

Opinion Piece

International Day of Older Persons 1 October 2021

Digital Access for All Ages

Watching the award winning Australian animation series *Bluey* with my grandchildren, I was struck by the episode called Grannies. I was actually dumbfounded. This episode of a usually charming, funny and instructive program based around a family of blue healer dogs showcased some of the most ageist stereotypes of older people. Bluey and her sister Bingo dress up as ‘grannies’ and spend the episode tripping over, crashing into things, falling asleep mid-sentence, driving over things in their car and coming to a crashing halt overturned in a sandpit. In one section Bluey and Bingo call their grandma on Facetime to see if grannies can do a dance move called flossing. The real joke of the scene is the inability of their grandma to work the device. First she’s holding it too close so that all you see are her ears, then its looking at her feet, then the ceiling and then up her nose until she finally gets the hang of it. The feel good laughing at all the silly and incompetent things only vaguely obscured the underlying theme, that old people are basically incapable bumbleheads especially with technology. It is assumed that this inability to use digital technology is something we would all recognise and would find hilarious.

Not a good message, especially when this year’s United Nations International Day of the Older Person focuses on **Digital Equity for All Ages** and the need for access and meaningful participation in the digital world by older persons.

Everyone appreciates how developments in digital technology and the online environment have transformed our society. The United Nations has recently highlighted that it is women and older people who either lack access to technologies or are not able to benefit from them. This research is consistent with our experience at Seniors Rights Service. This past year alone, we have assisted older people from across NSW with over 9,000 enquiries. We have heard many stories of how older people are being excluded from important and necessary parts of civil society because of the digital divide. However, unlike the Bluey scenario, it is not so much that older people don’t know how to use digital technology but that they simply do not have access to it.

This is especially true for people who are disadvantaged and it is becoming a serious issue for vulnerable older people. It prevents them from participating socially and makes it difficult for them to access many government services that increasingly require online engagement, digital forms and smart phone technology.

For many older people, and especially those living in regional areas, access to online services is just not sufficient and for many others even mobile phone coverage is inadequate. Recently, during an outreach visit to communities in Far West NSW, our solicitors and aged care advocates heard the frustration of older people who were required to access government information or services via online portals but had no capacity to do so. Accessing the internet just wasn't possible and they would have to drive long distances to attend a government office in person to submit a paper form. This is especially challenging as many local offices have closed or moved to larger regional centres.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted this digital divide. During the enforced restrictions to manage the pandemic, we have seen many older people left isolated and alone with their social interactions severely curtailed. Families not being able to visit aged care facilities, travel restrictions preventing visits across suburbs and lockdowns separating people from each other for months on end. Loneliness and isolation have been hard for so many and online communication has often provided a lifeline for some but not for all. While technology has had the potential to help older people stay connected with family, friends and their communities, many disadvantaged older people just don't have the means to connect in this way.

Many older people in aged care facilities have been prevented from seeing families and friends during the COVID-19 lockdowns. In fact, visitation rights and restrictions were the main issues raised with our aged care advocacy service this year. In the absence of face to face visits, some of the better aged care providers made sure that older people had access to devices to speak to their families. But many have not had this access and have not even been provided with mobile phones in their rooms to keep in touch with their loved ones, even when there has been no COVID-19 outbreak in the facility. They have simply been shut off from the outside world and they and their families have suffered and are suffering still.

Seniors Rights Service is calling for our government and our sector to ensure that all older people are provided with the means to engage in our increasingly digital world in line with the call from the United Nations to tackle ageist stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. It is also important to ensure older people are protected from cybercrime and misinformation as they access digital technologies and we need strategies developed and implemented to ensure vulnerable people are protected from online scams and crime.

We cannot leave older people out of digital world. Inclusion in all aspects of civil society is their right. The stereotyping of older people as technologically incapable goes far beyond Bluey. It is a commonly held trope throughout our society. Technology can and will be used by anyone, no matter what age. Communication and connection with others are powerful motivators but the ability to access them must be there. For so many people digital technologies have been a life saver in these pandemic times. I am just asking for that to be available to everyone no matter their age, their resources or their location.

Bluey creators, get with it! Remake that Grannies episode and start the change. We don't need those ageist stereotypes. Not now, not anymore, not ever.

Shannon Wright

CEO, Seniors Rights Service

About Seniors Rights Service

Seniors Rights Service is a community organisation dedicated to protecting and advancing the rights of older people, particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

We provide free and confidential telephone advice, aged care advocacy and support, legal advice and rights-based information to seniors across New South Wales.

Your rights. Your voice. Free and confidential.

1800 424 079

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