Digital tech to enhance social interaction between senior citizens

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Credit: Tonatiuh Ambrosetti & Daniela Droz / EPFL+ECAL Lab

EPFL+ECAL Lab, Pro Senectute Vaud and the Fondation Leenaards have joined forces in an innovative initiative to use new technologies to enhance social interaction among seniors. Their goal is to develop a digital solution that will allow greater interaction among older people in "solidarity neighborhoods." Preliminary results have shown that, despite widespread assumptions to the contrary, new interfaces can be developed

to meet the needs of elderly users.

A decline in social interaction affects mortality in the same way cigarettes do: it has an impact on our physical and mental well-being. And as people age, many factors tend to limit social connections: reduced mobility, loss of eyesight or hearing, the death of loved ones, greater distance from loved ones, the inability to use new means of communication, etc. Paradoxically, new communication technologies also can be used to combat isolation among society's older generation.

Designers and engineers spend time with seniors

With this in mind, three partners joined forces: EPFL+ECAL Lab, which explores new design approaches to interfaces; Pro Senectute Vaud, which has over 14 years of expertise in developing local community processes through its "Solidarity Neighborhoods" method; and Fondation Leenaards, as part of its "Age and Society" program. London's Royal College of Art is also providing support.

This new project took the form of a several months' long immersion in the activities of the Ecublens and Prilly-Nord solidarity neighborhoods and the Grandson-Onnens-Montagny solidarity village. A number of workshops were run to identify seniors' needs, how seniors wished to interact and the interfaces and languages that had to be developed. All this was made possible by the active participation of the residents, who freely expressed their views on the proposals of the engineers and designers from EPFL+ECAL Lab.

According to Alain Plattet, who is in charge of the Community-based social work unit at Pro Senectute Vaud: "The project will make it easier to organize activities proposed by the residents and improve participation; this will in turn promote seniors' longevity and encourage social interaction through the sharing of photos, stories, etc." The

enthusiasm displayed by the seniors who took part in the pilot project shows that "their supposed challenge in learning digital technologies is largely due to the fact that existing applications are not in line with their wishes and interests," said Nicolas Henchoz, the director of the EPFL+ECAL Lab.

More than just performance

The design approach is not limited to the visual aspect, as it focuses first and foremost on features and usage scenarios. And it presents a newfound freedom: the freedom to offer a stimulating and useful experience that meets the users' needs and fits their cultural and social environment. Preliminary results show that proximity, interactivity and user-friendliness are essential for the ability of seniors to use new communication technologies.

Beyond borders and generations

The project is meant to transcend local specificities, and for this reason communities in London were also taken into consideration. The Helen Hamlyn Centre, a postgraduate research center at the Royal College of Art with expertise in design solutions for the elderly, engages in field work to gain a greater understanding of needs, influence users' perception and seek to identify additional uses.

The goal is broad: to rethink interface design and digital services so that they fit ever more seamlessly into our daily lives. Thanks to the contribution made by seniors, the results will have an impact on a wide public and further develop how we interact with digital technology in a long-lasting way.

A video (in French) illustrates the topic:

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Provided by Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

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