CONNECTING: THE USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES BY OLDER ADULTS IN A RETIREMENT COMMUNITY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This is a long-term study of the use of information and communication technologies by 30 older adults (ages 70–97) living in a large retirement community. The study spanned the years of 1996 to 2008, during which time the research participants grappled with the challenges of computer use while aging 12 years. The researcher, herself a ‘mature learner,’ used a qualitative research design which included observations and open-ended interviews. Using a strategy of “intermittent immersion,” she spent an average of two weeks per visit on site and participated in the lives of the research population in numerous ways, including service as their computer tutor. With e-mail and telephone contact, she was able to continue her interactions with participants throughout the 12-year period. A long-term perspective afforded the view of the evolution, devolution or cessation of the technology use by these older adults, and this process is chronicled in detail through five individual “profiles.”

Three research questions dominated the inquiry: What function do computers serve in the lives of older adults? Does computer use foster or interfere with social ties? Is social support necessary for success in the face of challenging learning tasks? In answer to the first question, it became clear that computers were valued as a symbol of competence and intelligence. Some individuals brought their computers with them when transferred to the single-room residences of assisted living or nursing care facilities. Even when use had ceased, their computers were displayed to signal that their owners were or had once been keeping up to date. In answer to the second question, computer owners socialized around computing use (with in-person family members or friends) more than, or as much as, they socialized through their computers in the digital realm of the Internet. And in answer to the third question, while the existence of social support did facilitate computer exploration, more important was the social support network generated and developed among fellow computer users.

PREFACE

This dissertation is based on an ethnographic study of the uses of ‘technology’ in an
American retirement community of older adults which I conducted from 1996 through 2008. In this research, ‘older adult’ refers to individuals over the age of 70. Because I have followed their lives for more than a decade, the individuals in my study were in their mid-80s to late 90s at the ‘conclusion’ of my active data gathering. Under the rubric of technology I include a variety of devices that were used by the residents in this community to assist their survival and thriving. The technologies on which I primarily focused were computers and, secondarily, other communication and/or information gathering devices.

Whenever I mention the subject of my doctoral research to inquisitive individuals, I am always met with a grandmother/father story involving computers. Some of these vignettes have a happy tone; others are a mini saga of failure, disappointment, and even anger. In the U.S., we continually hear or read the reports of statistical surveys (by the Pew and Harris organizations, for example) on the use by Senior Citizens of information-communication (I-C) technologies ranging from owning computers to using their various applications, including the recent trend in social networking programs. When I listen to the grandparents-with-computers anecdotes and read the survey reports I find myself trying to imagine what really happens after the parents and grandchildren donate their old computer devices to their elders. Just what is going on in the dwellings of older Americans? What resources for learning about I-C technology are available for the individual who is well beyond the traditional school age? Distilling my research inquiry into its leanest form, it is: ‘then what?’

This is the question I have been considering while observing and participating in the lives of some Senior individuals who were attempting to achieve competence in the use of complex technologies. Since I have collected two file cabinets worth of data (in the form of transcripts of hundreds of hours of tape recorded interviews and supplementary materials), it has become necessary to carve out just a portion of my study for this dissertation. The most detailed presentation of data pertains to the most recent period of research which took place in the fall of 2008. However, in order to supply history and context for this recent time period I have also included shorter descriptions of preceding research interactions that took place over more than a decade. Realistically, only small segments of any given life can be portrayed, especially when viewed over a long stretch of time. Nevertheless, a major goal of this dissertation is to provide sufficiently descriptive detail to depict the passage of time during which the evolution, stagnation or devolution of I-C technology occurred. An equally important objective is to share with a readership the thoughts and wisdom that these individuals shared with me.

I would be tempted to say that my research is not theory-driven were it not for the fact that some scholars have insisted that there is no such thing as the absence of theory. If I have a guiding theory (or set of assumptions), then, it is one that I have developed over years of psychological and anthropological study, research and work. It is that human beings, with their large brains, look for (or manufacture) problems to solve. Optimally these problems and challenges should be meaningful in their eyes. Based on such a theory, a plausible hypothesis would be that older citizens approach the daunting world of
My inclination was to return back to the Air Force that I came from and be the commander of the cadets at the Air Force Academy. The Air Force already had somebody in mind and so I decided to retire, and I was left, for the first time, with a very unstructured life, and frankly, things began to come apart . . . . I had inherited tendencies for addictive substances—alcoholism—and clearly that began to predominate in my unstructured life. I thrived on the assignment to be involved in mission planning to cover most of the eventualities in Apollo, so that we could return to Earth safely. And I was left without goals to pursue, without a team to work with, and I had to begin recovery from that. That's a long process, and it's a process that has you make changes in your life.

(Aldrin 2009)

Two other important components of my theoretical set of assumptions are that (1) ideally there should be plausible means for re/solving the problems and challenges sought or confronted, and (2) such solutions are best provided within the context of social support. These are the issues that lie at the core of my research and comprise the subject of this dissertation.

PART I: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1
CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS

A. Cultural Context
A significant and shared experience for all humans is growing older. I am interested in knowing what this is like in America. What is the quality of life for our oldest citizens and how can we define and measure this idea? There are many ways to approach such a large topic but we know, at the very least, that there are basic needs that must be satisfied for a human being to survive, involving shelter, sustenance and bodily care, for example. And there must be a state beyond mere survival in which an individual can attest to being satisfied with the quality of her/his life—a state of \textit{thrival}.

Thriving is an ongoing process of utilizing one’s talents, capabilities, knowledge and ingenuity in the interest of attaining a meaningful goal, solving a relevant problem, fulfilling a wish. In order to \textit{thrive}, a person requires cognitive stimulation and development through some process of rearing, training or education. This notion of \textit{thrival} is one way of conceptualizing the issue of life quality. This is an important question for our society as the number of individuals aged 65 and over is expected to rise dramatically in the coming decades. There are serious policy decisions to be made.
regarding the support systems that we will need for our aging population to be able to both survive and thrive.

B. Research Focus, Broad and Specific
In assessing aspects of the quality of life of the elderly, I propose that informed engagement is a key element in thrival. The engagement is in and to one’s culture, which may range from one’s immediate family to one’s society. To begin with, I examined how individuals aged 70 and above obtained the information they needed to enable them to conduct their lives in a way that they identified as satisfactory. Obtaining needed information may be a challenge for aging individuals for at least two reasons. The first is intrinsic to individual development and concerns bodily capabilities. Being in poor health obviously makes every aspect of daily functioning difficult. But even with reasonably good health, the aging process often entails a diminution of sensory functioning: compromised eyesight and hearing, for example. As these conditions worsen, access to normal communication channels may be limited. How do the elderly obtain information to even meet their daily life needs, particularly when communication with others becomes difficult? A second aspect of obtaining information is a kind of access problem that is extrinsic to individuals: that of changing societal conditions. With regard to information resources, we are confronted by rapidly evolving technologies that are permeating every aspect of our lives. Automated and digitized technologies do not merely extend and expand existing technology. They require new approaches and operating skills that entail steep learning curves. How do these learning challenges impact the lives of elderly citizens? Are they being left out of a variety of information loops and why does it matter?

The other important focus of my research has been that of social support. We observe that humans, as gregarious beings, acquire, from their earliest ages, new skills within contexts of support networks and institutions. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that having the help of others eases the difficulties of learning new tasks, especially when the tasks are unusually challenging and/or when the learner is in a vulnerable state of being. Our Senior citizens are often vulnerable for three major reasons:

- Retirement can be a precarious period for those who find themselves suddenly and uncomfortably lacking structure to their days or bereft of ‘important’ things to do.
- Aging involves a gradual—or swift—decline in physical, emotional and mental capacities (which may be further complicated by an impoverishment of resources for some).
- Moving through the life course often entails significant changes/losses in one’s immediate support system, (typically through death and illness) as well as one’s larger support (through either voluntary or forced relocation).

Tackling the new language of information technology is an unusually challenging task for individuals who may be well past the critical learning period for acquiring new skills. It follows then, that for older citizens, having social support should be an important factor in their willingness to try to learn to speak, for example, ‘computerese.’
C. Research Questions
The primary question posed in this research is: what role do information-communication technologies play in the lives of older adults? A series of ancillary questions arise when considering this major question: For each Senior Citizen who finds her/himself staring at, for example, a computing machine, we could ask,

• How does s/he get started?
• Who provides connectedness?
• Whom does the user turn to for help?
• How long is interest sustained?
• What happens when the roadblocks of physical/mental decline are added on?
• What is the superficial/initial motivation for starting, and
• What is the deeper underlying motivation that is critical for perseverance

D. Assumptions and Moral Rationale Underlying this Research
The following propositions are the philosophical assumptions about human nature that I brought to this study and around which I built my research design.

• Homo sapiens have enormous brains that seem to thrive on problem solving. The biggest enemies of the human brain are under stimulation and prolonged inactivity. In the absence of meaningful activity, humans wither and/or engage in destructive behaviors.
• Homo sapiens are a symboling species. We naturally communicate, create, represent, and produce. We understand phenomena external to ourselves through our symbolic expressions.
• Homo sapiens are an imitative species, learning survival strategies, cultural rules and meaning through observation. We are influenced by forces outside ourselves—other people and products; symbols, technology, events.
• Homo sapiens are a gregarious species. Being with others and sharing activity is, typically, a pleasant and comforting experience. We learn and grow through contact and interaction and jointly construct meaning.

Since we are born helpless, we are interdependent which means we must form a social contract to survive. But such a contract must also help us thrive; ideally our society owes us the means to contribute to it in a way that enhances the quality of our brief lives. It owes us safe lodging, bodily care, and education. It owes us the opportunity to satisfy the urgent human need to use our brains to their maximum potential. We owe our society the fruits of our capabilities as they were nurtured by it. We want and need to contribute to the greater good because we recognize that we are social animals, reliant upon the contributions of others. These cognitive and bodily needs of the citizenry must be attended to most intensively in childhood and in elder hood. None of these needs, especially cognitive growth, should be neglected. This is so until the day we die. Each societal member has the right and responsibility to monitor and advise when parts of this contract are not fulfilled.

This set of assumptions informed my inquiry context in the following manner. Humans gravitate towards new experience, novel stimuli, and learning opportunities. What other
people do is of intrinsic interest to us, so the inventions, products, and technologies that are widely used by others will arouse our curiosity. The optimal setting for coping with change and challenge is within a supportive group rather than in isolation. If you or I, as societal advisors, suspect that members of the society are being excluded from these experiences, especially in a systematic manner and as a result of their given attributes, it is our responsibility to investigate and call attention to this circumstance.

**E. Approach**

I employed a qualitative approach in this research,

Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 3)

Qualitative research entails an *interactive* process of sense making. Understanding is mutually constructed in a collaborative process between researcher and participant and, ideally, knowledge emerges out of this collaboration. Using a combination of directed and open-ended interviews and conversations, I attempted to create opportunities for meaningful exchange of ideas. I embrace these epistemological underpinnings for this endeavor.

Only in a dialogical encounter with what is not understood, with what is alien, with what makes a claim upon us, can we open ourselves to risking and testing our preconceptions and prejudices. . . . Understanding is participative, conversational, and dialogic. It is always bound up with language and is achieved only through a logic of question and answer. . . Moreover, understanding is something that is *produced* in that dialogue, not something *reproduced* by an interpreter through an analysis of that which he or she seeks to understand. The meaning one seeks in ‘making sense’ of a social action or text is temporal and progressive and always coming into being in the specific occasion of understanding. (Schwandt 2000, 195)

A researcher of the elderly must be sensitive to health concerns such as stamina, mobility and pain. Changes in cognitive functions such as difficulties in word recall, lack of focus, and the confusion of over stimulation, call for patience and flexible approaches to communication. By modulating the pitch and pace of my speech, I was able, for example, to communicate with individuals with severe hearing losses.

Unlike gender and race, advanced age is not an attribute with which anyone is born. In youth-oriented America, its accumulation is not generally regarded as wealth and its acquisition is greeted ambiguously. Aging, however, is the one experience that all citizens will, in the normal course of things, share as an inescapable part of the life cycle. I posit that once one is ‘in’ old age, it becomes, as an experiential state, the paramount personal attribute, reducing the valence of all others, including race, gender, class and sexual orientation. This is not to say that the aforementioned attributes will not play a major role in how individuals cope with being aged. Indeed, the opportunities or missed opportunities inherent in such memberships will certainly influence how older citizens approach learning new tasks, for example. But, no matter what privileges one’s birth or life course might have afforded one, advanced old age threatens each of us with a less desirable status and condition, if not outright oppression and discrimination.
In contemporary approaches to qualitative research, the researcher’s role and identity are fore-grounded as a critical component of the situation. Within a research context, the researcher may, for example, “consciously adopt” or “negotiate” an identity with participants (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2000). In my experience, it is a blend of these choices. Additionally, any researcher has unalterable characteristics that s/he carries into the research setting. If the assumptions in the previous paragraph are valid, the most salient aspect of my self in this inquiry context was my age. I was at the start of my research an incipient Senior citizen and beginning to experience the types of physical changes that can challenge information processing. My chronological maturity and identification with older citizens carries with it patience, empathy, and understanding that may be lacking in younger researchers. The attitude of older individuals towards me as a female seemed to be one of chivalrous protectiveness by men and trust by women. Elderly women and men experience increasing feelings of vulnerability, which makes them wary of strangers; females are viewed as less threatening than males. Thus, my gender would seem to be a positive factor within a population of elderly citizens. I shared a (middle) class and (Caucasian) race membership with the members of my research population. As a comparative junior in life experience, I could be considered as mildly subordinate in rank to the elders with whom I interacted. Thus, the potential for power and intimidation within the research dyad was muted.

During the last several decades the researcher role in qualitative studies has gradually freed itself from its objectivist shadows and moved into the light of subjective self-awareness and even involvement with research participants. An intermediate position in the course of this evolving view of the researcher was expressed thus,

The task . . . is to witness again and again, but not to use the data gathered this way in intervention. Rather, the fieldworker observes to write. . . . This freedom from intervention and from ordinary interaction allows fieldworkers their special purchase on social life. (Bosk 1992, 17)

In sharp contract to this researcher’s stance, I did/do practice intervention (and have done so since my earliest field work in the late 1960s) in the course of my research. In this research setting of Flamingo Park, such intervention occurred as computing help, talks on technology development, information gathering on behalf of residents, advising and counseling, food provision, assistance in daily living tasks and so on. But there is more to self in the field than the “role of self” embraced by the researcher. The research participants create their own versions of a researcher’s self, which is what Reinharz (1997) calls “situationally created selves” (5).

Although the researcher may consider ‘being a researcher’ one’s most salient self, community members may not agree. . . . [The] . . . ‘brought’ and ‘created’ selves are those that are relevant to the people being studied, [and] they shape or obstruct the relationships that the researcher can form and hence the knowledge that can be obtained. Thus, these selves affect the researcher’s ability to conduct research. (3-4)

In Flamingo Park various, unexpected selves were created for me by residents. For two of the single men with whom I interacted (Laslo U. and Dr. Q), I became an object of comfort and affection; for two individuals (Will M. and Myrtle L.), I became a painful reminder of their lapsed computer use and they expressed hesitation about meeting with me once this had occurred. Sue J. (unbeknownst to her husband, Nelson, who did not
share her feelings) began to see me in a negative light as my close alliance with Barbara H. became apparent (since they had had some sort of falling out), and she eventually refused continued participation. And for Barbara H., my most cogent self was as her son’s university colleague and, next, as her private computer tutor. For Al S., I was primarily a student (a role which he greatly respected), and he instructed me in new technologies. Reinharz views these multiple selves as potential opportunities for understanding and concludes, “The researcher does not know in advance what attributes will be meaningful” (1997, 18).

F. Background History of this Research
This research project grew out of earlier studies I devised as part of two GSLIS courses (with Ann Bishop and Greg Newby) on “Prairie Net Usability” and “Information Needs,” in 1996-97. For these courses, I conducted interviews on the use of computers, free nets and information needs. First, I focused on the residents of one block in a Mid-western neighborhood, and, while doing so found myself drawn to the stories of the oldest residents. “Neighborhood Information Needs” (Linton 1996) was my preliminary report on this first phase of the study. Subsequently, in Phase II, I conducted interviews on the same topics with five residents in a senior citizen retirement community in a southerly state. This research was reported in “Computer Use by Senior Citizens” (Linton 1997). Since the time of those initial contacts, I have continued to interact with both research populations, keeping abreast of their lives. In the retirement community, I continued, in a researcher role, to conduct interviews with interested residents. Eventually, they began asking me to share my insights with them. Their requests and interest in this research played a major role in my decision to formalize my study and to seek guidance in the analysis of my collected data. And since the 1996 study, the scope of this research has broadened to include many other aspects of I-C technology in addition to information access.

CHAPTER 2 RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research Population and Setting
I conducted this research in a large residential community (which I renamed “Flamingo Park”) designed exclusively for individuals aged 62 and over. Most of the individuals living in the “Park” had their own private homes or apartments and in that sense were, at the time of this research, representative of Americans over age 65, nine out of ten of whom lived independently. On the other hand, only one in ten of all Americans over the age of 65 lived in age-segregated communities; over age 80 this number was 20%. In that respect Flamingo Park residents were not representative of their age cohort, according to a Pew survey (Horrigan 2009).

Within this population of approximately1000 people, I found a range of life styles and attributes along dimensions of educational and occupational backgrounds, interests, ages (62 – 100+), physical condition, abilities and marital/partnership status. Several residents estimated the average formal educational attainment of Park residents as one to two years of college. Among those individuals with no formal post-secondary education, I encountered some who had attained the equivalent of professional positions through on-
the-job training. The members of this community were financially comfortable, so for most of them the issue of affordability with regard to technological devices was mitigated. In summary, my research setting was:

• A self-contained retirement community with a large population.
• A total life-care facility that had several stages of living support.
• A community in which various kinds of social support were provided.
• A setting that acknowledged interest in new communication technologies in the lives of its members as manifested by special (though limited) facilities for computing equipment and/or living spaces designed for technology connectivity.
• A population that had the economic means to explore relatively expensive technological devices and practices.

Entrée into this setting was afforded through previously established relationships with members of the town of “Dry Springs” in which the Park was located. I had been visiting residents of that town since the 1970s and residents at the Park since the early 1990s. In 1995-96, a few Park residents formed a computer club for the express purpose of exploring this new technology. I met a club member in October 1996, while visiting in the Park and was invited to a meeting. Thus began what became an ongoing interaction with some of the residents who were aspiring computer users. Thirty-six individuals aged 70 and above were willing over the course of twelve years to share their thoughts and feelings with me about the culture of Flamingo Park and the role of I-C technologies in their lives. Before my attendance at the Computer Club, I had never met any of these research participants. In myriad ways—observing, listening, talking, and working together on computers—these individuals and I tried to understand and describe how they used various resources to accomplish their goals, meet their needs, and enhance their lives. A critical part of my self-identity in this setting was that of a commiserating mature learner who first began to explore computing systems in her mid-fifties. I am an enthusiastic champion of life-long learning but also profoundly aware of the serious challenge posed by continuously evolving technologies. Initially, I brought to the research a good understanding of how to explain, teach and discuss information technologies as a result of my personal educational experiences. As time went on, however, I found the pace of technological developments threatening to undermine my “tech expertise.”

B. Frequency and Intensity of Contact
A good way to explore research issues is to share the lived experiences of the individuals who are involved with them and living in their community is an ideal means of doing so; this process is referred to as “fieldwork.” Some researchers, on the other hand, elect not to live in the……..

[End of excerpt from Part I]

[Excerpt from Part II]

PART II: FIVE PROFILES
Although I did not choose these five profiles as case studies to represent theoretical points, they are illustrative of the longitudinal nature of this study. The criteria by which I chose them are:

- The existence of interviews and/or an acquaintanceship that span the greatest number of years, ideally as far back as 1996 (Barbara Howard and Samuel Dunlop, primarily, and Al Swenson with whom I spoke informally at that time).
- The largest numbers of combined interviews (Barbara, Laslo Unterweg, Neva Evans).
- The existence of more than two interviews in separate years.
- The existence of an interview in 2008, for conclusion of a long-range study.

These five individuals, as well as all of the others in Flamingo Park with whom I became acquainted, could have been chosen on other grounds as well because each one had a unique and noteworthy set of experiences with I-C technologies. Apart from the logistical criteria mentioned above, the five profiled individuals have distinctive qualities which make their stories compelling. Barbara Howard was the first member of my study and she became that by dint of her own personal traits of informed curiosity, community involvement and Computer Club membership. She impressed all who knew her by her unflagging determination to keep active and engaged with life despite many setbacks. Samuel Dunlop became, during the years of our acquaintanceship, very proactive in exploring every kind of assistive technology to which he was introduced to deal with his eventual loss of vision due to macular degeneration. He was fortunate to have the support of two children living nearby and together they used his I-C technologies in creative ways. Neva Evans was unusual with regard to the total lack of family support she had in her efforts to use a computer. Her initial, solo journey was shored up by other agents such as local friends, the Computer Club and her personal ability to remain undaunted when blocked by technology itself. Laslo Unterweg was, when we met, at the very beginning level of computer use and his strenuous efforts to master—or at least use—the technology were impressive. Equally noteworthy was the strength of his negative response to his lack of success in that endeavor. Albert Swenson made himself known to me through his co-leadership duties in the Computer Club, and his keen interest in technology and computers was immediately apparent. He was one of the most knowledgeable and fearless users of all I-C technologies. Each of the following five profiles is divided into several components. They are comprised of a chronologically arranged series of conversational interviews (consisting of narrative text and excerpts of transcripts). Each interview is followed by an “insights” section in which I draw out salient aspects of each interview. At the end of the series of interviews and “insights” there is a “general discussion” section which considers the entire span of the interviews and interactions with a given individual. References to other research findings are woven throughout the insights and discussions. While considering these five profiles, readers can make at least a part of the journey of discovery with me.

CHAPTER 4

A PROFILE IN PERSEVERANCE: BARBARA HOWARD (AGED 82–94)
My field notes of 1996 describe Barbara thus:
She is a small woman, slight of build and light of foot. She exudes energy, determination and seriousness of purpose. After a brief conversation, her keen intellect, wide range of reading interests and information-seeking curiosity is apparent. Her speech is measured and she articulates her words carefully, including their final consonants.

After our meetings at the pool and the computer club, Barbara Howard agreed, in 1996, to an interview for my study. She had invited me to come over to her cottage one evening at about 8 p.m. and was waiting for me outside in case I wasn’t able to find her walkway in the dim light. Her computer was on an enclosed sun porch, which she had made into an office space and we remained there during our conversation. As we sat down beside her computer desk, her husband opened the door (which led into the living room), greeted me briefly and then went back inside, closing the door behind him. To begin with, Barbara wanted some information about the purpose of my questions. First, she asked me why I was taking notes during the Club meeting; I told her that I always took notes of any discussion or meeting I attended so that I could remember important points and new ideas. I also repeated what I had told the Computer Club about working towards a degree related to information technology. I told her that I was especially interested in the use of computers by mature women since I was myself an “older learner.”

We began with my informal survey questions. She had been a member of SLIN for about two years and she wished she could show me that system. But she had been having trouble with her computer and getting on-line and could not connect with the library network. She was able to connect to JUNO (a free e-mail-only program) but she was unable to get to her “address book” to show me how that worked. Although she had obtained her computer from her son about ten years earlier, she had only added a modem within the last year. She confided that she probably would not have purchased a computer or attempted to learn about them without her son’s initial assistance. She agreed with Don McDonald’s (founder of the Computer Club) joke to the effect that the Club members were all computing because their children had given them the machines. I asked Barbara what, in her mind, the Internet was and she said it was writing to people here and there and looking up a lot of things. She was familiar with Yahoo, the search tool which Al Swenson had extolled to Club members and which she had tried when on AOL. I asked her if she knew what the World Wide Web was and she said that she couldn’t get into it often, that she “didn’t know how to use the addresses right.”

Barbara was interested in learning how to do searching on the Internet but she wasn’t particularly interested in getting “pictures” because she had tried AOL for a year and recalled that the graphics “took forever” [to download]. While using AOL, she had tried to find information in an ‘electronic encyclopedia.’ As to where else she would turn for information, Barbara could only say that it would depend on the kind of information she needed. She was a devoted user of libraries and tried to go once or twice a month; she was at the library two days before our meeting. She belonged to the Friends of the Library association of the local public library. For information on current events, Barbara relied on TV, the Park paper, and the local newspaper. She read Book Review on a monthly basis. She occasionally listened to the local Public Radio affiliate.

Barbara did not want to upgrade her computer to Windows 95 because her daughter
advised her against it, telling her that she didn’t need it. I suggested that her daughter
might be right in thinking that Windows 95 was probably too complex and overwhelming
for her current computer experience and comfort level. Barbara had been listening to
Don’s Club lectures for two months and told me that both he and Al had been over to her
home for quite a few hours to help her with her computer. (Just recently, Al had been
unable to get SLIN operative for her.) She smiled in agreement when I remarked that I
had noticed a tendency of males to talk about “specs,” like they were doing at the Club
meeting we had attended, and to get excited about increasing the power of their
“engines.” As I promised her I would, I shared with Barbara the talk I had given to Club
members about Internet searching since she had been unable to remain that long. She
took notes in a little notebook on what I said. She showed me the training manual on
SLIN, which seemed to be focused on the on-line systems of the library network. When I
said that the page on Boolean search strategies might be helpful for her use of the Alta
Vista search engine, she asked me to give her some examples. Barbara said that she
someday would like to visit the Louvre online and view their artwork.

**Insights:** Barbara was energetically engaged in using many sources to stay informed. She
did not evidence anxiety towards the computing process. I asked her what might be the
source of fear among older citizens towards computers. Her reply was that “they don’t
see what computers will do for them.” She was organized, taking notes on all that I said
and sought examples for any subject with which she was unfamiliar. She was the only
person I had met, besides Al Swenson, who used SLIN, the area online catalog of library
holdings. After using a computer for close to ten years she was apparently comfortable
with e-mailing and word processing but was inexperienced with regard to the “WWW”
and interested to learn more about it. Based on my brief encounter with Barbara’s
husband, I guessed that he was ill and later learned that he was suffering increasingly
from the cognitive and bodily deterioration associated with dementia.

By **1999** when I encountered Barbara for the second time, her husband had died and she
was living alone in her cottage.

[End of excerpt from Part II]