



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 13

Issue 2 *June*

Article 8

May 1986

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Recommended Citation

Shostak, Arthur B. (1986) "Retirees as Technoguides: A New Role as Shapers and Makers of the Future," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol13/iss2/8>

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RETIREES AS TECHNOGUIDES:
A NEW ROLE AS
SHAPERS AND MAKERS
OF THE
FUTURE

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Retirees nowadays serve in many out-of-the-home roles that make astute use of their maturity, their discretion time, and their flexibility about compensation. Large numbers help as paid or voluntary aides in day care centers, health fairs, home health care, hospice programs, nursing homes, and the vital like.

A brand new role that might appeal to many would have them learn and practice the craft of technology assessment and the process of technology diffusion. With these tools retirees could serve as technoguides, or paid or voluntary aides in the testing, evaluating, and adapting of new products and services to the needs of older Americans.

Background. During my on-going study of life in a large, well-established, and well-managed Florida retirement community, I have been struck over and again by missed (technological) opportunities. The condo apartments of the 23,000 residents, for example, are wired for emergency alarm systems that could rapidly

summon police, fire, or medical aid. But the systems have never been installed, and few residents seem to know why, or can explain why the life-protecting infrastructure was installed to begin with.

Similarly, the condo apartments in this sunbelt development make no use of active or passive solar technology. Instead, old-fashioned reliance is placed on large, noisy, and expensive air-conditioners and fans, much as if nothing useful had been learned in the past decade about heat pumps, photovoltaics, hot-water assist systems, solar collectors, solar greenhouse space conditioning, or the dynamic like. Even the community pools located every block or two go without solar aid, though this is the most common (and economically advisable) use being made of this technology elsewhere in the region.

As I tour other retirement communities around the country, I note the total absence of somewhat more venturesome, but no less promising technologies like-

community fish tanks, for the raising of edible fish like Phillipine carp and other species;

community vegetable gardens, for experiments with new seeds and aides to tillage yield;

community bartering systems, based in computer record keeping, and devoted to the swapping of desirable goods and services;

community electronic bulletin boards, based in home computer and modern use, and devoted to the rapid exchange and storage of valued

messages; and-

community hydroponics stations, for the raising of vine-clinging vegetables year-round in a soil-less, chemical-and-water solution.

Other cutting-edge ventures, including a storefront studio used for the video recording of oral histories by retirees, come quickly to mind.

Technological Concerns. Despite the seeming neglect in retirement communities of cutting-edge items the AARP has a 1,308-person telephone survey (1981-1983) that confirms keen interest older persons have in new technologies. Indeed, the head of the Association's Institute of Lifetime Learning boasts that "our research suggests older people are not far behind everyone else in the use of technology."¹

Specifically, the survey found a rise from 16% in '81 to 26% in '83 in the use of automatic bank-teller machines, and the use of home computers by 27% of persons over the age of 45. Not surprisingly, the phone interviews led the AARP to conclude that if a new gadget or process was provided with "a specific beneficial function they could directly relate to, older people will use it."²

At the same time, however, the AARP noted with rue that new technology applications for the elderly are often poorly publicized, and therefore, little used. Particularly invisible, much to the regret of concerned parties, are such frontier innovations as a voice-activated robotic arm that can grasp things from

nearby surfaces for bedridden persons, and a "ropet" that scuttles protectively up to a door at the sound of an intruder and attempts to frighten off the law-breaker (while phoning the police).³

Along with technologies of direct aid to retirees are gadgets and gimmicks through which retirees can directly aid others - and enjoy themselves at the same time. Typical is the ability of retirees to review the new computer software now being used in major companies to help those over 50 prepare for retirement. This software contains many basic and hidden assumptions about spending needs and practices of those over 65, assumptions that gray-haired technoguides could help validate or challenge and correct.

Similarly, retirees could assess and help improve our use of nonexhaustible fuel technologies (biomass, geothermal, photovoltaic, wave, wind, and wood). For as the founder of the Gray Panthers, Maggie Kuhn, insists, her generation (those born in the early 1900s), having been part of more changes than any other, "are the ones who must be advocates for...safe, renewable sources of energy."⁴

Finally, given the leadership of Florida in clarifying desirable roles for retirees it is vital that more and more of them be drawn into the on-going public policy process now weighing the construction of America's first high-speed (250 mph) magnetic levitation train. Organizations of the elderly lobbied on behalf of a state bill authorizing a Tampa-Orlando-Miami route, and a Florida oversight committee in 1985 was exploring the award of a franchise for a 1995 completion date.

However, with costs of Japanese and German hardware running about \$3-million a car and \$30-million per mile for track, Florida taxpayers are understandably hesitant.⁵ And this is exactly where statewide clubs of senior technoguides could come in to study the pros and cons of the Mag Lev, and help Floridians make the best possible choice in this vital matter.

Technoguides: Role and Goals. As I see it at this early point in the concept's formation, the retirees who choose to serve as technoguides would operate much like the staff of the 50-year old Consumer's Union: they would purchase cutting-edge technologies in the open market (home robots, year-round hydroponics stations, state-of-the-art heat pumps, solar panels, wind mills, and the exciting like), test their purchases in exacting ways, and advise older Americans and businesses alike about the merits and drawbacks of gee-whiz, Buck Rodgers' paraphernalia. Unlike CU, which focuses on more conventional mass market products of an everyday variety, the technoguides would hone in on the newest, latest, least tried-and-proven products and services of relevance primarily to older persons, and thereafter, to society-at-large.

Technoguides would finally applaud or deplore test items as they chose, taking care, however, to accompany negative assessments with clear guidance for the improvement of the futuristic product or service. Certain members of their group would study technology assessment, environmental impact assessment, and social impact assessment, and strive to adapt key concepts, models, and methodologies of these fast-improving fields to informed use by eager retirees.⁶

Technoguides would seek to involve the largest possible number of their peers in the testing process - the better to help raise futures - consciousness among older persons. Surveys and mini-usage tests could be conducted in mall plazas where oldsters congregate, along with senior centers and retirement village clubhouses. A network of technoguide clubs across the nation could coordinate their testing to use the same or similar surveys or mini-usage exercises, thereby upgrading the validity and usefulness of the findings.

Technoguide clubs could reach out to nearby community colleges and 4-year universities for help with the more esoteric aspects of state-of-the-art items under review. Both students and faculty intrigued by advances in home robotics, the "intelligent" electronic home, the basement (edible) fish culture option, and so on, might welcome a chance to collaborate with bright and energetic retirees, strong in available time and mature insights into product and service possibilities.

Technoguide Implementation. Given the apparent absence of new technologies from retirement communities, and the seeming interest of certain older people in such technologies, an unrealized opportunity would seem to exist to bring these two related matters together - for the good of retirees in particular and the nation in general.

Models for implementation exist, albeit without the acclaim they merit. Typical of meritorious pioneering in this connection is the Cable TV committee of the AARP chapter in Bethesda, Maryland. Formed in 1984 in anticipation of the arrival of this television option in the community, the committee set out to create special

cable programs of direct relevance to older persons. Committee members divided into areas of personal interest, with some pursuing the technical side of production, including camera work and editing, while others focused on planning TV programs and writing scripts. All learned how to systematically assess and rigorously evaluate cable TV offerings, thereby enhancing their role as constructive TV critics and users, a major technoguide option for active retirees.

Another model exists in Florida, Missouri, and Vermont where the state operates unique "barter" programs for senior volunteers. A state-operated computerized system maintains a registry of the names, skills, and interest of retirees who volunteer home-care services to their frail or disabled peers. These volunteers earn service credits that either they or their spouse can redeem later if they need free in-home services for themselves. Such a barter system, appropriately hailed now as an overdue social invention, could be expanded in nature to include service rendered as a technoguide club member, which service might also qualify one for home-care of similarly precious services in the years to come.

A third model is available in the operation of Title V of the 1969 Older Americans Act. Better known as the Senior Community Service Employment Program, it provides part-time work for unemployed, low-income persons 55 and over by enabling them to perform useful and necessary jobs in their communities (over 65,000 older men and women in 1985 worked on Title V funds at day care centers, hospitals, job placement offices, legal service offices, libraries, and senior centers). Eligibility for this popular cost-effective program could

be expanded to include retirees who work as full-fledged technoguides.

Still another model is available in the small, but growing number of computer user clubs by and for seniors. Early in 1985 about 250,000 retirees were thought to have personal computers in their homes, and research has found many actually enjoy doing programming, along with word processing, database management, and the use of electronic spreadsheets. A typical users' club in Menlo Park, Ca., requires prospective members to complete 12 of 24 lessons it offers, prizes the many new friendships members form among themselves, and boasts of new links forged by members with computer-using grandchildren. Above all, as a leading computer magazine in 1984 put it, "the new group of computer zealots are dispelling the myth that people stop functioning and lose their usefulness once they grow old."⁷

Finally, the proposed technoguide clubs could draw implementation and operational lessons of merit from the longstanding example of consulting firms of retired executives who aid needy organizational clients for little or no fee. Typical is the Executive Service Corps of the Delaware Valley, a nonprofit organization that lines up retired business leaders as consultants for "do good" outfits unable to meet the fees asked by major consulting firms. Part of the National Executive Service Corps, which has independent affiliates from coast-to-coast, the ESC could help a technoguide club organize itself (and probably provide many new members, as well).

With the possible backing, then, of the second-largest association in America (the 13-million member AARP), and with relevant advice available from Consumers Union, the Council of Better Business Bureaus of America, the National Executive Service Corps, and the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment, a 50-state network of technoguide clubs of future-shaping retirees beckons as both an achievable and a desirable prospect.

Limitations. Skeptics are quick to question the ability of older persons to "get up to speed" where esoteric cutting-edge technologies are concerned. Cynics, in turn, predict companies whose new products or service are zinged will demean the capacity of laymen in their dodderage to usefully assess state-of-the-art wonders. As well, even supporters of the idea worry about the capacity of non-specialists to rapidly and effectively master the craft of product and service evaluation, a complex, multidisciplinary matter that gets more quantifiable and computer-reliant all the time. Finally, both doubters and backers alike agree that only a very small number of retirees will (initially) be intrigued enough to give this idea a chance, and the clubs are unlikely, therefore, to soon match their possibly great impact with a comparably impressive enrollment.

In rebuttal, proponents insist an adequate cadre of dedicated retirees can master the arcane challenge of any futuristic gadget worth the effort. They are not fazed or intimidated by the prospect of a backlash from an offended manufacturer, as they expect this to be offset by their offer of advice to help "debug" the early version of innovations. They are confident the craft of evaluation can be studied, practiced, and mastered, especially if cross-generational alliances are forged

with campus and off-campus practitioners. And while they expect very few initial recruits, they believe the PR and media coverage their technoguide clubs are likely to win will help 240,000,000 Americans gain a better-than-ever impression of "with-it!" retirees - the small membership of the clubs notwithstanding.

Summary. When I reflect on the possible contribution of retirees to the technology assessment process, I am reminded of the advice offered by a 30-year old Smithsonian folklorist who specializes in collecting oral histories from elderly retirees especially good at aging: "We shouldn't be thinking of old people just in terms of Social Security and what they need, but as a matter of what old people can do for the rest of us."⁸

Similarly, I recall that Arnold Toynbee, at 82, co-authored a book, Surviving the Future, that sought deliberately to counter the natural tendency of the aged to dwell primarily on the past. (Toynbee urged experiments with "farming" the sea and learning how to prepare food made from domesticated plankton.) His good friend, Bertrand Russell, when in his late 80's, urged oldsters to never stop caring about possible happenings beyond their own lifespan.⁹ And more recently, 94-year old active journalist and writer George Seldes took time from working on his 21st book to lambast the concept of (idle) retirement as "the dirtiest word in the language."¹⁰

As technoguides, older persons could draw on decades on hard-earned insights to help us separate the wheat from the chaff where cutting-edge gadgets,

gimmicks, and processes are concerned. Much like the test pilots of The Right Stuff they could provide invaluable feedback on early models or prototypes of innovations for seniors or society-at-large, in keeping with the Toynbee-Russell concept of cross-generation caring. And, in remaining as engaged and productive as Gilbert Seldes, they could boost their sense of usefulness, their self-esteem, and their learning quotient in a life-prolonging and life-enhancing way. Above all, as technoguides the retirees could model a "power-to-the-people," demystifying, and constructive approach to new technology as valuable as any legacy imaginable.¹¹

Footnotes

- 1) Dennis La Buda, as quoted in "Elderly Embrace New Technologies," Modern Maturity, October-November, 1984. p. 17.
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) See in this connection, the testimony of K.G. Engelhardt in the proceedings of the House Select Committee on Aging, Hearing, "High Technology and Its Benefits for an Aging Population," Rush Office Building, Wash., D.C., May 22, 1984. (Comm. Publ. No. 98-459).
- 4) As quoted in Next, May/June 1981. P. 44.
- 5) John Hillkirk, "Magnetized Trains Attract Interest," USA Today, May 21, 1985. p. 4-B.

- 6) Useful in this connection is the 1984 report, Technology and Aging in America, Wash., D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office (Office of Technology Assessment).
- 7) Kathy Chin, "The Elderly Learn to Computer," Infoworld, May 7, 1984. p. 28.
- 8) Marjorie Hunt, as quoted in Francis X. Clines, "Documenting the Art of Surviving." N.Y. Times, April 26, 1985. p. A-18.
- 9) See in this connection, Alexander Lipski. "Toynbee's Frantic Quest for Survival." Journal of Religion & Aging, 1, 1, Fall, 1984. p. 47-61.
- 10) As quoted in Vic Sussman, "Thoughts that Altered the World." USA Today, May 3, 1985. p. 5-D.
- 11) See in this connection, "Retirees as 'Technoguides': On the Case for Technological Stewardship by Older Americans," available from me on request (Art Shostak, Drexel Univ., Dept. of Psychology & Sociology, Philadelphia, PA 19104).