

Personal History of Internet

- Interviewees:

C. Yu, born in 1940 in Wuyi Hill, Fujian province, China.

H. Yu, born in 1965 in Wuyi Hill, moved to Fuzhou, provincial capital.

C. Yang, born in 1990 in Wuyi Hill, moved to Shanghai, Software Engineer

1) C. Yu:

C. Yu was born in 1940 in Wuyi Hill, a small village of 2000 people deep inside Wuyi mountains, amidst WWII. She lived in extreme poverty, received no proper education, does not read nor write, and did not have access to any form of digital technology until 1980s (radio). As a result, she believed that cameras would “absorb people’s souls” and refuse to use any of the telecommunication’s technology that had visual connectivity. Nonetheless, she enjoyed watching TV and calling his family via cable telephone since they were made available in early 2000s.

2) H. Yu

H. Yu was born in 1965 and made her way to university through hard work. She studied economics in provincial university and worked as a business analyst for 40 years. Her access to internet was in align with the technological revolution in China. She was surprised by the “iPhone” moment and quickly learned to use smart phones and all the accompanied software. She now enjoys fiber, 5G, Wechat Pay, Tiktok, etc. But she has a hard time figuring out how to use some of the fancy features in social media. Being familiar with

Microsoft Office and Safari is the best that she could do in terms of using computers.

3) C. Yang

C. Yang was born in 1990 and had an interest in computers since he was a kid. He went to college to study computer science and founded a start-up in software. He became a software engineer at Bytedance in 2015 and has been a senior engineer since then. He has access to fiber, advanced laptop, sophisticated coding skills, user data and anything that is most up to date.

Observations:

C. Yu faced numerous obstacles when traveling to the urban area in 2020: Everything is done on smart phones, and it was just too hard for her because the only function she knew how to use was to call and text. The extremely rapid urbanization and digitization in the past 30 years in China has left her behind. She was overwhelmed by the digital complexities of the urban environment and therefore was excluded in the mainstream urban, digital lifestyle, assuming she'd like it. She tried to use an app to call a cab, but the sophisticated interface with dozens of buttons in Simplified Chinese characters stopped her from figuring out how to use it.

C. Yu is not alone. Despite the convenience of nationwide 5G coverage, high level smart phone affordability, and abundant software options, over 100 million senior people were left out of that drastic digitization process. Many

supermarkets no longer offer exchange and assume everyone knows how to pay via Wechat & Alipay. This problem was made worse during the pandemic, when a government-issued digital health code is a must-have for entering almost any building.

Although H. Yu is much younger and more literate, she constantly complains about how over-sophisticated software are these days. She didn't want to see dozens of ads and be marketed about NFTs, bootcamps, houses, and Tesla when all she wanted to do was just to order some vegetables. Fitting dozens of sections in a 5.7 inches screen is also too difficult for her deteriorating eyesight.

C. Yang is a tech geek. He wants to develop more sophisticated functions for his young, Gen-Z customers on TikTok and he is constantly thinking about adding new features to existing applications. He deals with gigabytes of data every day and a team of Ivy-League graduated interface designers. His boss always demands him to think outside box and try to create more affordances in order to achieve business growth through obtaining more traffic.

C. Yu is H. Yu's mother, and C. Yang is H. Yu's son. They all used to live together.

Conclusion:

In the context of China, a radical change of citizen literacy, level of urbanization, infrastructure and equipment and business environment took place within just 2 generations. In thinking about the "normal" use of

technology, I argue that we must first realize the idea that no one is born knowing how to use anything. The ability to use of any tools, ranging from chopsticks to Visual Studio Code, requires a process of learning to be acquired. We must not blindly assume anyone to know anything, so that no one is left helpless due to things we create. A "normality" of using technology is different for people of different ages, educational level, race, gender, culture, and much more. The answer for "what is the normality of using technology" is that there is no normality, or that normality is perhaps, fluidity.