

Tackling the Digital Divide

This year, Oct 1 marks International Day for Older Persons 2021, Oct 14, the Chinese Double Ninth Festival—an ancient festival which has included celebration of older adults since 1989—and Oct 21, the one-year anniversary of *The Lancet Healthy Longevity*'s launch. It would seem an auspicious time to reflect. In the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause drive excess mortality worldwide, even as vaccines are rolled out with varying degrees of access and success around the world. One of the most striking characteristics of the pandemic is the disproportionately worse outcomes experienced by older people. The age differential is so stark that it informed policy: older people were told to shelter and isolate for longer and more rigorously, and were also prioritised in most countries for vaccination.

Unfortunately, other age-related differentials have also emerged from the pandemic. One of the most striking, especially where movement outside home was legally prohibited or curtailed, was the unequal access to and use of digital technologies. During lockdowns, such technologies were instrumental for many people in allowing for remote working, socialisation in some form, and access to virtual facilities such as telemedicine. However, many older people do not have any form of access to internet-enabled technologies; for example, the UK Office of National Statistics estimated that in 2020 around 92% of the population as a whole used the internet, compared to only 54% of people aged 75 years or older. This year's theme for International Day for Older Persons is Digital Equity for All Ages. As the world moves steadily towards a digital future, ensuring equal access to all irrespective of age is crucial for ensuring that older people continue to be engaged members of society.

Digital fluency is important for many reasons. First, telecommunications access can now connect people across the whole world, which has enabled more mass migration than ever seen before. Remaining connected with family and friends, either because they have moved away or because of a lockdown order, is an important tool in remaining socially integrated and combatting loneliness and isolation. Research has consistently shown that these are important factors for maintaining not only physical but mental health, especially in older people. Second, as knowledge work increasingly takes

place through use of digital technologies, exclusion from these spheres represents a possible economic loss to older people and society, especially as older workers are less likely to be engaged in jobs that are physically demanding. Third, older people risk losing access to basic needs as such elements increasingly move to a digital space. For example, in New York (NY, USA), booking a COVID-19 vaccine required engaging with a complex online booking system which both initially reduced access and caused extreme distress. Finally, lack of digital fluency can give rise to the spread of misinformation among older adults, something which has been especially harmful during the pandemic.

Although all of these are excellent reasons for older people to engage more with the digital world, there are some more age-specific barriers that will need to be addressed. Manipulation of small device touch-screens is difficult for those with impaired mobility or eyesight. Lack of familiarity breeds lack of self-confidence in technological use, and many older people are wary of engagement from fear of breaking devices or from privacy concerns.

Encouragingly, the digital divide between older and younger people is beginning to decrease, with the pandemic in some cases actually driving the change. For example, with one of the world's largest growing population of older people (estimated to reach approximately 14% of the population, or about 200 million people), the so-called digital divide is stark in China. However, earlier this year the China Internet Network Information Centre found that the number of internet users aged 60 years and older had doubled from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Elsewhere, governments are actively creating policies that diminish digital division; for example Wales has launched Digital Communities Wales which is a dedicated national digital inclusion programme that trains younger people as Digital Heroes and partners them with older, less digitally literate people.

Instances such as these are encouraging and show what can be accomplished. Societies must work to ensure their older citizens are active digitally, to ensure that older people can engage in all aspects of society for as long as possible and to eliminate the digital divide between old and young. ■ *The Lancet Healthy Longevity*



For more on the **UN International Day of Older Persons** see <https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/2021-unidop-digital-equity-for-all-ages.html>

For more on the **New York vaccination booking systems** see [Editorial](#) *Lancet Healthy Longevity* 2021; 2: e53

For more on the **spread of misinformation amongst older adults** see <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/03/13/covid-19-older-adults-and-the-risks-of-misinformation/>

For more on **barriers to digital access in older adults** see <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/blogs/how-digital-divide-affects-older-adults-use-technology-during-covid-19>

For more on **closing the digital divide in China** see [Comment](#) *Lancet Healthy Longevity* 2021; 2: e125–26

For more on **Digital Communities Wales** see [Health Policy](#) *Lancet Digit Health* 2021; 3: e383–96