Digital Literacies Beyond School and Work: The Networked Lives of Older Adults in a Retirement Community

Allegra W. Smith
PhD Candidate, Rhetoric & Composition, Purdue University

All research begins with an exigency.

It's easy to use facts and figures and statistics and projections to frame the need for research on age (, aging, and technology). The United States' population pyramid is shifting. An aging populace presents unique opportunities and challenges for medicine, finance, business, law, infrastructure, design, and yes, computers & composition. Older adults[1]—defined most broadly as those aged 50 or above—are the fastest growing segment of the American population. One out of nine Americans is 65 or older, and these numbers are projected to steadily increase as the nation's fifty million Baby Boomers reach retirement age over the coming decades (Pirkl, 2009). The "graying of America" is a well-documented phenomenon, with older adults expected to outnumber children by 2035 (Vespa, 2018). However, this phenomenon is not only limited to the US: "by 2020, it is expected that over one billion senior citizens will be alive on the planet" (Sibley, 2008).

But while statistics may seem compelling, they are also flat—and this flatness erases the very material and human effects of complex phenomena, like aging. All research should begin with an exigency, and all research should begin with a story. Stories help focus our work on what's important, or rather, who's important.

So here's a story. It's a story about an 83-year-old woman who lives in an apartment by herself in The Villages, Florida. She sings in a choir and has a big collection of showtune albums, so when I asked her if she wanted to pick a pseudonym to be known by in my research, she said she wanted to be "Mama Rose," like Ethel Merman's character from *Gypsy*.

When I asked her to explain difficulties that she had with her computer, Rose showed me this letter, which she typed and printed in red ink (since she was "seeing red") after she was locked out of her Yahoo! account for too many failed login attempts:

> *"To YAHOO, 701 First Avenue, Sunnyvale, CA 94089.*
>
> *Dear Sirs: I am seeing RED. After 3 days of trying to change my e-mail with your organization with no success I am appealing to Corporate to solve my problem: I recently moved to a senior independent living apartment from my home. I no longer am able to use my former email (grandmarose31@comcast.net) as they do not service this place for free. My new email is grandmarose31@aol.com. I have a very 'DUMB'*

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[1] "Senior citizens" or "retirees" are perhaps more common terms used to describe this group in American media and society, however both of these terms are fraught with connotations that stereotype the identities and experiences of this incredibly diverse population. "Retirees" in particular is problematic because of the increasing numbers of older adults who have to continue to work for pay in order to support themselves and/or their families. For these reasons, I choose to use the terms "older adults" or "elders."

phone that does not accept text messages as I have had problems with bad calls So as a result your security won't allow me to make the necessary change in my e-mail. At 83 years old, I am quite able to talk with a representative which is now impossible. Of all the doctors, lawyers, companies, hospitals, and etc. you are the only company that is so unreachable by 'DUMB' phone. Please help me to resolve this problem as soon as possible as I would like to participate in your services before I die. Computers are fine but sometimes a person that 'talks' is important.

Sincerely,
Rose Jenkins[2]
PS I am on FACEBOOK if security really wants photo ID"

Why look at the digital literacies of elders? Why now?

At the outset, this seems like just-another-technologically-illiterate-grandma-story. We might joke about Old Lady Rose having a phone that doesn't text in 2019. We might make fun of her for writing a print letter to a tech company. We might laugh at the fact that she keeps a list of account passwords written on a sticky note taped underneath her computer keyboard. But, if we apply the same consideration to Mama Rose as we do to our students, we will understand that hers is a story of rich digital and technological literacies, marked by sophisticated technology usage and negotiation. So why do we default to an understanding of elders as less technologically literate than their younger counterparts—and why don't we conduct research on them, in the area of computers and composition?

While print literacy research often involves collecting narratives from writers throughout the life course (Brandt, 2001; Clark & Medina, 2000; Halbritter & Lindquist, 2012), digital literacy is seen as "tied to youth culture and the practices of younger people" (Bowen, 2011, pg. 588). In the United States, we operate under what Bowen (2011) calls a "curriculum of aging:" a set of assumptions about what it means to be old or growing old in our society. This is evident in the ways we talk about a "digital divide" between "digital natives," or younger folks who grew up in a "wired world," and "digital immigrants," (Prensky, 2001) or folks who "struggle to keep up" with the language of computers and the internet, because they acquired this literacy at a later age. In addition to being colonizing and Eurocentric, the "digital native/digital immigrant" conception is also ageist: it constructs an us/them binary that privileges nativity over migration, and youth over (old) age. It continues to perpetuate a tired story of older adults who cannot adjust to the "brave new world" of Twitter feeds and Facebook walls. The Geico commercial comes to mind [[show embedded video]]. Not only does rhetoric and composition rarely examine age, but its focus on youth and the digital rhetorics of the young insinuates that old age causes deterioration of (digital) literacy. We look at the reading and writing practices of individuals in school and during work, but not after they age out of the workforce and retire.

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[2] Rose's name (and email addresses), as with all others used in the write-ups of this research, is a pseudonym. I let participants select their own pseudonyms for this project—some elected to, while others did not (so I generated an alias for them).

Human-computer interaction is a field that *has* looked at the effects of age on user experience, to some degree, but it usually offers a similarly ungenerous read of older adults' technology usage. In an article on a research agenda for examining the social computing of older adults, a consortium of Korean scholars explain research directions for both basic and applied study. "The benefits of the new social computing environment are not equally applicable to the users," they write, differentiating between younger and older individuals, "especially those who cannot keep up with the advancement of the technology during a transition period (pg. 1123).

What do we imply when we say something like this—that elders "cannot keep up" with technology advancement? Are they left in the dust? Is technology outpacing them, passing them by? Are they in need of our benevolent assistance, like those "digital immigrants" who are striving to lose their dreaded pre-computer accent? Are we saying that old or aging folks are slow, helpless, unable to keep up with the times?

Ji et al. go on to say that older adults who have attempted to participate in digital life "have not adapted properly" to changes in technology. Here's what that type of "improper adaptation" might look like—another story[3].

> It's Thursday night, and I'm sitting in the kitchen with an 82-year-old woman who insisted that I give her the pseudonym "Holly" after Holly Golightly in her favorite film, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. She's showing me her laptop while her husband, who has dementia and doesn't use the computer much, watches game shows from the bedroom. After demonstrating her typical internet use to me—email, news, some healthcare research, a little online shopping—I ask her to complete a series of tasks so that I can better understand how she goes about finding information and solving problems online.

> The next 15 minutes are… a right kerfuffle. Holly struggles with the laptop's chiclet keyboard: "See," she says, "my fingers [can] type faster, but this is too small for me… no, I don't like it… this is not a good keyboard for an older person." She's attempting to find a news story that's of interest to her, so she's searching for journalism about Donald Trump's finances—but she does so not by navigating to a search engine (like Google or Bing) or typing a query into the address bar, but instead types what she's looking for into the search bar in Gmail's interface, which is her most frequently visited page (though not her browser's homepage). She types in all of her search requests as though they are webpage addresses written in sentence case: "www . info on trumps finances . com." When Gmail yields no results (because she has no messages in her folders that would match this content), she returns to the search bar and clicks "Search the Web For," which brings up Google search results in a new tab.

> The final task that I ask Holly to complete is to find a government document that answers the following question: "How do I deduct medical expenses for transportation to doctors' appointments from my taxes?" The next three minutes involve Holly clicking through advertisement after advertisement, getting stuck in a loop of sponsored

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[3] This example comes from my March 2019 ATTW presentation—apologies for anyone listening or reading who's already heard it before.

content—first paid search engine results, then SEO-optimized placements of medical billing software and claims processing companies. In the end, she gives up on the task, unable to find an adequate resource for explaining the tax law.

Given these results, it's no wonder that, midway through the task analysis, Holly sighs to me, "It's [the computer's] not my favorite thing in the world. The telephone is my favorite thing! And most of my friends are telephone people. You can put that in your whosiwhats [dissertation]... because that's what we grew up with."

Reframing and Revaluing: How Computers & Writing can Meet Elders Where They're At

This is where we can come in, as rhetoricians and compositionists, to revalue the type of work that Holly is doing in the first task, and to help intervene through digital literacy instruction to make Holly's life easier in the second task. We know that literate activity is not "improper" so long as it does not harm others or infringe upon their autonomy—thanks to our background in ethics, the theme of this conference—so we recognize that, if Holly's method of searching works for her and yields the results she is looking for, there is not a critical need to re-route her through Google's search engine page, or Yahoo!'s, or Bing's. We do not have an imperative to police or standardize usage: we recognize that there are many ways to get at the same information. What's going on here is not user error, but is actually Holly cobbling together her previous experiences and knowledge to find a method of searching that works for her.

In computers and writing, and in digital rhetoric—with our longstanding tradition of scholar-advocacy—we are well situated to do this kind of work of recognizing Holly's agency as a technology user and as a digital citizen employing literacies to reach her goals. It is our ethical obligation to value and revalue technology usage as literate activity: because while "usage" connotes passive or unconscious technology routine, "literacy" is a deliberate act that involves practice over time, metacognitive thought, and some kind of productive output. "Literacy," as a concept, recognizes the type of produsage (Bruns) and participation (Jenkins) that older adults are engaging in—and perhaps, in some ways, better poised to engage in than some of our students. After all, retirees have more time, and more disposable income, than most young people (Norman, 2019). These are also the people who contribute the most to our departments and programs financially—is it not important to give back, in some way, to the people who give to us?

Here I'm asking for us to move toward a broader usage of both technology usage (for technical and professional communication, as well as user experience and human-computer interaction) and digital literacy (for computers and writing, composition studies, and literacy studies), but also a broader definition of what constitutes acceptable or appropriate usage and literacy. Usage should not involve one pathway to completing a task or reaching a goal, just as literacy should not require solely one pathway to demonstrating mastery—in fact, "mastery" or "fluency" may not even be the end game for literacy development.

In their older adults and social computing article, Ji et al. write that they aim to "identify ways to motivate nonusers to use social networking sites," meaning that one of the goals of their study is to get more elders on social platforms. Has anyone surveyed or interviewed members of this

age cohort to ask them if they have any interest in social networking? (Spoiler alert: I have) If they are uninterested in joining social platforms for the same reasons as younger generations, would it not be better to build platforms that suit their needs instead? Just as it's unreasonable to try to shoehorn all age cohorts into a single model of computing, so too is it unreasonable to evaluate digital literacy based on one-size-fits-all benchmarks. The root of accessibility is access: to only provide one way of accessing content (or of proving one's literacy) is fundamentally inaccessible or inequitable.

To return to Mama Rose's story, by all accounts, Mama Rose demonstrates considerable digital literacy for an 83-year-old. She described herself as "using the computer quite a lot," and for a variety of purposes. She skypes her grandchildren, and keeps tabs on family and friends through Facebook. She manages her healthcare, physical therapy and acupuncture appointments, and prescription medications through medical portals from five different doctors' offices. She downloads books to her Kindle Fire and has been known to play a round or two of Angry Birds. She uses a computer connected to her sewing machine to create embroidery patterns and appliqué for quilts. Again, let me remind you: this person is an octogenarian.

Mama Rose's expertise with email, desktop publishing and photo-editing software, social media, Kindle tablets, and video chat even made her go-to tech support for other elders in her senior apartment community—but she hit a seemingly insurmountable roadblock when Yahoo! required her to unlock her account with a code sent by text. Why didn't she seek out another option, like text-based web chat with a customer service representative, to regain access to her account?

Rose's situation sheds light on cultural and generational differences that affect digital literacies and technology usage. Design is cultural, and the affordances and limitations of an interface reflect specific, situated cultural assumptions about what users can or cannot, should or should not do (Selfe & Selfe, 1994). In Rose's case, the assumptions are that 1) most or all users will have access to SMS to receive numerical codes to unlock their account, and 2) those who are unable to or do not want to receive SMS will be able to or are comfortable messaging a support representative through an in-browser text chat. Rose, who grew up in the golden age of telephony, finds speaking with a representative more personal (and thus more comfortable and safe) than exchanging account details with an "invisible" person she can neither see nor hear— hence the letter of complaint. This is an issue of cultural and generational user experience, and of access. Again, an interface that only provides one way to unlock an account is a fundamentally inaccessible one.

Moving Forward: Recommendations for Future Work

So, this presentation has established an agenda for drawing the digital literacy circle wider to incorporate the reading, writing, research, design, coordination, and engagement of older adults into our scholar-advocacy as techno-rhetoricians. But what might this work look like? And what should we keep in mind as we seek to expand our understanding of literacy and usage—not just with elders, but with other groups? I am currently transcribing and analyzing data for my doctoral dissertation, which combines interview, observation, and task analysis data to report

on how individuals 75+ in a retirement community use computers, and what issues they run into when trying to complete tasks online. Here are some brief ideas based on my own experience.

Privacy and Security: Students in our classes have enough difficulty differentiating between authoritative sources and bullshit online—older adults typically have received little to no training or guidance on how to identify and validate legitimate content. In my own work, I have had to 1) teach participants how to use a password keeper, in order to not store passwords on a post-it note affixed to a bulletin board directly next to their desktop; 2) discourage a participant from installing a questionable browser plugin while trying to find an answer to a question online; 3) advise participants on identifying sponsored search results or advertisements, and install adblocker software on their machines. This is an area where we can intervene to help protect a population that is historically vulnerable to scams and other kinds of abuse. Research on search strategies, fake news, and sponsored content (as well as workshops or grant-funded projects around the same topics) could be especially beneficial.

Opting Out of Technology is a Literate Choice (but It's Complicated): Looking at users who elect not to develop digital literacies or engage in digital life can be just as fruitful as looking at technology wizards—but be cautious of writing off anyone as "unplugged." Suzy Rumsey (2006) discusses this in her article on heritage literacies, where she explains that individuals may adopt, adapt, or alienate themselves from new technologies—choices that all reveal core values at the heart of culture, and changes within culture over time. In my work in a retirement community, several women have explained that the computer is their husband's domain: which sheds light on a gendered divide that manifests itself in different ways across generations (even now, STEM remains male-dominated at increasing levels from elementary education to upper management). However, when questioned further, individuals who identified themselves as "less techy" still recounted experiences with other technologies—set-top boxes like Roku or Apple TV, digital assistants like Amazon Alexa, and assistive technologies like an Optelec magnifier, just to name a few—that revealed specific interests and struggles. As time goes on and media continues to converge, we will likely have less ability or opportunity to say "no" to digital connectivity. Investigating the spaces of resistance and disruption could prove fruitful.

Engage in Contextual Inquiry Beyond the School/Work Binary: "Contextual inquiry" is a fancy way of saying "come to your participants, instead of making them come to you. Seeing folks work with technology in their own homes (or offices, or wherever they do the thing) helps them feel more comfortable and reveals more about their contexts of use than if you interview them, or if you ask them to use computers in a lab or office. It also gets folks to tell stories, which can yield rich qualitative data and productive tangents. What types of writing could we learn about from engaging in contextual inquiry outside of studies of students or working professionals? Personal, civic, hobbyist, community-building, religious, service-oriented... Literate activity is enacted in a multitude of ways beyond school and work, and often these become some of the most enriching writing of our lives. I'd like to conclude this with a conversation about other strategies that we can

employ to broaden our understanding of how and where literacy is enacted. How can we pitch this research—to our departments, to IRB, to funders? How can we forge connections that are productive for our and for the communities and groups we work with/in? How can we use this work to grow the field of computers and writing, link it with other disciplines, and ensure its continued relevance?

Allegra W. Smith // smit2632@purdue.edu // @argella

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