

Chapter 19

The Importance of ICT in the Social Support Networks and in the Citizenship of the Portuguese Elderly

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ABSTRACT

The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) contain properties that easily convert into solutions for people with special needs, contributing to their inclusion in everyday life. The possibility to intervene and participate in acts of communication in interpersonal settings and distance learning, or simply the possibility of using a device that simulates the vocalization of requests, greetings, and caresses gain a redoubled sense in the efforts to include citizens with special needs, as it does to the senior citizens, in societies attempting to promote equal opportunities among its members. This chapter focuses on the interaction between the elderly and the information and communication technologies and the impact that that interaction has on their participation in society.

INTRODUCTION

According to what was proposed by several authors throughout this work as well as through the analysis of obtained results, we can infer that the senior individual has advantages when using the Internet as a communication intermediary. When they use the virtual space to improve the

physical space, they improve the communication in distance. They also realize that the social support provided online is likely to be more accessible and visible to any hour, which allows a greater enjoyment of it. Besides, the Internet allows effective participation, which transforms seniors in active citizens with the ability to increase their sociocultural capital.

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The presented analysis allowed inferring that senior citizens in the sampled group want to learn and use ICT in the promotion of their personal networks and citizenship. We conclude, therefore, that the use of this tool is a strong improver of senior citizen's quality of living as well as their social inclusion/participation and as a consequence, a powerful tool of sociocultural capital.

The relevance of Internet used by seniors under study and its importance on active citizenship, advises us that we need to pay special attention to the systematic teaching of this tool. This kind of teaching in institutions that support these age groups, is used as a tool that is useful in fighting isolation and loneliness.

The study sample consists of 351 seniors who attend computer classes at Senior Universities in Portugal, individuals over 50 years using ICT. Nowadays there are about 120 Senior Universities in Portugal where computer courses are taught. Each class comprises about 40 students, which makes a population of about 4,800 seniors.

To evaluate the study variables it was used a questionnaire. This questionnaire will provide the description of the sample regarding the social characteristics and the use of ICT by the older. It was also used the Instrumento de Análise da Rede Social Pessoal (IARSP) which allowed to analyze the social network which could be improved by ICT use.

Issues for which the study aims to address:

Can the computer and the Internet use help seniors to feel included as members of the community as their age and needs increase? Does this use promote the development of their social networks?

BACKGROUND

The impact of ICT use, and more specifically the computer and the Internet's impact has on the increase of seniors social capital and in the promotion of their (re)integration into society was a theme already studied in some works, especially

in the international context, such as Spain, the United States, Ireland and Scotland (the latter by comparing the Swedish senior). In the Portuguese case there is a certain hiatus of research on this subject.

Among the work carried out in the international context we can highlight the study of Manuel Area Moreira (1998), entitled *Desigualdades, educación y nuevas tecnologías*, which states that ICTs have harmful side effects on the social system, including, target and increase cultural and economic distances between sectors integrated in the technological development and the population excluded from this development, since a certain economic and cultural level to acquire these tools is an essential factor for this type of inclusion.

According to him, the use of ICT is contributing to a change and a better society as a whole and is a consequence of the quality of life of citizens. It would be naive not to recognize that the economic, social and cultural ICT benefits for those who use them are undeniable (Moreira, 1998). ICTs have also substantive effects on the citizenship policy formation, in the configuration and transmission of ideas and ideological values, in the development of attitudes towards inter-relationship and interaction with others. According to the study, access to culture conveyed by these technologies will become a reality for those whose economic level enables them to acquire them and those who have adequate knowledge to understand and use them. The article looks at ICT as a specific communication system and compares it with the means of traditional mass communication (television, for ex.), concluding that in today's societies are set up two parallel networks of different information both the content and convey the same culture as the way to store, organize and access to information: A network is represented by the traditional media (press, radio, movies and especially television) and the other shaped by technology information and digital media (mobile, digital television, Internet, etc.). Each one offers different opportunities and cultural experiences, and it is expected to be used only for a given network communication

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