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# Into the Grey Zone: Seniors, Cell Phones and Milieus That Matter

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## **Introduction**

Within the burgeoning literature on the everyday and innovative uses of cell phones and mobile technologies, there is a concentration of detailed statistical or ethnographic data on those who are young or middle-aged (Ito, 2005; Caronia and Caron, 2004; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2007). With the exception of a handful of articles (Wong, Thwaites, & Khong, 2008; Lee, 2008), much less attention, scholarly or otherwise, is paid to those who are fifty-five and over: this demographic constitutes a 'grey zone' literally and metaphorically (Harris-Decima, 2008). Our research on 'Seniors and Cells' rectifies this absence and is intended to contribute, productively, to the discussion of the intertwining dimensions of age, technology, and the everyday practices of citizenship by differentiating between 'shades of grey': we highlight what they do, and try to make sense of it in their terms, rather than comparing seniors with more 'active' user-groups.

While we cannot claim, at this stage of the work, that we are in a 'truly mobile setting', our research has brought us into milieus that matter to our subjects: milieus are spaces of encounter and exchange, and not merely sites of data collecting and gathering. We discuss two sorts of milieu: intimate individual exchanges comprised of one-on-one conversation, and social interactions that break the isolation and loneliness often

experienced by seniors. These milieus take shape within broader national contexts of telecommunications infrastructures and policies that influence and structure individual choices. We end with a discussion of some of the practical strategies we have adopted for engaging with these users from a perspective which allows them to transform the research agenda (Walker, 2007). In this paper we describe some of the broader lessons learned from our project to date, and reflect upon our research process and practice.

### **Canadian Context**

Before examining our reasons for engaging in discussion groups in local settings, there are some data to consider when researching age in relation to wireless, mobile media in Canada's particular national milieu. Here we would like to clarify that we do not see our research in opposition to statistical research, but as complementary to statistical overviews. Large-scale quantitative studies provide a picture of how systemic conditions might impact the everyday practices of cell phone use in elderly populations.

### ***Seniors and Cell Phones in Canada***



Figure 1: Bronx Park, Winnipeg

The number of seniors in Canada is predicted to double from 4.2 million at present to 9.8 million by 2038 (Statistics Canada, 2007). This is a dramatic increase in the population, which has led to grave warnings in the Canadian media about the emergence of ‘a grey tsunami’ threatening to bleed dry the resources of the state, with rising costs for medical care, housing or other social services. There is a climate of fear around ageing reinforced by these discourses that our study’s participants challenge overtly in their comments on encounters with ageism, and more subtly, through the liveliness of their engagements with friends and family.

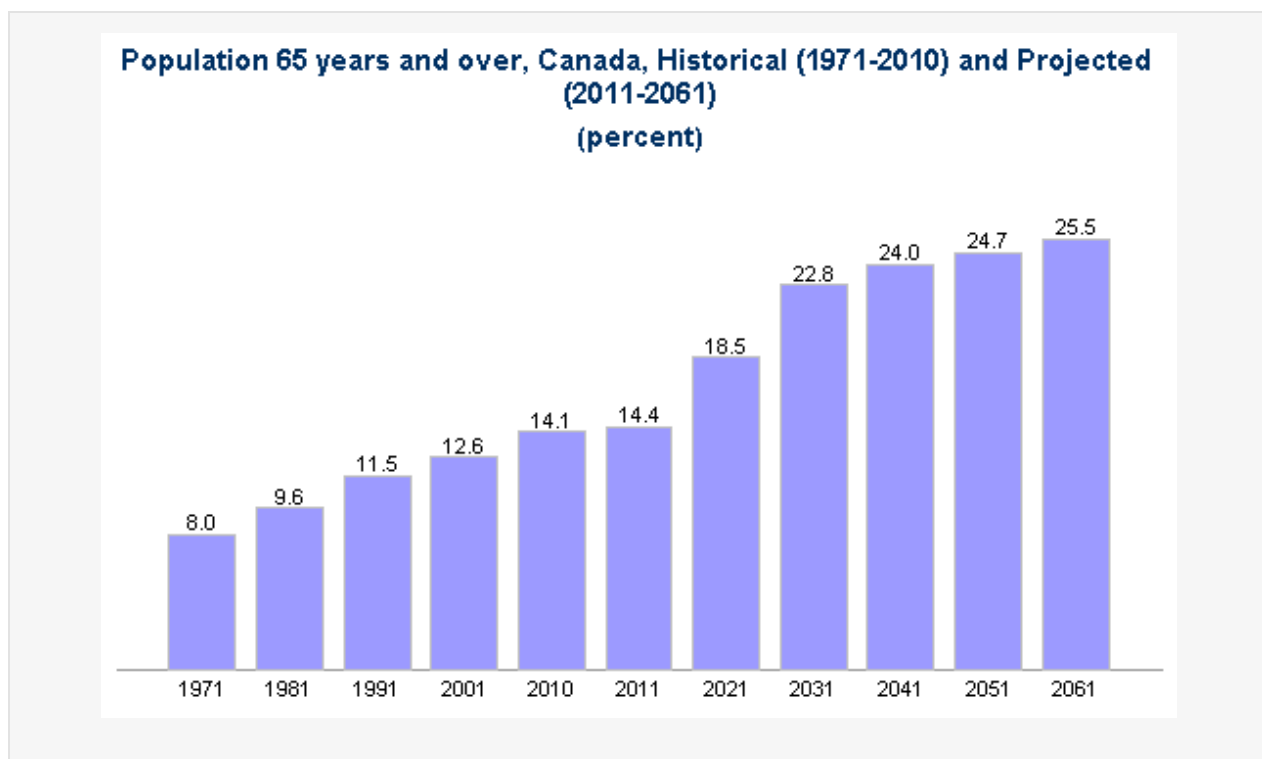


Chart 1: Population 65 years and over, Canada.

*Source: HRSDC calculations based on Statistics Canada. Estimates of population, by age group and sex for July 1, Canada, provinces and territories, annual (CANSIM Table 051-0001); and Statistics Canada. Projected population, by projection scenario,*

*sex and age group as of July 1, Canada, provinces and territories, annual (CANSIM table 052-0005). Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2010*

The mobile phone, or cell phone as it is called in Canada, is rapidly displacing the landline telephone for person-to-person communications here, as it is worldwide. Cell phones are also increasing in popularity in our country, which has tended to have lower adoption rates than elsewhere. On average, 72% of Canadians now own a cell phone, a steady increase since 1997. The lowest rates of ownership are in Quebec and amongst those fifty-five and over.

### ***The Wireless Industry in Canada***

As a recent report on the cell phone industry indicates (Nowak, 2010), cell phone companies make enormous profits for services that many Canadians feel are overpriced and inadequate. Such media reporting on the industry has been backed by independent inquiries made by digital research institutes that confirm that Canadians are paying extremely high rates for their cell phones. Compared to users in other countries, Canadians are often locked into draconian service contracts, and can experience punitive fees if they break these contracts (Marlow, 2010). The telecom regulation that historically guaranteed reasonable rates for landline phones in Canada has not been applied to cellular services.

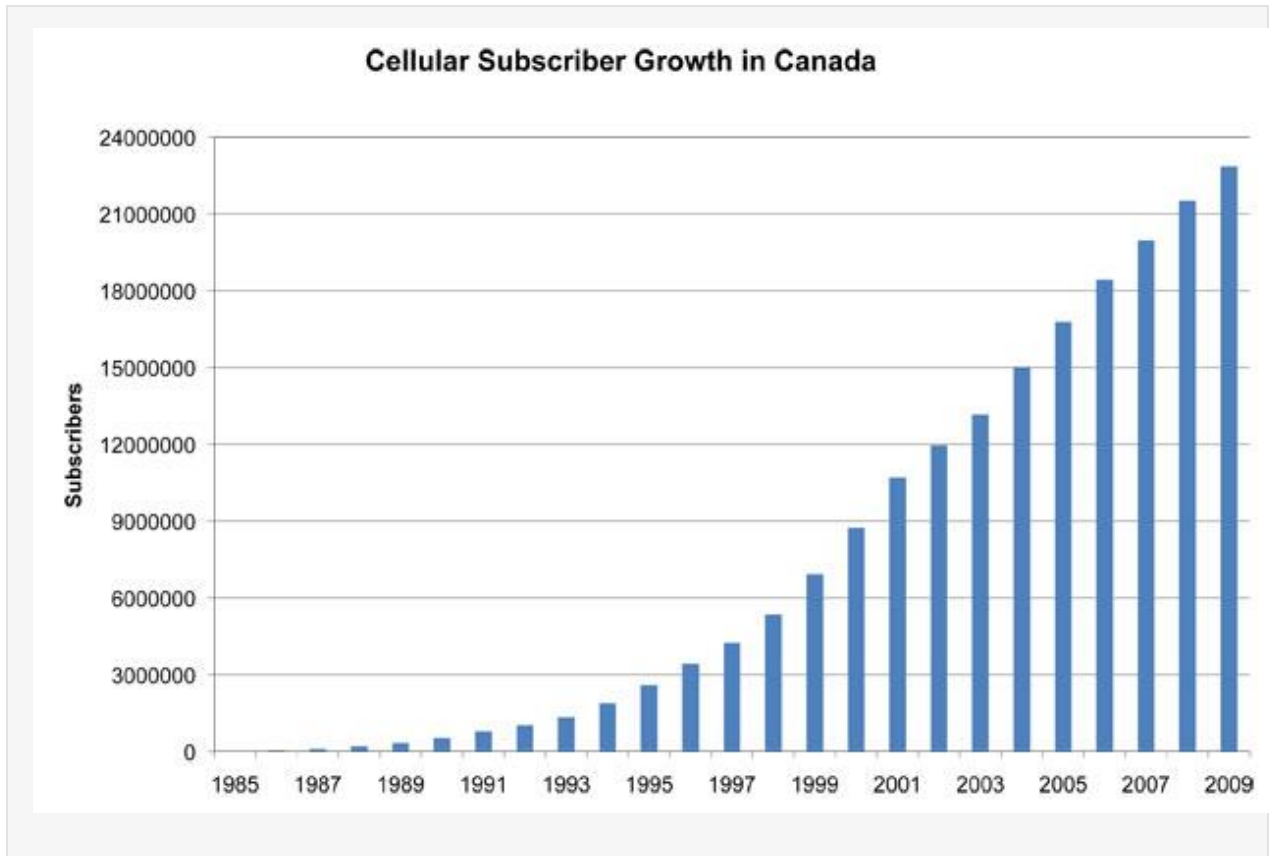


Chart 2: Cell Phone Subscriber Growth in Canada

Landlines have been reliable and inexpensive, comparatively speaking. These conditions influence seniors' responses to our study and to us; they must be accounted for in our analysis of the individual and household choices made on cell phone use. Hence, to quickly summarize the results of our preliminary data analysis, we have found that seniors tend to restrict their practices to a few functions, share the cell phone between spouses, use pay-as-you go cards for monitoring minutes, and consider carefully who is given access to a phone number. These practices do not stem from mere 'fears' of entering into the brave new world of mobile technology. Instead, as we have seen, these 'restrictive' practices are logical choices given the infrastructural conditions in Canada. Understanding these systemic conditions that influence individual choice also makes us

hesitant to use quasi-psychographic terms, based on survey research, to develop user profiles (Lee, 2008). Such profiling does not account for individuals or social groups in the context of their milieus.

### **Seniors' Local Milieus**

It is within this context that we are conducting our research. To date, we have held formal group discussions with over one hundred and twenty people who are sixty-five and over, accepting invitations into their community centres, legions, church halls, and homes. Over the past three years, we have engaged in a small number of early one-on-one interviews and countless informal conversations with retired individuals in shops, on the street and in cars on the subject of ageing and technological practices. We have received unsolicited emails from retired people who have offered encouragement and their own testimonials upon hearing of our project. While technically, only the interviews have been approved by our University research ethics committee, all of these conversations constitute valuable source materials for understanding the digital desires and frustrations of senior users.



Figure 2: Seniors Centre, Qualicum Beach



Figure 3: Cowichan Seniors' Centre

Our entry, albeit brief, into these local contexts provides crucial information about our subjects and their lives in relationship to the lifeworld that might not be shared in a survey or interview situation. Entry into these spaces gives us insight into the lives and mobile practices of both users and non-users. This latter group is particularly important to us. Just as we have been concerned with the reasons this population restricts use, our conversations with seniors indicates that the reasons for this 'non-use' are extremely complex, and need more attention. In this our project dovetails with the work of researchers such as Sally Wyatt (2003), who see use and non-use as part of a longer continuum of practices.

### **Iterative Adjustments**

In developing a multi-pronged research agenda, we have adopted methods of data collection that draw from our past experience in developing user-tests, guidelines and protocols for artists and engineers that are participatory and iterative in focus and in

practice (Crow & Sawchuk, 2008). Participatory research design asks subjects to play a role in setting the terms of the research agenda. Iterative research design suggests a constant re-adjustment of the research strategies over time, as one learns ‘in the field.’

While related to ethical issues in ethnographic research, including feminist empowerment research, these research strategies stress social change, and are based on ongoing dialogue and the researcher’s accountability to participants at all stages and phases of the research plan. Unlike empowerment research, the demands we place on subjects to maintain involvement in our project is minimal. We are not looking to institute change in a community, but to bring attention to those who have become invisible. As word of our study has gone out into the communities we contact, we frequently find that we have more seniors wanting to talk with us than we have time to give.

From an ethical perspective, in a short research note on working in the field of gerontology, Alan Walker (2007) makes the crucial point that the ‘older research subject’ should ideally be an active participant in setting the research agenda for epistemological, ethical and political reasons. This awareness and transformation of the research agenda is imperative when dealing with the elderly because of the rampant existence of age discrimination and social exclusion often experienced by this cohort. Given the lack of satisfactory studies with this cohort of users to act as a comparative benchmark, and our contextual approach, a pilot project with eight elderly intimates was critically important. During the pilot phase, we were able to test interview questions, develop a small survey, and most importantly negotiate our language and central ‘concepts.’ Taking into account the lack of literature on seniors in media studies,

we used these intimates to test initial hypothesis and intuitions, and to work out our own biases and presuppositions.

### ***Local Help: from Informants to Mediators***

Our local ‘organizers’ are seniors themselves and most often, our initial point of contact has been through family and friends. In ‘Approaching the Elderly,’ John Tulloch (1989) discusses openly the pitfalls and advantages of working with family members, which he sees as valid when working with populations that feel vulnerable. We have also made contact with individuals in existing volunteer and local organizations for seniors: a guild of quilters; a resource centre; a swimming group; a community centre. After retirement, many seniors also get involved in volunteer work for others, and these organizations have been helpful for not only giving access, but as a reminder that active ageing is not only possible, but actual. Local helpers have also provided material comforts for our groups: coffee, juice and snacks. They play the critical role of mediators in the research process (Latour, 2005), and have not acted as informants in the classical anthropological sense.



Figure 4: St. Thomas Church, Qualicum Beach, British Columbia



Figure 5: Yorkgate Mall, Toronto, Ontario

### ***The Old is Always Other Section***

What constitutes a senior is a contested category (see Riggs, 2002) and protocols for addressing this cohort are uncertain, given the range in ages from the recently retired ‘young-old’ to the ‘old-old.’ Ageing, we were reminded over and over again, is not only a demographic variable or a biological condition: it is also a question of perception, ‘a state of mind.’ What was interesting to hear was that no one sees themselves as old. The old is always other. Old is associated with a lack of both agency and mobility. We learned that they felt more comfortable with the term ‘senior’ than with other identity categories associated with ageing.



Figure 6: Senior Special

### ***Incorporating Critique***

Our seniors were willing to engage in what are arguably insightful critical discussions of our research program, the current literature and cultural presuppositions about age and ageing. In some instances they have acted in a consultative role setting the research agenda, formulating initial questions and helping make contacts with others. In a more recent encounter, we have been told that our ethics forms were too long and complicated and changed them in response. They have made suggestions to our survey, asked us to increase font size to make the text easier to read, and actively worked to set

up interviews with their constituents. In discussion, they have corrected us when we have revealed our own ageist presuppositions. One early lesson for us was when we asked if they were 'still driving' which led to a direct confrontation with our use of the word 'still,' which implied being incapacitated. Further, what this revealed is that the concept of mobility is about physical mobility, movement through space, as much as it is about a mobile device. The phone is not only a part of media ecology but a whole system for staying mobile and active: driving and public transport; exercise and walking; having and exerting agency. Conversation on other interests also made us initially attentive to emergent patterns, including pre-retirement and post-retirement work and the gravitation to particular digital devices.

### ***Media Ecologies: Phone Alone?***

One of the issues in studying any technology is that the focus of the study often isolates the technology from other uses and practices. Many of our early participants did not want to talk only about cell phones, and often diverted from the discussion of this technology to the question of other digital media. This pattern was repeated in all of our discussion groups, where we were reminded continually that technologies do not exist in the lives of individuals or households in isolation; that there was a 'media ecology' of multiple technologies for communications.

This led to the important finding that the 'restriction' or 'rejection' of the cell phone did not constitute a resistance to new forms of communications from these users. The cell phone exists as a choice among several options, including Skype, the landline phone, and email. Choices were made based on expedience and cost, the experience users had from pre-retirement occupations, and the demands of their interlocutors. This type of

finding points to the need for long-term contact with participants to track the reasons individuals may adopt new practices, exchange technologies, or exit the cell phone scene altogether. In addition to tracking such changes over time, we have situated cell phone use in terms of income levels: for example, the pressure felt by seniors who balance a home budget and life on a fixed income to keep up with the costs of maintaining services, engaging in upgrades, or using multiple functions.

### ***A Space for Non-Users***

Leaving space for the non-users involves accounting for those who would be left out of the conversation if we used more 'objective' means of gathering data on our subjects through a technological device (such as a tracking mechanism on their mobile phones). As we have argued elsewhere (Crow and Sawchuk, 2010), one of the other biases our research addresses is the tendency in media studies to focus on the exuberant user of technology. In our study, the perspective of these non-users has become extremely critical, for it challenges the assumption that only active users or owners of a mobile device are affected by the transition to wireless, mobile means of communication. The increasing lack of public telephones is but one example of how non-users are affected by broader cultural shifts. It also means that instead of the research being about us 'getting information from them,' the discussion groups have also become spaces where non-users come to find out from users why they should or should not get a cell phone, what plans they might get, what options and features on the phone to look for, and tips about how it might best serve them.



Figure 7: St. Boniface, Winnipeg

### ***We Are Not Selling Anything***

This was particularly important when dealing with our seniors: one of the important points of reassurance we had to offer was that we were not marketing researchers working for cell phone companies. We had to convince them that we were not trying to sell them something. This, we realized, is related to one of the main issues of this group: their distrust of telecommunications companies, and their sense of vulnerability as a population in relation to unscrupulous researchers and scam artists trying to get money from them.

### ***From Focus Group to Discussion Groups***

Initially we termed our research as ‘focus group discussions.’ During the course of our research, we have preferred to use the term ‘group interviews’ in order to stimulate a discussion amongst seniors, rather than simply read a list of questions. For this cohort, ‘focus groups’ imply that we are situated within the paradigms and parameters of marketing research, often affiliated with the much despised phone companies. But it

also seemed as if we had a definite research agenda. ‘Discussion group’ reframed the terms of engagement as allowing for a much more meandering flow of conversation, guided not only by our questions, but by the participants’ interests and needs, discussed within a much less formal context.

### ***Money Talks***

One critical aspect of recruitment, but also part of the politics of our project, that is rarely talked about is the issue of money. We have paid our subjects for their time: CAD\$20 per hour, which usually translates into CAD\$40 cash in-hand for each participant. We also know from experience that there are class divisions in the doing of research: doctors and lawyers are paid for their time in focus groups commensurate with their income and status. Survey research with ‘ordinary’ people frequently asks of time on a phone for an hour two, but the pay scales are different. Paying our participants for their time was an ethical and political decision that benefited us. Word got around about the compensation, which valorised their time as important and they loved this. Seniors are sometimes seen as people with ‘time on their hands’ and ‘they like to talk’ as if they have nothing better to do. Offering money for their time and talk was an affirmation that their insights were valuable.

But we also had insight into who they were because of what they told us they were going to do with the money. Given the significant socio-economic differences between our subjects, their responses to having their time acknowledged and their participation rewarded in tangible terms was telling. For one group, CAD\$40 is a week’s worth of groceries. For another group, this money represented a special lunch with a friend. For another group, our research was used as a fundraiser for their religious organization.

For yet another group, this money was coveted as a way to purchase quilting materials for their favoured hobby.

## **Conclusion**

Our foray into the 'grey zone' has revealed much to us, from methods of researching seniors to considering mobility and mobile use in more complex and nuanced ways. While we have collected some qualitative data on our participants, our research largely relies on verbal testimony as well as our own observations of friends and relatives who are in this demographic and who have actively assisted us. In our understanding of what we are 'getting' in these conversations, we operate from within the perspective of repertoire analysis, defined as 'recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomenon' (Potter, & Wetherell, 1987). As Joke Hermes (1996) explains, interpretive repertoires are 'a storehouse of possible understandings, legitimations, and evaluations that can be brought to bear on any number of subjects.' We are in the midst of this analysis of our data, using the TAMs analyzer open source software program to systematically document emergent terms and themes from the volumes of data we have collected: each group discussion is comprised of text ranging from forty to seventy pages in length.

Statistical portraits draw attention to larger discursive and social patterns, but this type of 'survey' can operate effectively in collaboration with qualitative data to offer insights and construct categories that are meaningful to the population studied. The technical collection of data from the devices themselves may also not be appropriate for this cohort. There is much to be said for studies that track mobile users and do not require them to fill in details, instead relying on software programs (such as Mobitrak) and the

phone itself to gather data. However, we are not sure if such studies would be either possible or desirable given the specificities of our group of participants. Considering that this cohort does not use or want many of the functions of the cell phone, imposing such a device will only give us access to some respondents. There are important cultural differences between this generation and younger users in their feelings about the need for privacy, as our discussions on these matters have indicated.

Our research suggests that the methodologies for mobile users and usage in the 'grey zone' are enriched when we engage with them in their milieus on their terms. As we enter into the next phase of the research, it is the insight gleaned through contact, conversation and entry into these milieus that matters. This insight will guide the analysis, interpretations, and positions we inevitably must put forth as the authors of this study as we seek to make seniors matter within the ever-shifting terrain of mobility studies.

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Notes**

Population projections use a medium-growth scenario (M1) based on interprovincial migration trends from 1981 to 2008. For further information see: Statistics Canada.

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## **Biographies**

Kim Sawchuk is a Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University. A feminist media studies scholar, Sawchuk is interested in new media art, wireless and mobile media technologies and the politics and culture of health and biomedicine. She is a co-founder of Studio XX (1996), the Mobile Media Lab (2006), *wi: journal of mobile media* (2008) as well as the former Editor of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* (2005-2011).

Barbara Crow is Associate Dean, Research in the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies at York University, Toronto. Her research interests are in the areas of gender, digital and mobile technologies. She is currently the co-director of the Mobile Media Lab and one of the co-founding editors of *wi*.