

GETTING WITH THE PROGRAM: SENIORS AND TECHNOLOGY

By Jackie Littleton

Keeping pace with the rapidly changing online world can be challenging, especially for the generation that came of age before technology's spectacular takeover of everyday life. As computer and Internet literacy become more of a necessity and less of a novelty, women of all ages are discovering the benefits of connecting online.

As the song says, diamonds are a girl's best friend but, considering all it can do for her, the Internet might be a close second. She can keep in touch with the neighbor who's feeding her cat while she's on vacation. She can pay her bills without leaving the house. She can check the facts in a political candidate's latest ad. She can even do all the research for an article for *Outlook!* But if the "girl" is over 65, she may not have met this new best friend.

Are You Connected?

A 2007 report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, "A Typology of Information and Communication Technology Users," divided the American adult population into three groups based on their use of technology. Of those surveyed, 31 percent are elite tech users, 20 percent are middle-of-the-road tech users, and 49 percent are considered to have few tech assets.

Within this last group, 15 percent have neither cell phones nor Internet connectivity and "tend to be older adults (70 or above) who are content with old media (telephone and television)." Most of these older adults are women, and most of them are in the lowest strata of income and education. (You can read the entire report at www.pewinternet.org.)

These statistics will change, of course, as 76 million baby boomers enter the "senior" demographic. Women in this group have used computers on the job for years, and they know that the Internet helps them stay connected—to family, to information, to efficiency. Although so-called wired seniors are the fastest-growing group online, the growth comes from users "aging into" the demographic. As the Pew report says, there is "little evidence that nonusers in their 70s and 80s are suddenly getting the Internet bug."

User-Friendly Technology

If technology use is one of those barriers to be broken through to give women—and particularly older women—a fair chance, the word appears to be getting out. Purveyors of everything from government programs to Botox are on the alert for ways to extend the reach of their products. Website designers are updating their sites to accommodate the realities of an aging population, taking to heart recommendations from the U.S. Institute on Aging to use larger and plainer typefaces, to simplify text, and to avoid juxtaposing yellow, blue, and green—a color combination difficult for aging eyes to read.

Text-to-speech programs are readily available to help people with visual impairments listen to Internet content or other computer-generated documents, and many websites now feature podcasts—audio versions of their online content—and

RSS feeds, regular updates of website material that can often be converted to speech by a special software program. Also in widespread use are a variety of assistive technology devices, from trackballs and "foot mice" to oversize keyboards and monitors, that make computers more accessible for older users.

Seniors on the Net

Seniors who are already online have access to a growing number of websites designed especially for them. AARP's popular site (www.aarp.org) provides information on health, money, leisure, and volunteering. Up-to-the-minute news articles of interest to seniors are interspersed throughout the site; one recent story, "Equal Pay for All Genders," profiled AAUW friend and fair-pay advocate Lilly Ledbetter. AARP's online community offers other choices, including a variety of user groups and "journals." ("If it

WIRED SENIORS ARE
THE FASTEST-GROWING
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makes you feel cooler,” the site says, “call them ‘blogs.’”) The site has the larger type recommended for seniors and helps simplify Internet surfing by suggesting useful websites, such as the 100 best health sites.


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Another helpful site is SeniorNet (www.seniornet.org), which aims to “provide older adults education for and access to computer technologies to enhance their lives and enable them to share their knowledge and wisdom.” SeniorNet has learning centers across the United States where seniors teach other seniors to use the Web, and the website explains how you can start a learning center in your own community.

Connecting with AAUW

AAUW branches have worked for years to bring their members up to speed technically, starting in the early 1980s with an issue focus called “Taking Hold of Technology.” According to AAUW’s most recent member survey, more than 63 percent of members reported using the Internet at least once a day. States and many branches have websites that augment the information available on AAUW’s website (www.aauw.org). In many AAUW branches, improving computer access and providing basic computer instruction are already on the docket for programming and community involvement projects. Branch members work with public libraries, senior citizen centers, and community colleges to offer one-to-one instruction in general computer use and Internet strategies.

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In a recent issue of *Time* magazine, a report on the “networking power of technology” in the presidential campaign noted how important it is to “get the fact that the Internet is more than television with a keyboard. It is the greatest tool ever invented for connecting people to others who share their interests.” AAUW members also “get it” and are working to make sure that technology is not a barrier that holds our older sisters back. 

Jackie Littleton is bylaws chair of the AAUW Tyler (TX) Branch and AAUW director at large.



Meet Joann Rairigh Tech-Savvy Texan

Joann Rairigh, 78, credits AAUW for some of her current expertise with computers. An AAUW life member, Joann perfected many of her skills through on-the-job training on committees and as a past president of the AAUW Tyler (TX) Branch.

As a high school counselor in the 1980s, Joann’s first experience with technology was “bubbling in” students’ scheduling information, which was then processed by the one person at each school who had a computer. At the time, Joann didn’t even own a typewriter. When she retired in 1997, she bought her first computer, a Toshiba laptop, because it would fit into a small area in her kitchen. She took a class at the local community college to learn the basics, attended a branch computer program, and found a technician who encouraged her and kept telling her, “Just pound those keys; you can’t hurt anything!”

AAUW friends urged Joann to add desktop publishing to her repertoire, so she bought another computer with more memory and was soon turning out newsletters for the branch and the local retired teachers’ group and producing program booklets for the branch Tour of Homes fundraiser. Later, she took a watercolor class and, with the addition of Photoshop and a good scanner, began printing her own note cards.

An avid Internet user, Joann says she finds it “especially helpful in getting my opinions to legislators.” That task is even easier with tools like AAUW’s Two-Minute Activist, available on the website at <http://capwiz.com/aauw/home>. “I use the Web mostly to gather information about books, politics, and some health concerns,” she says. “I don’t use it much for commerce, but I do order my medications online since my insurance policy provides that option.”

Like many computer enthusiasts, Joann is especially fond of e-mail. “The neat thing about e-mail is being able to keep up with so many more people. There’s still nothing like getting together for a good long visit,” she admits, “but the items we can share from all over the world are mind-boggling!”

For Joann, keeping up with technology isn’t a new skill; it’s more of a continuum. Still, she says she’s come a long way from her beginnings as one of the “original tech girls—the ones who started in the ‘pound, ring, and sling’ group” on a used Underwood typewriter some 65 years ago.