

Focus On...

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Centre for Ageing Research
and Development in Ireland



Internet use and older people

Introduction

Services that provide information, advice and advocacy are vital in promoting independent living for older people (Dunning, 2005). However, as many of these services increasingly move online there is a risk that older people who do not use computers and the internet may be left behind. While this is a major concern, online services can also provide great benefits and cost savings for older people, in areas such as easy access to public services, communication and online shopping (Richards, 2006). We need to understand more about older peoples access and use of the internet in particular those who do not use it and what can be done to provide internet skills to sustain usage among such groups.

This edition of the CARDI "Focus on" series examines these issues and looks at what is being done to help older people gain access to the internet and learn the skills to use this valuable resource.

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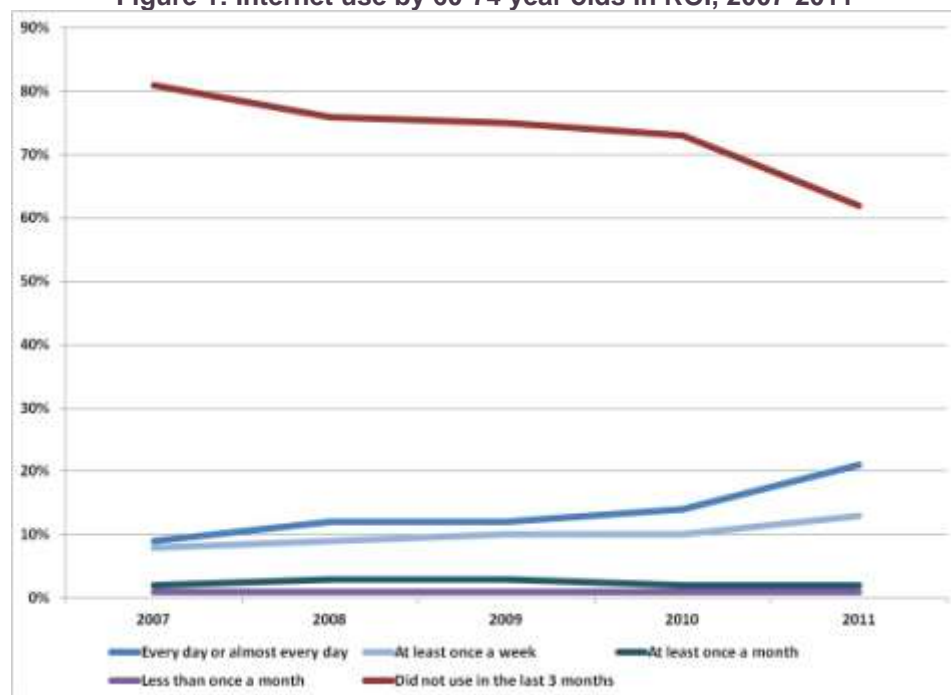
Key findings

- Although levels of internet use among older people are rising, at least 300,000 older people in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) do not use the internet (Central Statistics Office, 2012) and 235,000 people in Northern Ireland (NI) do not have internet access (NISRA, 2011).
- 11% of 65-74 year olds in ROI were using the internet for online banking by 2011, up from 2% in 2006. 18% of 65-74 year olds were using online banking across the UK in 2011 (Eurostat, 2012).
- Businesses and governments are moving services and information online, so it is important that older people, particularly in the over 75 age group, are not disadvantaged in terms of sustained access.
- Governments and businesses must provide alternative ways to access services and information for older people who do not use the internet, while facilitating the learning and use of new IT skills.

Internet use in ROI

Of the 1,649,408 private households in the ROI Census in 2011, 73% had a personal computer and 64% had a broadband connection (Central Statistics Office, 2012). Internet usage is certainly rising among older people, as Figure 1 below shows. The Central Statistics Office only measures the 60-74 age group, but 21% of these now use the internet every day or almost every day, compared to 9% five years ago. Over the same time period, the percentage of older people who had not used the internet in the past three months dropped from 81% to 62%. However, this still means that over 300,000 older people in ROI are not using the internet.

Figure 1: Internet use by 60-74 year olds in ROI, 2007-2011



Source: (Central Statistics Office, 2012)

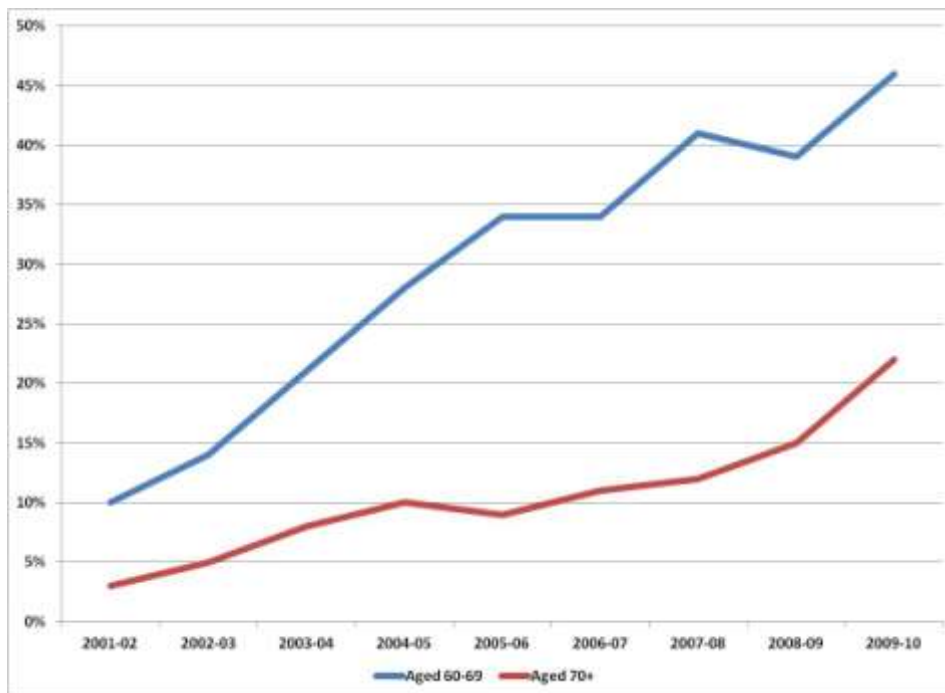
Of older adults who regularly use the internet and are aged 50+, 38% most often visit Google, 19% most often visit Facebook and 13% most often visit the Ryanair website. Of people aged 65 and over whom regularly use the internet, 38% have online banking facilities, 18% have a Facebook account and 33% have a Skype account. However, internet use among those aged 75 and over is very low, with only 3% of people in this age group using the internet. (Amárach Research, 2011).

A qualitative study on information pathways and access to information among older people in ROI conducted in 2011 found that the older people in the study were keen to learn about computers but were reluctant to learn how to use them to access information. Some of the participants in the focus groups felt marginalised from society as a result of developments in technology such as mobile phones and computers (McDaid, 2012).

Internet use in NI

The [Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service](#) (NINIS) tracks internet access by age group across all of NI. This includes all means of access such as a home computer, work computer, digital television or smartphone. Access to the internet has increased sharply in recent years for older age groups. Among 60-69 year olds, 46% had access to the internet in 2009-10 compared to 10% in 2001-02. Over one fifth (22%) of people aged 70 and over had internet access in 2009-10 compared to just 3% in 2001-02. While the figures indicate that access to the internet is rising, this may not necessarily lead to increase in actual usage. According to the Census 2011 figures, 95,000 60-69 year olds and 140,000 people over the age of 70 do not have internet access.

Figure 2: Internet access by age in NI, 2001-2010



Source: NISRA, 2011

Three quarters (75%) of all adults in NI have broadband at home as of 2011. However, the take-up of broadband among older adults is much less. Less than half (44%) of those aged 55 or over in NI have broadband in their home. The 55+ age group is also the least likely in NI to have made the switch to digital television (OFCOM, 2011). Across the UK, a majority of people in all age groups, apart from those aged 75 and over, have used the internet.

Internet use: empowering for older people?

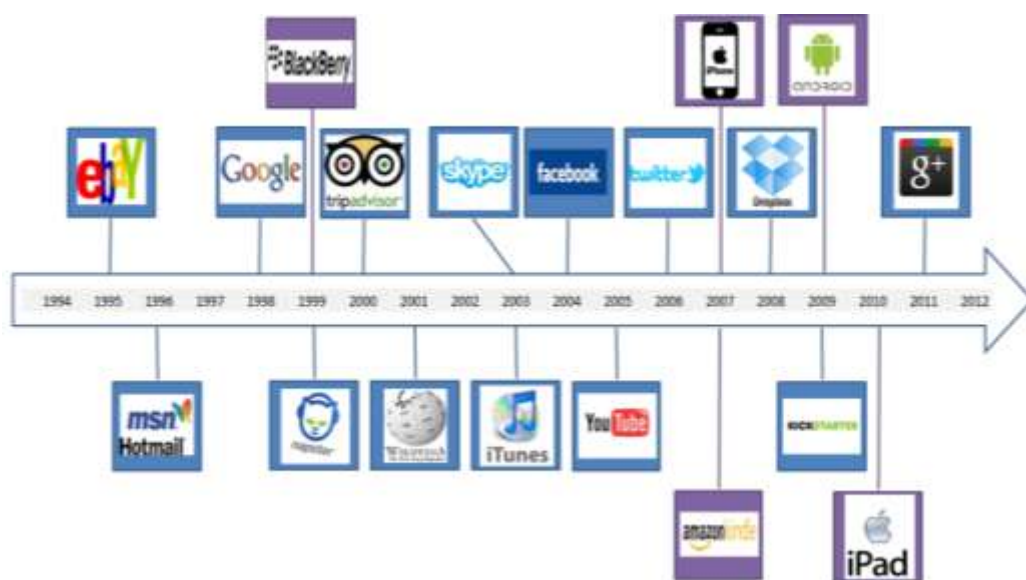
There is conflicting research as to whether or not the internet is empowering or disempowering for older people. Its benefits could include strengthening social networks with friends and family (White, et al., 1999) and reducing isolation using Skype or Facebook; reducing expenses through booking flights and holidays online; providing information on goods and services allowing people to make better informed decisions (Richards, 2006); allowing people to find out about benefits through e-governance; or more convenience through shopping online. Other research finds that negative impacts could be created where older people who do not use ICT cannot get a full range of banking services as they are offered online only, or cannot get access to information on government benefits or services if they are only provided online.

Internet use in adults aged 50 and over in the US was shown to reduce depression by between 20-28% in one study conducted in the University of Alabama (Cotten et al., 2012). Other research conducted in UCLA indicated that internet training can stimulate neural activation patterns and could potentially enhance brain function and cognition in older adults (Live Science, 2009). A small Canadian study showed that among adults over the age of 60, there a link between internet use and personal evaluation of competence. It showed that older people who use the internet are better adjusted psychologically than those who do not (Aged Care Insite, 2012). A UK study of socially excluded groups in London found that use of the internet can have clear and quantifiable economic and social benefits for such groups. It also found not only that the internet

provides opportunities for socially excluded people, but that these groups are keen to seize the opportunities provided (Foley, 2004).

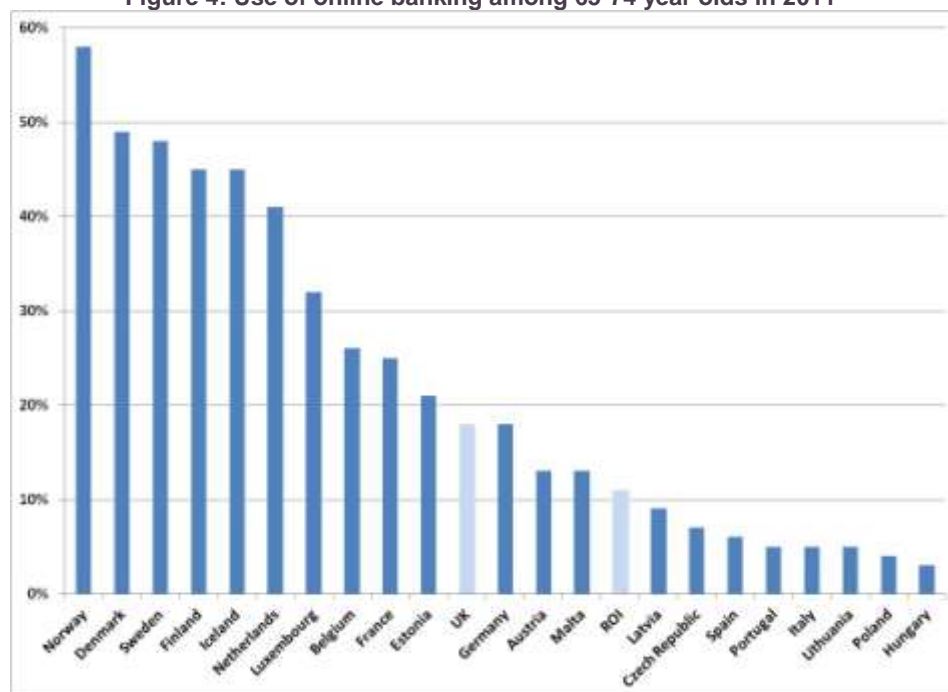
Other research argues that internet use may not have any effect on the physical or mental health of older people. A randomised, controlled study of 191 people conducted in 2007 to examine the effect of computer training and internet usage on older adults found that using computers and the internet neither positively nor negatively influenced everyday functioning, well-being and mood, or the social network of healthy older people (Slegers et al., 2008). However, the research pre-dates many of the new developments in internet communications that may help to strengthen social networks and combat social exclusion, such as the increase in Facebook and Skype usage by older people. Figure 3 below shows the timeline for the introduction of new internet services (blue boxes) and mobile technologies (purple boxes).

Figure 3: Timeline of the introduction of recent internet and technology developments



There is also concern that a switch to online technology will adversely affect older people who have not yet developed the necessary skills to use online services. For example, while only small minorities of older people in the UK and ROI are using the internet for online banking, many banks are closing branches and concentrating their services online at the same time, in both ROI (Independent.ie, 2012) and NI (Belfast Telegraph, 2012). European Union statistics show that 11% of 65-74 year olds in ROI were using the internet for online banking by 2011, up from 2% in 2006. There were 18% of 65-74 year olds using online banking across the UK. These levels are far below those of 65-74 year olds using online banking in other European countries such as Norway (58%), Denmark (49%), Sweden (48%) or the Netherlands (41%) (Eurostat, 2012).

Figure 4: Use of online banking among 65-74 year olds in 2011¹



Source: Eurostat (2012)

Barriers to internet use

There are several actual and potential barriers to sustained use of ICT by older people. A recent UK study showed that education is directly linked to non-use of the internet, as 61% of internet non-users had no formal education qualifications whereas only 6% of those with a higher education qualification were internet non-users. The same research showed that income was positively related to internet use and negatively related to non-use. 43% of those retired people with an annual income of £12,500 or less were internet users, while 99% of those with an income more than £40,000 were users (Blank, 2012).

Among retired people in the UK, “just not interested” was the most common reason for not using the internet and giving up using it. “Do not know how to use” was the second most common reason for non-use, while retired people also stated “not for people my age”, “computer not available” and “too expensive” as reasons for non-use (Dutton & Blank, 2011).

An exploratory study conducted for the UK Department for Work and Pensions stated that older people (those in the over 50 age group in this case) do not often get information directly from primary sources and most do not contact government departments or agencies to learn about benefits or services available to them. This suggests that older people who are given the skills to access information on the internet may not automatically use it to get information on services or benefits. (Skyles & Hedges, 2008)

However, research from the [US think-tank Pew Research Centre](#) shows that once older people are given the necessary skills and training to use the internet,

¹ Data from the UK is from 2010

it can become a fixture in their everyday lives. 70% of people aged 65 or over who had started using the internet stated that they typically use it every day (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012).

Policy in ROI

In 2009, the ROI government published *Technology Actions to Support the Smart Economy*, part of its Knowledge Society Strategy (Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, 2009). It notes that research shows a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of the use of the internet and other new technologies among people who do not use them. As a result, raising awareness of benefits and motivating groups, particularly older people, to learn how to use the internet and other new technologies is a central component.

As part of the strategy for digital inclusion, the ROI government launched a grants scheme for training 40,000 people in June 2011, Benefit 3. The training is mostly provided through local groups in community facilities and it usually amounts to six hours of training. In some cases it is free but in others it costs a maximum of €20. To date, 36% of the people who have received training are aged 65 or over (Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, 2012).

The ROI government also supports and promotes some private sector initiatives on digital inclusion. These include the internet provider UPC's "Internet buttons", a way to make the internet more accessible and easy to use for older people, the [Google / Age Action "Silver Surfer" awards](#) and the Irish Internet Association's "[Digitise the nation](#)" drive.

Policy in NI

The Department of Finance and Personnel in NI published a digital inclusion strategy in 2003. It led to the creation of a digital inclusion unit within the Information Strategy and Innovation Division in the Department. That unit aims "to promote a digitally inclusive society through a range of projects working in partnership with various organisations to help digitally excluded citizens get online" (Department of Finance and Personnel, 2012).

In May 2010, the Department of Employment and Learning announced the introduction of free of charge entry-level classes for anyone wishing to improve their computer skills (NI Direct, 2010). Silver Surfers' Day, started in 2002, is an annual day-long event offering over-50s the opportunity to learn more about how to get online and make the most of the internet. Volunteers provide advice and information to older people at their local libraries and Housing Association locations (Department of Finance and Personnel, 2012).

Conclusion

The internet is a powerful communication tool and information resource which can bring many benefits to the older population across the island of Ireland, from using Skype for staying in contact with family to grocery shopping or banking online. Initiatives that promote the benefits of using the internet and programmes that help teach people the skills needed to navigate the many goods and services online are important in encouraging older people to access and use it. However, it is also important to recognise that many people, particularly in "older" old age groups, will never have used the internet and as a

result, governments and businesses must ensure that alternative ways are in place to access services and information as well as supporting usage. Care must be taken by private and public sectors that these groups do not become excluded and disadvantaged in the drive to go digital.

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