



Librarians, Seniors, and the Challenge of Technological Education and Outreach



Seniors are often viewed as a technophobic user group.

I started my career as a librarian at an academic library, where information literacy instruction and outreach are big components of day-to-day work. After my academic librarian position, I found myself working in a public library's reference services, where information literacy, while still stressed to patrons, takes on a different meaning. Public library patrons often encounter a different obstacle in becoming information-iterate—operating the technology itself successfully. Older and elderly patrons are the population most wrestling with technological literacy. In a normal day at the reference desk, I spend a large amount of time working with this group on just the basic operations of technology: how to save a Word document, how to troubleshoot printing failures, and how to retrieve lost email passwords.

As time goes on and I continue to get to know my patrons, I see how technological literacy, while not glamorous, is a very vital part of information literacy outreach. After all, how can we help patrons find reliable information if they cannot turn on their computer and successfully open an internet browser?

SENIOR MOMENTUM

Seniors are often viewed as a technophobic user group. While it is true that seniors might have more anxiety about using technology and that fewer members of this age group are adapting—and those who are, are doing it at a slower rate—it does not mean that seniors are not using technology or do not have a desire to learn how to use the latest tech gadgets. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, “Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults,” 67% of seniors use the internet. Additionally, smartphone adoption has quadrupled in the last 5 years among this group (“Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults” May 17, 2017; pewinternet.org/2017/05/17/tech-adoption-climbs-among-older-adults). In fact, at my small public library, at least one patron a day comes by the desk asking for technological assistance or where they can find classes on how to use their new digital devices. In addition, using the library's own desktop computers, we assist several older adults with basic operation skills and questions. Seniors need technological literacy to operate their devices, but to also help them tackle more complex forms of information literacy in their daily lives such as discerning unreliable news sources and internet scams. Librarians are one of the first responders on the technological and information literacy front

lines and have many types of strategies to assist and educate these patrons.

According to the same Pew Research Center survey, seniors, albeit slow on the uptake, are actually adopting technology faster than ever before. This user group is ready to learn technology skills and embrace technology in their day-to-day lives. It is important to note that a majority of this early adopter group tends to be upper middle-class, wealthy, and college-educated, and hence have the ability to purchase and keep up with all the latest tech trends. However, there is another group of tech adopters besides wealthy educated seniors. This group is often forced to adapt to some kind of technology not by curiosity or choice, but because of the general shift to more digital ways of life in present-day society. These include older adults who are now in the job market for the first time in years and need to upgrade their tech skills. Seniors who live at home now must try to learn how to properly operate a slew of digital devices and services in order to pay bills, request food delivery, or even renew magazine subscriptions. Whether they want to adopt technology or not, the decision is already being made for aging populations due to an ever-increasingly digital presence in their lives. This change can be daunting and discouraging for seniors having very little experience with digital technology.

LIBRARIES' SENIOR SERVICES

In most cases, seniors rely on family members to help them out with technology issues. When there isn't someone to turn to, these people often end up at the public library seeking any kind of assistance and guidance to learn how to perform basic tech operations. In fact, public libraries take the needs of this patron population very seriously, offering a variety of resources to assist patrons in their quest to become technologically and information-literate.

Get With the Program

One major way that public libraries assist in technology-based outreach is through special programming. Ranging from classes to workshops and resources available for check-out, the library is a big source of help to older technology users. At my library, Crowell Public Library in San Marino, Calif., we have gone through several versions of a program that assists our senior population in mastering technology skills. In October 2017 after some trial and error, we finally settled on the Tech Time program. Tech Time is a twice-a-month, 2-hour program that gives seniors an opportunity to sign up for 30 minutes of one-on-one technology assistance. Patrons sit with a library staff member or volunteer to work through one technological goal or to receive assistance with their device. As of this writing (prior to the end of 2018), we have served more than 72 patrons, and in 13 exit surveys taken, we have received an average score of 4.58 out of 5 (Library Programming Survey, Crowell Public Library, October 2017). For a library the size of Crowell, a small single branch in a tiny community, reaching out to 72 patrons and improving their technological literacy skills is an accomplishment. As Tech Time becomes more popular, we have plans to expand its reach as far as we have the means to do so for our elderly patrons.

Seniors in Seattle and the Big Apple

Programs such as Tech Time are not unique to Crowell Public Library. Libraries all over the country are taking the lead in assisting seniors or any other patrons who need help with basic technological skills.

Seattle Public Library offers a variety of digital literacy classes such as Digital Creativity and Digital Learning. However, the most notable is the large cannon of classes offered under the title Technology for Beginners. This cannon includes one-on-one appointments with an instructor as well



The Seattle Public Library is one of the many libraries across the country offering technological literacy programming within their communities.



The Seniors TechClub in Bellflower, Calif., helps bridge the digital divide by offering a space where seniors can take classes, work with instructors one on one for assistance, and access digital technology in a group setting.

as larger Intro to Tech Skills classes—all of which are completely free of charge. These classes address a variety of topics from computer operation basics, how to use the internet, even rudimentary Microsoft word skills (“Technology Skills,” Seattle Public Library 2018; spl.org/programs-and-services/learning/technology-skills).

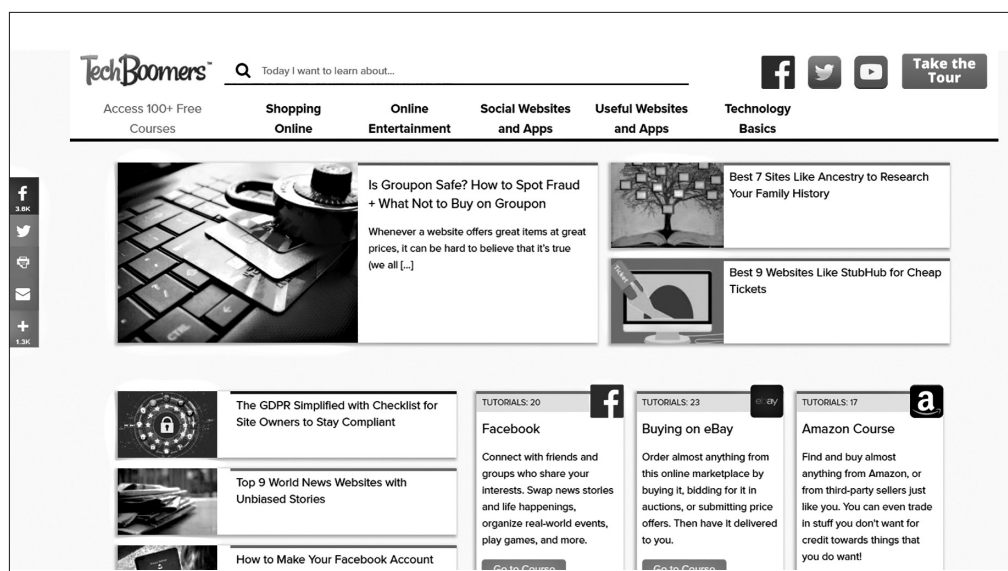
The New York Public Library (NYPL) has a similar offering titled the TechConnect program, where patrons can seek tech skill assistance in a variety of classes at levels ranging from beginner to skilled (“NYPL TechConnect Classes,” 2018; nypl.org/tech-connect). The library is one of the few places that seniors and older patrons can go to improve their technology skills. Some patrons only have these free instructional classes as a way to learn about these devices. Upon completion, seniors for the most part walk away feeling confident and grateful someone took the time to teach them about their digital devices; in some cases, technological literacy has even improved their social skills. (See “Tech Training Builds Connections and Confidence for Older Adults,” July 24, 2018; aarp.org/home-family/personal-technology/info-2018/technology-training-for-older-adults.html.)

LIBRARY RESOURCES AND ASSISTANCE OPTIONS

Another avenue of outreach is library resources. In addition to classes and one-on-one tech time blocks, there are a variety of print and virtual resources patrons can utilize help to build and refine their tech skills. A well-stocked technology section is usually a staple of any public library collection. As the adult services librarian at Crowell, I am in charge of purchasing nonfiction for our patrons. I make sure our technological literacy print material section is packed with instructional books about learning different aspects of technology

such as software, computer programming, and internet basics. Older patrons enjoy books on utilizing Facebook, learning the Microsoft Office Suite, and becoming familiar with basic computer functions. In my personal experience, I have discovered that some users prefer the print resources to learn on their own and perhaps ask questions in a technology class or at the reference desk at a later date. Print resources offer an alternative to hands-on instruction and appeal to a different type of learner, especially one who may have reservations about operating digital technology.

Lastly, in the event that it does not offer a resource that fits the patron’s needs, librarians are very good at finding assistance elsewhere for their patrons. Just like all services the library provides, budgets, staff sizes, and resources can only reach out and help a certain number of patrons. This is where online tutorials, neighboring larger libraries, and even other community departments or nonprofits can fill in the gaps. In our community, we are only able to offer Tech Time and cannot do a larger, multiple-session class. However, San Marino’s Recreation Department offers quarterly full-length classes that teach basic technological literacy skills on a number of devices. We often suggest this solution to patrons who want to repeatedly return to Tech Time and require more structured assistance (Fall 2018 *San Marino Community Newsletter and Community Services Guide*, p.16; cityofsanmarino.org/DocumentCenter/View/1083/FALL-2018-Community-Newsletter--Community-Services-Guide-MAIN?bidId=). There is also the option of community centers and nonprofits that libraries can connect patrons with to assist them in their technological literacy quests. One example is The Seniors TECH Club (seniorstechclub.com) in Bellflower, Calif. This is a place seniors can visit for building digital technology



TechBoomers is a wonderful open access resource intermediate technology users can access for personal assistance with their digital technology questions.

skills. This organization is committed to bridging the digital divide between generations by providing individual assistance, classes, and even remote instruction. No matter what type of user or ability, there is something for everyone at public libraries. Librarians reach out to as many patrons as possible to get them connected to other organizations and resources that can help them improve their technological literacy skills. Sometimes an open source and librarian vetted website can be of great help to users.

TechBoomers

A particularly useful free, librarian-vetted resource is the TechBoomers website (techboomers.com). It offers free online tutorials ranging from technology basics such as How to Check Your Voicemail on Your Mobile Telephone to more complex topics for seniors who might have some technology skills, including How to Make Your Facebook Profile Private or How to Unsubscribe to Groupon. TechBoomers takes all those hard-to-answer questions and makes their answers accessible online for free. It even offers a Classes section where users access a string of tutorials on one specific subject such as Netflix Operation or YouTube. This resource is great for those seniors who are comfortable with the basic operations of technology but have questions about navigating aspects of specific programs or websites. It is even better that these intermediate users can access this resource online from home for free and be confident in the instructional credibility of this librarian-vetted resource.

AARP, BE MY EYES, AND MORE

Digital technology accessed by confident technology users can improve senior's lives drastically. Applications, online delivery services, and entertainment make life much more convenient for a population that can be homebound or decreasingly mobile. One of the best applications for seniors is the AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) App. The AARP App offers a calendar of local events in the user's area and coupons to various local businesses. (See "Get AARP on the Go!"; aarp.org/about-aarp/mobile.)

Be My Eyes (bemyeyes.com) is an application that illuminates and magnifies everyday print objects such as newspapers, menus, and magazines. Medical applications such as Blood Pressure Monitor help seniors track their vital statistics and numerous applications help seniors locate the lowest-cost medicine and pharmacies in their area ("Senior Citizen Apps" 2018; seniorliving.org/leisure/senior-citizen-apps). Rideshare applications such as Uber and Lyft help homebound seniors get social events or doctor's appointments safely. Senior citizens' worlds open up beyond the analog once they are properly able to access technology.

OTHER ONLINE SERVICES

It does not stop at applications. The internet offers entertainment and life services as well. Most chain grocery stores, not just Amazon, offer food delivery service online. Seniors can use the time saved going to the store and lugging grocer-



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ies around to enjoy digital leisure sites. Hulu offers subscription streaming services so seniors can watch their favorite programs via smart TVs and online. In addition to all the online streaming services available for subscription, seniors can also enjoy audiobooks through their local library. This is a great service for people who can no longer read print books for long periods of time due to deteriorating eyesight. Some libraries subscribe to brain game memory software such as Lumosity (lumosity.com) that assists seniors in building their memory skills while enjoying online games. Technology is offering leisure and life skills activities for seniors for the first time in our modern age, and the Boomer generation is the first to reap the benefits.

LIBRARIES: EMPOWERED TO SERVE

While some critics are stuck on the negative aspects of the digital world, librarians are working hard to educate and empower senior users so they can embrace technology to improve their quality of life. It is not an easy feat, and it is a slow race, but outreach and teaching technological literacy are vital to making sure a generation is not left behind on the digital rollercoaster ride. Just like having access to information in all formats, everyone deserves a chance to understand and properly access digital technology. Access provides freedom and an open door to a whole new world. Once again the library is the beacon that ensures freedom to digital access, by every user, no matter what age, around the world.

Carly Lamphere (clamphere@cityofsanmarino.org) is reference librarian at Crowell Public Library by day and digital literacy superhero by night, battling the villains of technological literacy at the library and bringing the joy of technology to patrons of all ages.

Comments? Email the editor-in-chief (marydee@xmission.com).

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