

Digital difficulty deters the aged

God has gone digital. Well, more his agents have, if you want the literal meaning of a story about a Paris church that now offers credit card-swiping facilities on its collection plates. In a digitally devout transaction, you key in the amount of your tithe, possibly hoping nobody earthly can glimpse your code. Wisely, they still have a cash option for the un-digitised.

This is a sensitive topic. Where does the digital upheaval leave people who choose not to board the digital tumbrel and who want to continue as functioning members of society?

In my teaching days I came across a surprising number of people who tried to disguise their lack of “connectedness” to the online and computerised worlds. Many students and staff arriving at various journalism schools where I worked had limited computer skills and tried to hide that through some misguided sense of shame. They quickly came up to speed.

Until recently, the digi revolution hasn't stopped most everyday enterprises trundling along with over-the-counter service, paper records and “snail mail”, notwithstanding vague threats to viability and occasional changes forced by the encroaching internet.

Complex administrative systems like those at hospitals still use paper trails, the health industry at that level no doubt wary of change after expensive disasters suffered by government departments attempting major advances. Computer system vendors are notorious for unkept promises.

That hasn't prevented transformations, of course. The latest is an announcement printed versions of Yellow Pages are on the way out, since people can access the information online. Too bad for those who don't use a computer or online device.

An elderly New Plymouth friend told me about constant difficulties with companies wanting her email address. She doesn't have one. When she tells them, the common response is they can't help her.

She won a prize at a supermarket, but when she asked how she could claim it, they said she would have to go online. On learning she had no way to do that, they told her to ring the company providing the prize. Yes, you read right – *she* had to ring, not them. She did.

A courier firm failed to deliver on time a Christmas pudding she made for her family in Auckland (she paid \$17 to send it on December 18 - it arrived December 27). She immediately went in to complain, but the news she has no email drew a “there's nothing we can do” reply. They rang on December 29 to ask if she intended to pursue the matter. When she affirmed she did, they promised to get back to her. She'd heard nothing by the beginning of this week.

Two insurance companies refused to accommodate her when she was unable to do their online applications for travel insurance. She also finds people online seem to get first dibs at new library books, even though she has been a member for many decades. She's worried about what will happen when her ability to pay by cheque disappears. And when there are no landlines.

Such problems worry Lance Girling-Butcher, chair of New Plymouth Positive Ageing Trust. “In times of yore, communities could punish people who said or did something they disliked by refusing to talk to them (sending them to Coventry),” he says. “Now technology and modern advancements are unwittingly doing the same thing to an undeserving older generation.

“Many over-65s are not used to using computers and smart phones and are losing contact with the rest of the community. A lot do not send or receive emails or browse the internet, instead relying on ‘old fashioned’ handwritten mail. They don't get messages from people who use email.”

He says the implications are serious, and greater numbers are becoming concerned: last year, more than 150 attended a trust forum on the topic, compared to an average forum attendance of about 60.

He has many examples of disadvantages people face. For instance, those without smart-phones can't access the new civil defence warning and advice system. Movie adverts are now available only online. Print classified advertisements have largely migrated to the internet. A law change insists you can't ask a doctor for a repeat prescription without emailing the request or writing a letter: "Those without email have to wait longer."

Clubs and other organisations – including local councils - send out messages by email in groups, so if they're holding a meeting they can advise people without having to pay for a newspaper advert or talk individually to everyone. New Plymouth District Council meetings are streamed live online – which is great for ratepayers with access.

"Positive Ageing is aware of these problems, and while it does send emails to those able to use the internet, it also uses the community newspaper. North Taranaki Midweek is an effective communication tool for us, since it's free to all homes and has high readership amongst older members."

Senior Net offers help, but he says it is short of tutors and does not have particularly accessible rooms. So much for all the talk about New Zealand preparing for a silver tsunami.