THE INTERNET AS PROBLEM-SOLVING TOOL FOR ELDERS

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Abstract:

PC and Internet skills belong now to the basic culture. The Romans have defined the obsolete, ill educated individual by “Nec literas didicit nec natare” that is who never learnt neither to read nor to swim; today this became who is not computer skilled and cannot use the facilities of the Internet. Old people don’t want to be obsolete. They even can sometimes swim upstream, metaphorically speaking. Rejuvenate with the help of the Net. Their lack of computer literacy is actually a problem that can be converted directly in a solution - make them really enjoy learning, kind of intellectual resurrection. Because they can do it!

This paper is about to tell and show them both what to do and what to not do on the Internet. To make them feel valuable, effective, skilled, fast, knowledgeable, safe. Living. Not a burden. To defy time. To give them back the dignity and the status they lost by retirement, many times perceived as a preliminary form of death.

Ideally, old age is characterized by having found solutions for many of life’s problems, so, in principle it could be the most creative period of life. The paper will explore some of the solutions provided by the Internet for many of psychological and practical problems of elders: virtual travels via the Web, news, music, reading, games, shopping to name only a few. Examples will be given (mainly from InfoKappa.ro, created especially to protect, help all the oppressed minorities and majorities – seniors of life, too).

Key words: Internet, motivation, problems converted in solutions
Old people, at least the good ones, don’t want to be obsolete. A most valuable slogan of our times is lifelong learning and this means that learning has to continue independently of the number of years lived by an individual. By this method, some people never grow really old, they just fade away.

It is a lot to learn. With the advent of computers and the development of the Internet, almost everything has changed, except human nature and thinking. These stay like solid immovable rocks in a tsunami of fresh information. (After the dreadful events of December 26, 2004 “tsunami” became a journalistic cliché). The contrast between the very modern tools available today and the old modes of using them, for old aims them makes our world quite strange. It is difficult to understand why people search mainly for celebrities and trivia, why nine messages from ten on the Internet are useless ads- i.e. spam, why so many forums are gatherings of hateful people and storehouses of offensive words, why tens of thousand of highly intelligent and damaging viruses are invading the Net each month, how a lot of criminals use new and new baits to steal identities and money from suckers i.e. everybody else. To tell that this is a crazy world is actually a euphemism. But it also is a great certainty that the core part, the Serious Internet exists, is focused on useful and good, creative and important things and that this valuable part of the Internet offers absolutely new, unique opportunities for reason, knowledge, education, science, research, art, culture, communication, collaboration, contributions- for a more just and enlightened future. Serious Internet can be of great help for the senior members of the society, who have some peculiar problems – to be old is not a great pleasure per se, but what can you do? Old age is clearly not for sissies as Bette Davis has told, but us; if you are a strong character you will use many things, including the Internet for creating a rich and interesting life of positive discoveries for you – and for the people you love and care for. This is usually Family but can extend up to the Humankind. As the examples of billions of people everywhere shows, the Internet, the Web is accessible for everybody, and it is easy – a child’s play- to learn how to use it for you benefit. And it is an old woman/man’s play too. As the very practice shows, who cannot learn when old, probably never knew how to learn.

A new definition of the illiterate in this much technologized world. is: “somebody who is not computer skilled and cannot use
the facilities of the Internet.” This is the modern equivalent of the “Nec literas didicit nec natare” used by the Romans— you are of low value if you cannot read or you cannot swim. The senior author remembers with nostalgia his childhood days in Timisoara— then a penta-national and tetra-linguistic city with an unique charm - to be considered a human being you had to learn to swim. And, obviously to read too, but this was not so specific.

Now, swimming is replaced by something more technological and informational— navigating the Web, finding new facts, friends, ideas, bits of wisdom, good advices. The senior author’s obsession with swimming (an old one, surely not a symptom of Alzheimer or something similar), has helped him to find a slogan: “My favorite sport is swimming; my favorite meta-sport is swimming counter-stream.” This sounds like a bit strange metaphor but he wants to tell you a simple truth- the river of the Time is pushing you downwards, but you can, you have to try –to go upstream. You can, yes you can rejuvenate by your efforts and even have a lot of fun. OK, we well know- we cannot escape the final great Niagara of Nothingness patiently waiting for us downstream, but at least we have had a beautiful travel.

We are convinced that even very old and non-technical people can use the computer and can enjoy the main facilities created by the Internet. Old people actually need communication, need good information more than other people- so many times they are solitary and more or less abandoned. Therefore, their problem can be, many times, directly converted in a solution.

Usually it starts with communication- sending e-mails, connecting via Internet messaging or some form of VOIP, say Skype, with remote or not so remote but busy and/or lazy members of the family, relatives, friends. And joining a group focused on similar interests, profession and hobbies. Only a small step for the skills but a giant leap for the opportunities (to cite Neil Armstrong) and our old friends start to use search engines, ask questions, find data, news, images, sounds, learn what is multimedia, explore websites, navigate. And for God’s sake – it is of crucial significance! they learn to select- what is good and what is evil, what is true and what is a Big Lie, what makes you a prisoner and what makes you free, what is significant and what has to be actively ignored, what is stupid kitsch and what is a treasure, what is dirty and what is clean, what is destructive and what is constructive. See, judge, evaluate, choose, discard. SELECTION with capital letters...
This is the most difficult stage, and it is habit forming. The very core of the Internet education or auto education. Let’s hope that many people, including our old friend, will make good choices. Than many of the good people, of all ages can have a kind of satori (revelation):”Why should I be a passive listener, a nobody? I have experience, I have seen and done many things in my life, I am an old dog and cannot learn many new tricks but I can teach them- perhaps they are of interest. I read so much trivial or erroneous information. I can do it better- Internet, I am coming!” And our friend starts a newsletter or a blog, gets a new voice. Perhaps she or he will not be famous, but there are great chances he will have a lot of readers and friends and enemies (they too are helping you to keep fighting and writing). After a while, our activated and active friend will state with pleasure that her/his name is well known by Google and Yahoo! and all the other search engines. That’s so good for dignity and self-respect!

The senior author’s experience includes a rather long apprenticeship period. He has learned web search in the stage when web search itself was searching the best ways. Before Google and after Google. The flow of information was slow and only texts where transported. The websites were modest and laconic. Phones and slow modems were used. But the progress became more and more rapid and now, in the intimacy of your home you can get more information in a minute that ten years ago, at special workplaces, in an hour. Even if you are “very” retired you can afford a decent Internet connection – and a window is opened to the great world.

The senior author is coming from the world of technical and scientific research, and he wanted to continue this activity by any means, at any price.

Being given that from financial reasons (read lack of money) he was working then at a great Internet Service Provider, he has persuaded the management of the company that a newsletter teaching the clients and everybody else how to search the Internet, will be a good point for the reputation of the company. It does not cost much and it is a competitive advantage. A lot of good colleagues have helped him with the technical part, so all he has to deliver is content. If you look to an issue, you will see that it is quite enough. His project has developed and became Info Kappa http://info.kappa.ro a newsletter with six columns. It is described in the other conference, “We need a real XXI’s century mentality...” It started in 2002 and IK’s were published weekly, only with three
week interruptions (when the author has participated at international conferences re New Energy Sources twice in Italy and once in France.). Next Monday issue No. 300 will speak about the Future. The editor of the newsletter has readily understood that the Internet has a great potential for problem solving, is a valuable tool for getting solutions for myriads of personal and professional problems. He is working out an original methodology for problem solving. Everybody has some problems, so he hopes this will be useful.

The newsletter is not dedicated only to old people but special care is taken for their interests. However it tries to protect other social groups that are oppressed in some way – children, young individuals, adults, middle aged people, minorities and majorities as women and poor humans.

In many editorials of the newsletter, it was shown that human rights are threatened by Human Privileges and the special problems of old people were described and some solutions were asked or offered. Trying hard to be well documented and informed, and attempting to think realistically, as his pragmatic profession – engineering – demands, the editor is well aware of the main conflicts of our age. And he knows that these have far-going implications for the lives of the present and coming generations. What will prevail: reason or irrational thinking, science or pseudo-science(s), culture or counter-cultures, good taste or cheap kitsch, superstition or knowledge, obscurantism or a new enlightenment, good or evil? Info Kappa’s strategy is directed towards the good choices. It is more hopeful thinking, perhaps it is too optimistic, but perhaps it is even possible to change something by healthy information and education, including thinking and human nature. All crises are crises of thinking and we have plenty from them.

As a bottom line, we wish to everybody, to all humans living at this interesting Planet to go through this stage of life called “OLD”. Without it, your life is missing something. And try to make this stage pleasant- you can use many tools, but the Internet is clearly one of the best.