

No app, no entry: How the digital world is failing the non tech-savvy

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Whatever the word is for the opposite of heartwarming, it certainly applies to the story of Ruth and Peter Jaffe. The elderly couple from Ealing, west London, made headlines last week after being charged £110 by Ryanair for printing out their tickets at Stansted airport. Even allowing for the exorbitant cost of inkjet printer ink, 55 quid for each sheet of paper is a shockingly creative example of punitive pricing. The Jaffes, aged 79 and 80, said they had become confused on the Ryanair website and accidentally printed out their return tickets instead of their outbound ones to Bergerac. It was the kind of error anyone could make, although octogenarians, many of whom struggle with the tech demands of digitalisation, are far more likely to make it. But as the company explained in a characteristically charmless justification of the charge: “We regret that these passengers ignored their email reminder and failed to check-in online.” Leaving aside the “sorry, not sorry” expression of regret, the presumption is that the elderly remain vigilant to every missive from the online world, when in fact many find it a jungle of scams, junk mail, endless passwords and security risks into which they venture as little as possible. Although Ryanair prides itself on its distinctively narrow interpretation of customer care, the plight of the Jaffes is emblematic of a larger problem confronting the elderly and those not fully plugged into modern systems of business. Citing the Jaffes, the historian and TV presenter Amanda Vickery noted in a series of outraged tweets last week that “most car parks now don’t take cash, ticket offices are disappearing. If you are not tech-savvy you are toast. It is so exclusionary.” The real cause of Vickery’s ire, however, was a breast cancer clinic she attended that, in her words, turned away “some old ladies ... because they did not have an SMS message from an app. They didn’t even have a phone! Appalling. And agist!” The Good Things Foundation is the UK’s largest digital inclusion charity, seeking to help a million people to get across a tech divide that has deepened during the cost of living crisis. Natasha Bright-Wray, the foundation’s associate director of communications, says that “digitally excluded people are largely forgotten” by a government that boasts of making the UK a digital superpower but is apathetic about those left behind and lacks any meaningful digital inclusion strategy. The effects are conspicuous in the NHS, where improved digitalisation can bring greater efficiencies but often leaves those, like the women Vickery witnessed, failing to benefit from the services. After all, as Bright-Wray says, one in 20 UK households have no home internet access. And in the case of the elderly, even if they do have access, they frequently have limited ability to use it. In much the same way, the notion that everyone has a bank account and a card or phone with money on it does not withstand a visit to your local supermarket, where it’s noticeable how many people avoid the checkouts that are “card only”. The cashless society is effectively already a reality

for most of us, but there remains a minority for whom it represents a continuing headache. The government last week told high street banks that they must offer access to cash machines within three miles of customers after the closure of thousands of branches had reduced the number of ATMs. There are also an estimated to be 1.3 million adults in this country who are “unbanked” – ie do not have a bank account. For them, something as mundane as parking a car is increasingly fraught – a quarter of London councils have removed pay and display parking machines in favour of smartphone-centred apps. This silent trend towards the removal of cash has provided another front for conspiratorial thinking. Go to a demonstration by the sort of people who believe that 5G mobile towers and Covid are linked and the chances are you’ll see placards warning of the evils of electronic money. It’s easy to mock such thinking, but it feeds on a sense of disempowerment. Recently in Nottinghamshire I spoke to a woman called Audrey who told me she had worked in the caring profession for 50 years. She and her husband were full of melodramatic warnings about China and “shadowy” powers who controlled politics, but she also said that when it came to removing cash transactions “it’s the poor and marginalised who are forgotten”. She had a point. The shiny, bright future of full computerisation looks very much like a dystopia to someone who either doesn’t understand it or have the means to access it. And almost by definition, the people who can’t access the digitalised world are seldom visible, because absence is not easy to see. What is apparent is that improved efficiency doesn’t necessarily lead to greater wellbeing. From a technological and economic perspective, the case for removing railway station ticket offices is hard to refute. A public consultation process is under way by train operators who present the proposed closures as means of bringing “station staff closer to customers”. The RMT union, by contrast, believes it’s a means of bringing the staff closer to unemployment and has mounted a campaign heralding the good work done by ticket offices across the network. Whatever the truth, human interaction is in danger of being undervalued in the digital landscape. Technology doesn’t have to be dehumanising, but if it’s to avoid that outcome it has to be human-focused, not just consumer-focused, and in particular not just digital-consumer-focused. Cash, like printed air tickets or indeed train tickets, will no doubt one day soon seem as anachronistic as the barter system. In the meantime the transition should focus on ensuring that no one is discounted because they are too old, too poor or too disabled to matter to the gods of efficiency. The alternative is the Ryanair way, in which analogue becomes a ticket to be taken for a ride. • This article was amended on 20 August 2023. An error during editing put Ealing in north, rather than west, London.