The use of the Internet by the elderly in France

M.P.C.Blin and A.Phippen

Network Research Group, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, United Kingdom
e-mail: info@network-research-group.org

Abstract

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is more and more present in the daily life because a lot of services and products are being offered electronically. Some people, mainly the disabled and the elderly, are often excluded from these new technologies and a digital divide is established between the generations. This digital divide can be greater if people live in rural areas. Of course, the government takes some initiatives to try to decrease this gap. They develop Internet Public Access Points (IPAPs) which welcome everybody who wants to attend initiations to learn to use a computer. The work presented here aims to define if the elderly using the Internet are numerous and to identify what are the main factors that enable some elderly people to use the Internet. This paper includes two main parts. The first is about the use of computers and the Internet by people who are over 50 years old and living a rural area. The second is on the actions taken by the governments to decrease the digital divide.

Keywords

The Internet, computer, elderly people, digital divide, Internet Public Access Point (IPAP)

1. Introduction

Technological innovations take an important scope near the general public, so it would be interesting to know if the widespread of ICT has not excluded the elderly. A first research showed that three main factors have an impact on the use of computers: the age, the fact to live in a rural or an urban area and the social category. Ageing is considered as the main handicap in the acquisition of ICT. Thus, a study was leading on the use of a computer and the Internet by the elderly in a rural area to know if the digital divide is real. The government has developed a plan to try to decrease it. Several IPAPs have been setting up to help people to access ICT.

2. Position of France in computer's equipment

A study carried out in 2004 by Gfk France (European marketing study institute) reveals that 43% of French households were equipped with a computer at the end of 2003. In comparison with others European countries France is a backward country. Indeed, the Netherlands are the most equipped in computers with 67% and England is better equipped than France with 45% (Beky, 2004).

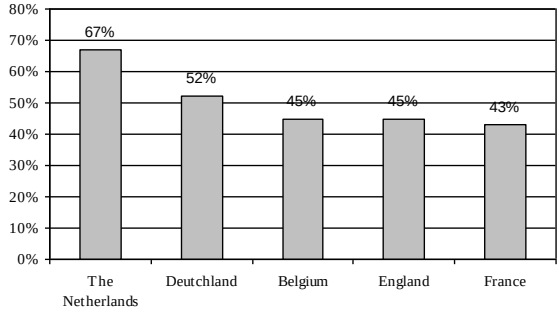

Figure 1: Position of France about computers' equipment at the end of 2003 (Beky, 2004)

The access to ICT is not the same for each group of the population. Indeed, there are some groups which are more or less excluded. Three factors, which have an influence on the use of computers and the Internet, were distinguished (Carboni, 2003; Bouchayer, Gorgeon et al, 2002):

- The age: most of Net surfers are people who are less than 25 years old (59%). The more population is aged, the less they used new technologies, only 19% of people who are 65 years old and over use the Internet.
- The location of people in a rural or an urban area. More than half of people living in Paris think that the Internet is important in their life against 35% of people who live in provincial France.
- The social category, which is a few linked to the fact that people live in a rural or urban area because the job with responsibility are more often located in cities. 57% of the executives use the Internet against 30% of the workers.

3. Research method

A first literature review was carried out to design a survey on the use of a computer and the Internet by people aged over 50 and living a rural area. The survey contained questions for the users and the non-user. There were questions on the use of a computer and the Internet, the duration and the frequency of use, the main activities on the Internet, the encountered difficulties, and the factors that prevents some people to use the Internet… People have been asked in the Mayenne department, located in the north west of France. Mayenne is rather a rural area with less than 300,000 inhabitants. People were asked in the streets during several markets which took place in the town centre of Mayenne. About 170 answers have been collected. In this study as many people aged of 50-59, 60-69, 70-79 and over 80 years old were asked. The level of diploma, the incomes and the social category, which could be factors on the access to new technologies, were not taken into account. This could be another interesting study to lead.

3.1 Have used a computer

Figure 2 shows that only 38% of people have already used a computer. If we consider the Europe, according to the Older Population Survey, 40% of the European aged over 50 have already used a computer in 1999 (Kubitschke, 2001). Since this study, we can suppose that the percentage of users have increased. If the age is taken into account, it can be seen in Figure3 that the more people are aged, the less they have used a computer. Besides, anybody over 75 years old has used a computer. About 30 people living in retirement homes answered the survey. All answered that they never use a computer. These people have over 80 years old and this can explain why they never use a computer. Indeed, the Internet is a recent technology; it is available for the large public for a few more than 10 years and at its beginning few people used it. The elderly who use the Internet are more often some who used it at work. The employment could be a key factor linked to the use of the Internet. Indeed, people who did not use ICT when they were in the professional environment do not use them when they are no longer in activity (Östlund, 1998).

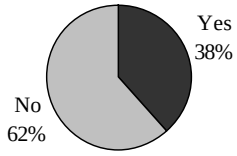

Figure 2: Use a computer

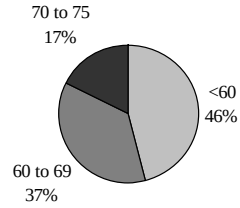

Figure 3: People using a computer according to the age

3.2 Own a computer/ an Internet connection

Among asked people, a quarter have a computer and 80% of people owning a computer have an Internet access. Thus, it can be assumed that people have a computer mainly to surf on the Web. In the autumn term 2004, the French average of people owning a computer was of 45.1%, the Mayenne department is behind in the use of a computer (Mediametrie, 2004).

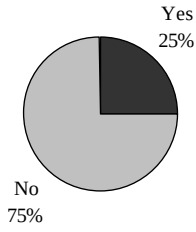

Figure 4: People owning a computer

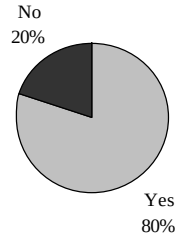

Figure 5: People having an Internet access

According to the Figure7, 33% of people aged 60-69 years old have a computer. According to the INSEE (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies is a "General Directorate" of the French Ministry of the Economy, Finance, and

Industry), at the beginning of the year 2004, 28% had a computer. Thus, people of Mayenne are above the national average. Figure 6 shows that 46% of the 50-59 years old own a computer compared to 56% of the French average for the same age group. People of Mayenne are below the average. About 7% of people of 70 years old and over have a computer compare to 9% of the national average (Frydel, 2005). This age group is also below the average. Overall, people living in Mayenne are less equipped of computers if we compare the averages of this study and of the INSEE study.

More or less the same results are obtained if we consider the ownership of an Internet access at home. However, the study reveals that people living in Mayenne are more equipped of Internet access than the global French population. Indeed, the study reveals that 63% of the Net surfers have a high speed Internet access against 50.1% of the national average (Mediametrie, 2004). This can be explained by the fact that the Mayenne department is rather well equipped in high speed connections. At the end of the year 2005, 97% of the department would be covered. Thus, Mayenne would be among the first department which provides an almost total cover (Conseil Général de la Mayenne Direction de la Communication, 2005).

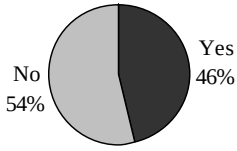

Figure 6: Own a computer 50-59 years old

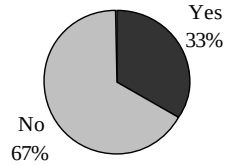

Figure 7 : Own a computer 60-69 years old

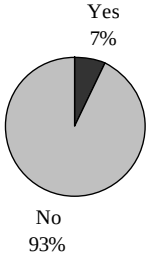

Figure 8: Own a computer - > 70 years old

According to the following pie charts, about 20% of people live in villages between 500 to 1,000 inhabitants and only 9% of people using a computer live in such a village. About 30% of people live in communes between 1,000 to 2,000 inhabitants and 40% of people using a computer live in such a commune. About 45% of people live in towns of more than 2,000 inhabitants and 47% of people using a computer live in such a town. It can be deduced that the majority of people, who answered the survey and who use a computer, live in communes between 1,000 and 2,000 inhabitants. In France, a town is defined by 2,000 inhabitants. So, the study reveals that in the Mayenne department, there are more people who use a computer living in villages than in towns.

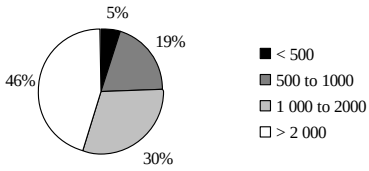

Figure 9: Percentage of asked people according to the size of the town

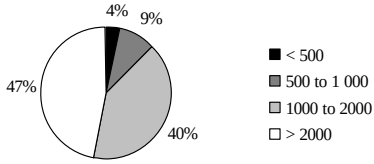

Figure 10: People using a computer according to the size of the commune

3.3 Type of difficulties

People encountered difficulties at the beginning of the use of the Internet. The difficulty the most spread is not to find relevant information. Then, lot of people have problem of connection, essentially with 56ko modem because they often are disconnected and sometimes cannot access the Internet. This problem is rather technical than a real user problem. Advertisement and spam overrun people's email box and people can be lost by advertisement which display when they surf on the Web.

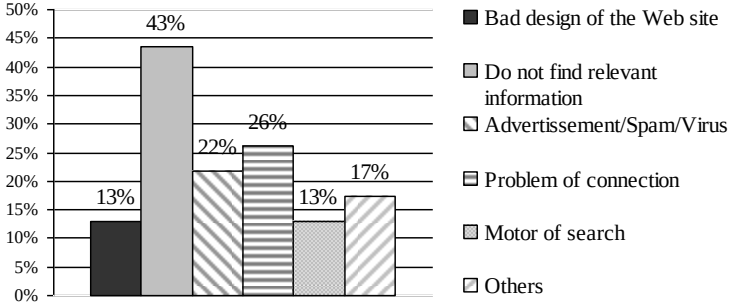

Figure 11: Type of difficulties

3.4 People wanting to use a computer

Very few people want to learn to use the Internet (16%). Generally, the more people are aged, the less they want to begin to use the Internet (84%). There is no distinction between men and women and if people live in a rural or an urban area, but only a distinction according to the age.

3.5 Factors that prevents people to use a computer

A first research reveals that old people can encounter the following problems (Viriot-Durandal; Coutty, 2004): fear of the innovation and the complexity, lack of skills, lack of confidence, fear of the failure in the learning, manipulation of the keyboard and the mouse, difficulties with vision, difficulties with mobility (rural isolation), training facilities can be inappropriate or inaccessible, … In the study, we find more or less the same factors.

The first factor that prevents people to use a computer is the fact that people are not interested in using this technology because they do not see the usage. About 54% of people answer this. This result agrees with the poll realised by the CREDOC (A research centre for the study and observation of life conditions) which reveals that 50% of the 60 years old and over think that computers are useless in the daily life. Indeed, according to the CREDOC study, 29% of the 60-69 years old see an interest to the use of a computer and only 26% of the retired people (Viriot-Durandal). Perhaps if the elderly knew what the Internet could bring them, for example find out more about their personal interests and hobbies, they would change one's mind. More people will think that there is an interest to the use of a computer. Indeed, if people do not see an interest to use something they will not use it. Of course, there are IPAPs with coordinators to help people to use computers. But if people are not interested, they will not come. We need to find something that could interest them and introduce the computer like a tool to achieve their needs.

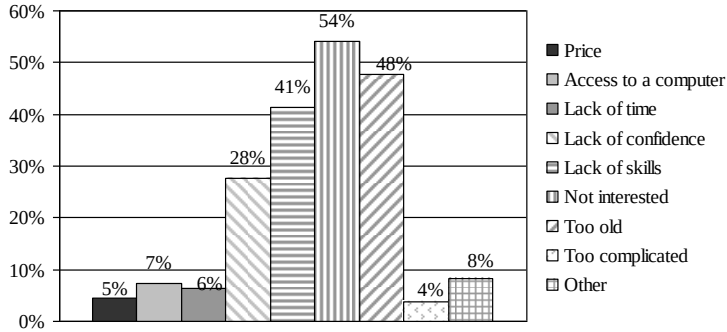

Figure 12: Factors

The second most spread answer is "I am too old to use a computer" with about 48%. People think that the use of a computer is not of their generation and that it is too complicated to begin at over 60 years old. However, an experience realised by Marquié, Jourdan-Boddaert and Huet in 2002 shows that the elderly underestimate their own capabilities to use new technologies. Indeed, we know that people hesitate to do something when they think that they are incompetent. If we want to encourage the elderly to use new technologies, we need to help them to find confidence in their capabilities to do it (100 fenêtres sur Internet).

About 41% of people assert that they do not use a computer because they do not have the necessary skills. Indeed, if we compare a telephone or a TV (which were also new technologies) to a computer, it seems that a computer and its software are technologies really more difficult to use. In the case of a phone, the same procedure is repeated at each call (hang up, dial, talk and hang back up), so the technique is transparent and easy to learn. With a computer and the Internet, the technique is more complex and the learning can be longer. Certainly, the use of a keyboard and a mouse can be difficult at the beginning. They have in particular problems with some keys of the keyboard such as make stress mark, write in capital letters or erase mistakes. It is also difficult to use the mouse because the cursor move too fast at the beginning and when they want to click in a particular place the cursor go away. This

learning can be long. Moreover, software is more difficult to use because people need to learn, to understand and to remember the different functions and this in a continuous way because new versions are provided. However, there are always difficulties when someone begins to use a new technology but the skills can be gained after some practises.

28% of people say that they lack of confidence and think that they do not succeed in using a computer correctly. Thus, they prefer not to use it. The "other" category regroups people who have problems of vision, problems of memory, and people who think that there are too freedom in the use of the Internet. From people who answered that they are interested in using a computer, the main factors that prevent them to use it are: the lack of skills, the access to a computer and the price.

3.6 Promote the use of ICT

For the moment, France is behind in the use of the Internet by elderly people. Thus, the authorities need to carry on promoting the Internet otherwise some people could be passed through a great number of services. Many initiatives have been taken into place on local and national level to favour the Internet access to everybody. Since 1998, majority of regions and communities have set up IPAPs. Thus, in 2004, more than 3,000 IPAPs mesh the country. It is poor compared to the UK with more than 6,000 online centres (DUI, 2004). These premises are needed to communicate the benefits of ICT. Indeed, the computer is currently the most important way to go to the online world and to offer services. These will continue to develop. It is mainly the elderly who need these services more than younger people. So, if they do not take part to technologies, they will be excluded of the society (Bradbrook and Fisher, 2004).

4. Discussion

The survey reveals that 40% of people who have 50 years old and over have used a computer. It can also be noticed that the more people are aged, the less they have used a computer. Indeed, the greatest number of users has less than 60 years old. People over 75 years old have never used a computer (Figure 3). This can be explained by the fact that in the past few people used a computer in their work because it was a new technology and in rural areas new technologies arrive later than in urban areas. Indeed, some surveys have stated that the professional environment is often a key factor linked to the use of a computer. Thus, if the elderly did not use a computer when they worked, they will not begin to use it when there are in retirement. It can be assumed that in the future years more elderly people will use a computer and the Internet because people will use it during their active live.

The survey also shows that few people, who do not use the Internet, want or wish to use it. Only 16% would like to begin to use the Internet (Fig 12). This trend does not depend on the gender or if people live in a rural or an urban area, but depend rather on the age. The more people are aged, the less they want to begin to learn to use the

Internet. The three main factors that enable them to begin to use the Internet are: Not interested/Not see the usage (54%), too old (48%) and lack of skills (41%)

However, it seems that the elderly who want to learn to use a computer and the Internet wish to attend training. 64% of people mainly people who think that they lack of skills would like to go in an IPAP to attend initiations. Thus, IPAPs seem important in the acquisition of the knowledge and the practises for people who want to begin to use a computer.

The interview, given by M. Roussel, shows that even if people have a good education (lecturer at the university) they do not necessarily use a computer. It would seem that **the use of a computer is neither a matter of age nor of diploma but rather of individual wish**. It is right that the family or friend circle is perhaps a factor which favours the use of ICT.

To extend this research the following could be undertaken:

- Lead the same study in Paris or a big city to compare the results,
- Take into account in the survey the level of diploma and the social category to know if there is a link with the use of a computer,
- Find a "hook" to interest the elderly to ICT. If this interest is found, it will be easier for them to begin to use a computer because they will have the wish. Indeed, if someone does not want to do something, he (she) will never do it.
- Find new interfaces or improve the existing interfaces (the keys of the keyboard could be larger and the mouse must be easier to handle).
- Design easier software with only useful functions (browser with only the file, edition and view menu)

5. Conclusions

As show some studies, few elderly people use a computer or the Internet and the more they are aged, the less they use it. As revealed by the Ipsos study, particularly older citizens are at risk to be left behind on the "Information Highway". In the Mayenne department, only 40% of people aged over 50 have already used a computer. The rate of computer equipment is weak, 25% against 45.1% of the global French average. The main factor that enables people to use a computer is that the elderly are not interested in this technology. Thus, this group of population is excluded despite the fact that the government promotes the use of ICT by setting up IPAPs through the country in order to help people to reach new technologies. The premises are well present but people, who are not interested in, do not come to these places. The benefits of ICT, which should focus on the interests of the elderly people, have to be proved. If an initial "hook" is providing, then it will be easier to introduce the computer and the Internet like tools to achieve their needs.

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