

Invited Commentary

'It keeps dropping out!': The need to address the ongoing digital divide to achieve improved health and well-being benefits for older rural Australians

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Introduction

The article "Although we're isolated, we're not really isolated": The value of information and communications technology for older people in rural Australia' explores the experiences of rural older people using information and communications technology (ICT) and the relationship with well-being [1] is a work in digital ethnography which recognises the importance of considering a holistic environmental framework and the roles that ICT play. The article examines how ICT use by rural older people facilitates interactions between themselves and their environment and concludes that ICT may facilitate wellness for rural older people by compensating for geographic and social isolation. In particular, it highlights how ICT can offer mental stimulation and prevent loneliness as compensation for decline in physical function and mobility and provide 'control, choice and convenience'. Significantly, while ICT use was not explicitly asked about during semi-structured qualitative interviews (part of a larger project that identified the systems, supports and services that facilitate wellness), it emerged as a key theme in the participants' day-to-day experiences.

ICT for improved health and well-being and overcoming rural disadvantage

It is well established in the literature that ICT use improves physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being in general and including older people [2]. ICT is becoming increasingly more important and is seen by many as a mechanism to overcome rural disadvantage and promote well-being in rural residents, and more. Warburton et al. recognised that it was timely to explore the possibilities of ICT to generate social capital and to encounter the social disadvantage associated with rurality. They considered ICT as a social asset empowering groups and individuals to experience 'enhanced social cohesion, capacity and social participation' [2; p.8]. Similarly, Park [3] looked at the positive outcomes

of Internet connectivity in rural Australia in overcoming the barriers of distance through use of online services, which resulted in increased levels of social capital among community members, and economic gains.

The problem of the digital divide

However, for connectivity to be beneficial, rural older people must be able to engage with ICT. While there has been a consistent increase in home Internet permeation over time, the gap between urban and rural areas has not been reduced. Without appropriate infrastructure and services, rural residents, particularly older people, are less likely to adopt new ICT. The challenge is not only to get older rural Australians using ICT and thus improve their health and well-being, but also to ensure stable systems to access reliable connectivity and avoid the problem of the digital divide.

The term digital divide suggests that people with certain demographic and socio-economic characteristics may be more disadvantaged in accessing and using ICT than others. Reasons for a digital divide affecting older rural Australians are diverse. It may be exacerbated by the strategies of service providers who fail to recognise and respond to the needs of older rural clients [4]. Hodge and colleagues, for example, found that older people have more limited skills and different experiences and preferences in how to use ICT. Existing social exclusion factors interact with the digital divide and create a double risk for rural older people. There is still ongoing debate around access to and uptake of ICT. Issues of digital exclusion in rural areas often become entangled with existing social exclusion. Rather than improving health and well-being, there can be, as Park [3; p.405] described, 'a vicious cycle of inadequate infrastructure and being deprived of the means to use technologies effectively'.

The Australian National Broadband Network

In 2009, the Australian federal government decided to fund the construction of the National Broadband Network (NBN), designed to combat the challenges of distance and making it clear that the subsequent outcomes are part of the intended design relating to social inclusion, economic productivity and geographic connectivity. NBN redesign in 2013, by a newly elected federal government, has further

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delayed roll-out to regional and rural Australia. Many claim the NBN is contributing to the digital divide by improving access and speed to urban areas at a greater rate to those in rural areas, further disadvantaging older Australians, and impacting their health and well-being.

From a policy perspective, apart from the delays in NBN roll-out and the broad differences between urban and rural users, it is crucial that rural users are not treated as a homogenous group. Each rural community has very different demand needs based on a range of factors and these determine the selection of communications services and types of applications. Restricted availability of technology options reduces competition in rural areas and is a significant driver of the higher costs incurred by rural users. The effective prices are higher despite mobile and NBN pricing plans being the same nationally. For example, as an older rural customer without effective mobile coverage, I am unable to achieve the same bundling of services as my urban counterparts and often experience dropouts with resulting 'wasted' call charges.

Conclusion

Information and communications technology is ubiquitous and embedded in our day-to-day lives. While ICT can reduce social isolation and in turn improve wellness for older rural Australians, lack of access to ICT can also exacerbate or increase that isolation. In our current study of the health impact of the Victorian Hazelwood mine fire on the local (rural) community, ongoing research with older people reveals that the relatively low usage of ICT hindered communications between various agencies and community-dwelling older people, impeding access to services and reducing uptake of critical health advice [5]. At the same time, related research on broad community well-being highlighted the positive role that social media played during the event [6].

Rural digital inclusion policies must take a systematic and integrated approach to digital engagement that accounts for interrelations between infrastructure, adoption and usage of ICT in rural areas.

The article "Although we're isolated, we're not really isolated": The value of information and communications technology for older people in rural Australia' provides a useful contribution to address a gap in the literature on the experiences of older people using ICT and the relationship with wellness [1].

Acknowledgement

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