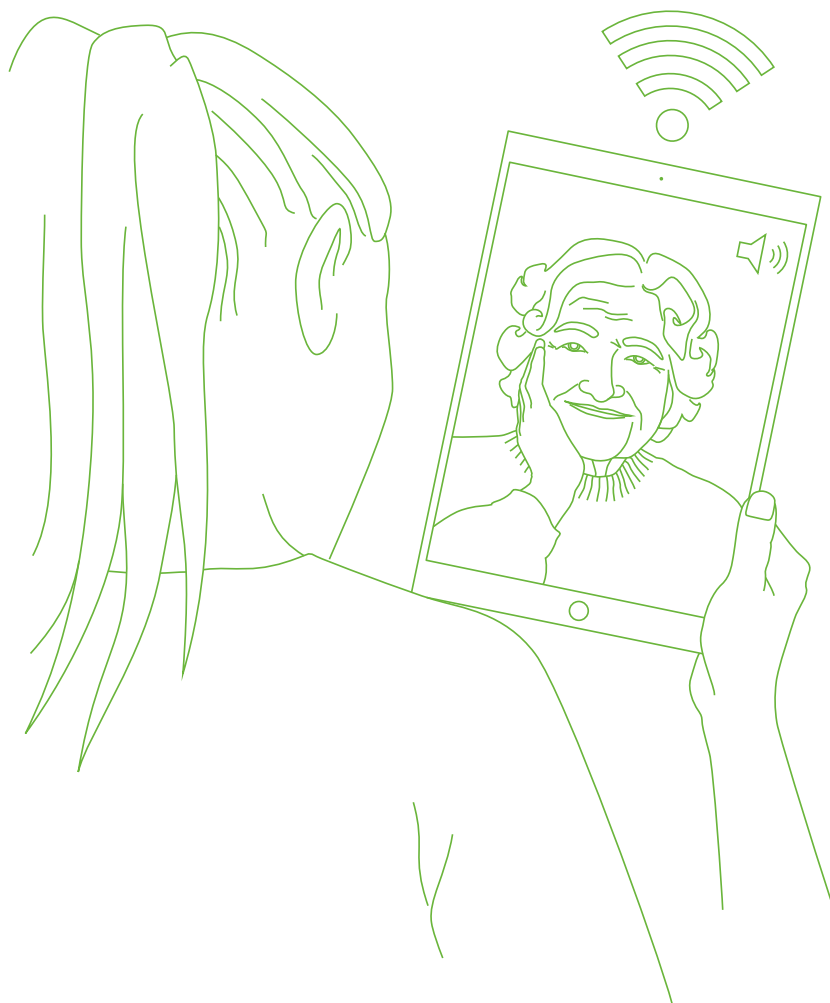


Smart home or granny flat?

There are digital technologies out there designed to encourage dialogue and solidarity between the generations. But often this only happens if certain analogue requirements are met.

Article by **Valerie Zaslowski**



The coronavirus crisis in early 2020 has been an impressive illustration of the solidarity that exists between the generations in Switzerland. Young people have followed the government's bidding to stay at home to avoid putting older people and those with underlying health conditions in danger. People have stepped in, no questions asked, to help their neighbours, and young people have gone shopping for the elderly. Widely debated curfews for senior citizens to prevent the whole economy from shutting down have been rejected by most as age discrimination and a lack of solidarity, and only a few regions have enforced them.¹

Pre-coronavirus, the media were often sceptical about solidarity between the generations. Life expectancies in Switzerland have increased significantly in recent decades. According to the basic scenario posited by the Federal Office of Statistics, in 2045 more than one quarter of the Swiss population is likely to be over age 65, compared with only 19 per cent at present.²

This development is putting pressure on the pension system, which is getting harder to fund and increasingly relies on young people in employment. In 1990, 23.5 out of 100 people in Switzerland were drawing a pension; by 2018 this figure had climbed to 30.³ Dwindling prospects of prosperity and fears of losing social status seemed to be leading to a widespread belief among members of Generations Y and Z (those born after 1980) that they had it harder in life than their parents. In the debate around climate change, younger people were attacking their parents and grandparents for decades of alleged environmental recklessness. The emergence of the meme "OK Boomer" in the US towards the end of 2019 marked a new level of venom and spite in intergenerational dialogue.⁴

But according to the University of Zurich professor emeritus and gerontologist François Höpflinger, these points of contention are overemphasised. "The public debate is primarily focused on the challenges of an ageing society," he says in an interview with W.I.R.E. "Since the 1980s the issue has been dramatised." While Höpflinger concedes that the baby boomers will benefit more from social security than the contributions they paid in, he also points out that people often forget what elderly people give back in the form of unpaid work.

Studies also suggest that despite all the fuss in the media, things aren't that bad at all in Switzerland and Europe in terms of solidarity between the generations.⁵ A distinction does have to be made, however, between family and non-family solidarity. Apparently family solidarity has even increased since the late 1980s and early 1990s, at least in central and northern Europe.

1: For information on regional curfews for senior citizens: <https://www.nzz.ch/schweiz/die-spezielle-corona-situation-im-tessin-noe-tigt-uns-zu-fruehzeitigen-massnahmen-ld.1549009>

2: François Höpflinger, Demographischer Wandel der Generationenverhältnisse (Mai 2019), <http://www.hoepflinger.com/fh/top/WandelGenerationen.pdf>

3: Bundesamt für Statistik (Federal Statistical Office), Altersquotienten, <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/querschnittsthemen/wohlfahrtsmessung/alle-indikatoren/gesellschaft/altersquotient.html>

4: Taylor Lorentz, "'OK Boomer' Marks the End of Friendly Generational Relations", *New York Times* (29 Oct 2019) <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/29/style/ok-boomer.html>

5: Shell Jugendstudie 2019: https://www.shell.de/ueber-uns/shell-jugendstudie-icr_content/par/toptasks.stream/1570708341213/4a002df-f58a7a9540cb9e83ee0a37a0ed8a0fd55/shell-youth-study-summary-2019-de.pdf Share - Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe: <http://www.share-project.org/home0.html>

Non-family solidarity, by contrast, is more a matter of polite coexistence between the generations.⁶ According to François Höpflinger there's a certain lack of communication and relationships between young and old: "Each generation lives for itself, and intergenerational friendships are fairly rare."

Communication and protection for family members

In recent years, efforts to turn mere coexistence between the generations into real togetherness and preserve and strengthen solidarity and the intergenerational contract have spawned many projects initiated by both the government and the private sector designed to bring old and young together. Digitalisation often plays a key role in these projects. The idea is that just as digital processes are increasingly permeating the whole way we communicate and work, they should also help create new ways for the old and young people of the 21st century to connect.

In family structures, digital technology often seems to function well as a way of bringing the generations together. Family WhatsApp chat groups, grandparents calling their grandchildren on Skype, Zoom and Facetime, and shared Instagram accounts are new communications channels with the potential to increase understanding between young and old. This kind of digital communication is also increasingly running via smart home applications, connecting old people who find mobile phones too complicated or hard to use because of their eyesight.⁷ Gerontologist François Höpflinger is confident about the ability of digital communications technology to boost solidarity between the generations: "It helps families that live in different areas to stay in contact."

Digital technology is also increasingly used in cases where elderly family members are reliant on care and support because of age or illness. In particular there are monitoring applications designed to enable elderly people to live independently while still having the reassurance that a relative or designated person will be there if they need them.⁸ The idea is that technology creates a kind of digital granny flat where people get closeness, companionship and support.

The days where age tech was limited to a wristband with an emergency alarm are long gone. CherryHome, for example, is an app based on artificial intelligence technology designed for seniors who live at home or in old-age accommodation.⁹ Cameras monitor their apartment, with the smart system recognising the resident's recurring patterns of movement and alerting an outside caregiver if there's any change in their gait, posture or other routines. The technology is able to identify falls and other behaviours suggesting a health problem, immediately alerting a relative by mobile phone or connecting them live. To safeguard privacy it's possible to have people visualised schematically in camera feeds, meaning that a son-in-law can't snoop on what a grandmother's up to, for instance.

6: Almuth Fricke, "Kulturelle Bildung im Dialog zwischen Jung und Alt", <https://www.kubi-online.de/artikel/kulturelle-bildung-dialog-zwischen-jung-alt>

7: One example from Switzerland is Caru, a digital flatmate whose slogan is "Being close to grandma and grandpa – in everyday life and in emergencies" <https://www.caruhome.com/>

8: Digitalisierung für mehr Optionen und Teilhabe im Alter, Bertelsmann-Stiftung (2017): https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Smart_Country/DigitaleTeilhabe_2017_final.pdf

9: CherryHome ("Enabling seniors to live safely at home for longer"): <https://get.cherryhome.ai/care/>

In some cases this kind of digital monitoring can be done very intensively, for example by way of wearable technology. For example, Japanese design agency Triple W has developed an app called DFree that predicts when people with dementia or disability need to go to the toilet.¹⁰ It uses a wearable sensor attached just above the waist that uses ultrasound technology to monitor the person's bladder.

Whether such distance monitoring will help or harm solidarity between the generations remains to be seen. The Bertelsmann-Stiftung foundation has come to the conclusion that the development of the market has so far been driven primarily by supply rather than what's really needed. The range of age tech actually used in health and old age care is limited.¹¹

Intergenerational solidarity among strangers?

When it comes to non-family solidarity there are also many digital applications and platforms designed to improve contact between old and young people and promote solidarity between the generations – most of them on the basis of new modes of connecting and networking.

The solutions being discussed include mixed generation living as a way of boosting understanding and dialogue, with digital platforms bringing together those with shared interests. WG-gesucht.de is a German website promoting multigenerational flat-sharing as the way forward: people living together as neighbours instead of being socially isolated.¹²

But gerontologist François Höpflinger doesn't think that living together at such close quarters in the same flat is likely to meet the needs of most young people or the wishes of the majority of older people. He believes people are more likely to accept intergenerational housing communities where people live under the same roof but in separate apartments or units. What's decisive is "that cross-generational contacts that go beyond neighbourly co-existence have to be systematically and regularly managed and supervised."

It's not just flatmates that digital platforms bring together, but elective grandparents and families as well. The idea is that in these days of patchwork families, systems based on elective affinity (i.e. being able to choose who you're close to) relieve the strain and enrich everyone concerned. In other words, young and old should get to enjoy the benefits of personal relationships with people in other generations who aren't members of their family. Platforms such as misgrosi.ch are there to put people in contact.¹³

Here, too, François Höpflinger is sceptical of the potential for bringing the generations together: "Experience so far with projects promoting neighbourly "adoptive" grandparenting has shown that it only works if the ersatz grandparents and their adopted families are closely supervised" – among other things to avoid misunderstandings and people stepping on each other's toes. Höpflinger also warns of the danger of idealising notions of intergenerational relationships: "A characteristic of non-family relationships between young and old people is the fact that they don't function – and shouldn't function – the same way as family relationships."¹⁴

10: "First wearable device for urinary incontinence": <https://www.dfreeus.biz>

11: Digitalisierung für mehr Optionen und Teilhabe im Alter, Bertelsmann-Stiftung (2017): https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Smart_Country/DigitaleTeilhabe_2017_final.pdf

12: "Mehrgenerationen-WG: Miteinander von Jung und Alt statt allein": <https://www.wg-gesucht.de/artikel/mehrgenerationen-wg-miteinander-von-jung-und-alt-statt-allein>

13: Platform for people offering and seeking childcare: <https://www.misgrosi.ch>

Digital networks, physical neighbourhoods

While digital apps can boost solidarity between generations within the family, they only work for relationships outside the family if certain analogue conditions are met. According to gerontologist François Höpflinger, if digital networking is built on neighbourly organisation and embedded in the structures of the local community it can certainly help improve solidarity between the generations. The less neighbourly the concept of solidarity is, the more abstract it becomes. Only when things are rooted in the neighbourhood can account be taken of local circumstances and chance encounters facilitated.

According to the Bertelsmann-Stiftung foundation, digitalisation isn't about shifting social life to a cyberspace consisting of decoupled, disrooted, anonymous social networks.¹⁵ It's more a matter of strengthening existing relationships between people. Generational projects work best when they involve local relationships and established social structures built up, preserved or reinforced via digital modes of communication. According to Höpflinger, they always also require close supervision and facilitation to defuse conflict and ensure that the interests of both generation are taken equal account of.

One promising development in this area could be (neighbourhood) projects promoting intergenerational learning among strangers. For example the DOJ/AFAJ, the Swiss umbrella association for children's and youth support, promotes the teaching of media and technical skills to senior citizens by young people.¹⁶ The idea is that in return, the young people acquire didactical knowledge from the seniors. The whole thing is designed to increase solidarity between the generations and prevent the emergence of a digital rift.

Many tech optimists now believe that solidarity between the generations can be facilitated completely digitally without human contact. Trading Ages, a virtual technology app developed in the United States, allows young people to experience with their own senses what it's like to get old and how it feels to lose your sight and hearing.¹⁷ The idea is that virtually swapping roles increases the younger generation's empathy and respect for elderly people.

But it's hardly possible to decouple this type of virtual role swapping from established analogue relationships. As long as there are no real friendships and ties between young and old people, even the most realistic simulation will remain abstract. The best basis for the successful, valued use of technology to facilitate relations between the generations still seems to be solid family and neighbourly relationships in the real, non-virtual space.

14: François Höpflinger, "Intergenerationenprojekte - in Arbeitswelt und Nachbarschaft". In: Auf dem Weg zu einer Generationenpolitik, ed. Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften, Bern: SAGW (2010): 181-196: <http://www.hoepflinger.com/fhtop/Intergenerationenprojekte.pdf>

15: Digitalisierung für mehr Optionen und Teilhabe im Alter, Bertelsmann-Stiftung: https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Smart_Country/DigitaleTeilhabe_2017_final.pdf

16: Jugendliche fördern Medienkompetenz von Seniorinnen und Senioren: <http://doj.ch/jugendliche-foerdern-medienkompetenz-von-seniorinnen-und-senioren/>

17: How does it feel to get old? <https://www.scanhealthplan.com/tradingages>

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