SOCIAL NETWORKING AND SUCCESSFUL AGEING

A new Facebook application developed by researchers at The Australian National University will help shed light on how seniors use online social networks.

The application will provide data for a pioneering research project into how Australian seniors are using the Facebook social networking site to connect with friends and family, and the relationship between social networks and successful ageing.

Dr Heather Booth from the Australian Demographic & Social Research Institute in the ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences is leading the Australian Research Council Linkage Project with industry partner National Seniors Australia.

“Understanding how online social networking can contribute to successful ageing is critically important in Australia with our ageing population and the attendant health and welfare policy challenges this raises,” Dr Booth said.

“Social isolation is a significant inhibitor to health and wellbeing in later years but social networks offer a potential means to overcome this.

“With the rollout of the National Broadband Network expected to significantly increase internet broadband access, the opportunities for using online media as a tool to promote successful ageing are also likely to grow.”

Fellow researcher, Dr Robert Ackland, who led the development of the new application, called Australian Seniors' Online Networks (AuSON), said it had the potential to revolutionise our understanding of the online behaviours of older Australians.

“Once the AuSON Facebook application is installed, it automatically collects information on the structure of users’ Facebook networks,” Dr Ackland said.

“But the functionality goes beyond that to enable participants to provide additional information about offline friends, how their social networks provide access to resources such as information and assistance (social capital) and measures of ageing status such as physical and mental wellbeing.

“By collecting data on both social networks and ageing status, we hope to be able to better understand the role of social networks, in particular, online social networks, in contributing to successful ageing in Australia.”

Further information about the application is available at http://auson.anu.edu.au

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