

When ageing society meets the digital divide

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By Cai Yiping



Population ageing is leading to a shift in the median age of the population due both to declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy. China has seen this trend towards an ageing society since 1999 and China as a “developing country” has the largest elderly population and the fastest ageing process in the world accounting for one-fifth of the global elderly population. In 2019, China’s overall elderly population aged 60 and above reached approximately 254 million, accounting for 18.1% of the total population.[i] This increase in the numbers of ageing population is predicted to be on the rise.

In parallel, there is an unprecedented rapid development of the Internet, new ICTs, and digitisation in China, which has been integrated into all aspects of people’s daily lives. As of March 2020, according to “The 45th Statistical Report on Internet Development” released by the China Internet Network Information Centre, the number of internet users in China is 904 million, and the Internet coverage rate reached 64.5%.[ii] This means there are about 500 million people within China who do not use the Internet. In addition, in 2019, there were 253.88 million people aged 60 and above, of which only 60.56 million people had access to the Internet, thus leaving nearly 200 million elderly people out of the digital society.

UN Policy Brief “The Impact of COVID-19 on older persons” outlines the negative impact of the digital divide on older persons both in developed and developing countries. Many older persons have limited access to digital technology and lack necessary skills to fully utilise them. Barriers that older persons face related to literacy and language, including visual and hearing impairments, may be amplified during the COVID-19 crisis.[iii] Therefore, the most vulnerable groups (aged, poor, illiterate, ethnic minority, rural, disabled) are often excluded from basic services, such as public transportation, health, banking. This has become even more evident during the pandemic, when the apps and digital devices are used for contact tracking and many services are only provided via internet.

Recently, the news reports and footage on the plight of older persons during COVID-19 have gone viral on the Internet and social media. A 70-year-old man was removed from the bus by drivers and passengers as he did not have a smartphone and could not show the health code, which is required to board any public transportation. Another old man was crying in the supermarket because he could not purchase anything without mobile payment, although he brought cash with him. “Why? Why I cannot pay by cash? It is not fake money!” he argued, but nobody listened to him. An old woman went to the dental clinic but was turned away at the door because she did not know that she had to make an online appointment in advance. In another case, a street vendor who sells vegetables asked his customers whether they could pay by cash instead of paying by mobile phone. “If you scan the QR code and pay by phone, the money will be transferred to my son’s bank account. I will not receive any money. I need some cash to buy food”, she explained. According to a survey, only 51% of people over 60 use electronic payments. At the same time, there are also heart-warming stories in the media. A railway station and some hospitals set up a special channel at the entrance to serve passengers/patients who do not have smart phones or health codes, in order to provide services for the elderly. Since October 2020, in the Sichuan Province, it is mandatory for all clinics and health facilities to retain a face to face service window for elderly people.[iv] Young volunteers are teaching and accompanying elderly people to explain how to use smartphones and how to surf the internet.

All these stories make people reflect on how to ensure that older persons are not left behind in the digital age. It requires the synergy and co-ordinated efforts from the government, business sectors and from the community at large.

- Governments need to ensure the policies and measures, including the temporary measure aimed at containing the pandemic, are aligned with the existing laws and policies on the protection of rights and interests of the elderly.
- Many elderly people also are active learners, but the digital products and services provided should be adapted to and meet the needs of the elderly; such as developing mobile phones with large screens, loud-volume, large font and a simplified operating system.

- Optimise the application of e-government services to ensure that the basic public services (in stations, airports, parks, banks, hospitals, shopping malls and other public places) provide necessary information guidance and manual assistance. For example, establishing “green channels” and adopting alternative measures and retaining cash payments and offline processing channels to improve “face-to-face” services.
- CSOs and communities can introduce technical service resources and conduct training courses for the elderly for the use of digital products.
- Strengthen social inclusion and solidarity (including inter-generational solidarity) during physical distancing and provide social support measures and targeted care for older persons, including assisting their access to digital technologies.
- Pay special attention to the most vulnerable groups among our elderly people (poor, rural, women, and those with physical and mental impairments), to address their needs and eradicate the digital barriers.

[i] National Bureau of Statistics: National Economic and Social Development Statistical Gazette of the People’s Republic of China 2019.

[ii] China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), The 45th China Statistical Report on Internet Development. April 2020.

[iii] United Nations, Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on older persons. May 2020.

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<http://www.sc.gov.cn/10462/12771/2020/10/24/435d8cbcba6a4aca915d2da8b13319e4.shtml>

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