Beyond Repair: Literacy, Technology, and a Curriculum of Aging

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The experience of old age, as with other bodily identities, is only partially the experience of an individual body and mind. Of course we experience aging because our bodies change, but also, as many age studies scholars remind us, we are aged by culture (Butler; Cole; Cruikshank; Gullette). For Margaret Cruikshank, learning to be old means “acquiring the knowledge that aging is a creation of this time and place, more cultural than biological, determined by social institutions, or, more optimistically, a set of life experiences we can consciously shape” (2). Taking up a critical resistance to the biomedical model of aging, other aging studies scholars have explored the enculturation of aging in relation to sexuality and gender, physical appearance, capacity for work, and other markers that have been tied to cultural standards of youth; few, however, have investigated how literacy has been recruited into the social construction (and thus potential for reconstruction) of old age in the United States. Although aging is indeed a biological process that brings real challenges, this essay contends that the conflation of aging and bodily decline potentially limits the literate and rhetorical development of older adults.

Literacy, both as a perceived personal quality and as a social practice, plays a central role in the development and distribution of a curriculum of aging: an assemblage of rhetorics that define and promote cultural ideologies about old age. Popular discourses often link the state of being literate with particular age groups; in recent years, the languages and literacies of digital technologies, especially social media, carry strong ties to youth-based identities. Recent trends suggest that the elder demographic is making serious gains in technological literacy practices. For

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instance, Pew Internet and American Life Project research shows that between 2009 and 2011, users of social networking sites (for example, Facebook, LinkedIn) aged sixty-five and over increased by 150 percent, and users in the Baby Boomer group, aged fifty to sixty-four (many of whom are working professionals), doubled (Madden and Zickuhr 6; see also Lenhart; Madden). Despite such evidence, popular discourses continue to represent a disassociation between older adults and twenty-first–century literacies. Although the rhetorics of aging and literacy are sometimes subtle, they are nonetheless pervasive: an age-based ideology of technological literacy appears even among organizations actively promoting the welfare of older adults, such as AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons). In an issue of AARP The Magazine, the organization printed a feature story in which experts were interviewed and photographed with various digital technologies (Bloosten et al.). The “experts”—consulted for the benefit of older audiences—were children. Wrapped up in such age-based rhetorics of literacy are assumptions about older adults’ inability or unwillingness to take up newer literacies associated with younger people.

In this essay I examine literacy’s interventions in cultural perspectives of aging through the published discourses of AARP, a group that openly attempts to shape perceptions and consumer behavior of older adults, which the group currently defines as adults aged fifty and up. Since its founding in 1958, AARP has done some excellent work in promoting elder adults’ roles as civic participants and self-advocates in American society, mainly by distributing texts and most recently by supporting textual environments in which AARP members are asked to represent themselves in writing. However, largely due to its interest in reaching a large and diverse audience of older adults (and securing revenue), AARP often relies on problematic rhetorics that privilege youth-centered ideals and create limited representations of older adults’ literacy in digital times. These rhetorics rest on a metaphor of repair, which labels aging adults as primarily bodies in need of fixing or protection.

Although literacy can be shaped by popular discourses, it cannot be separated from lived experience; likewise, aging cannot be reduced to an “autonomous model” (Street). In other words, both literacy and aging are in part rhetorical activities. Literacy scholars have brought rhetorical studies to bear on literacy in order to ascertain how dominant and resistant rhetorics might impact perceptions and uses of literacy in particular identity groups and communities (see, for example, Cushman; Duffy; Eldred and Mortensen; Powell). Such moves can be extended to studies of technological literacy, which literacy researchers Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher define as “the practices involved in reading, writing, and exchanging information in online environments, as well as the values associated with such practices” (2).

Some age studies and literacy researchers have begun to outline important connections between literacy and the values that inform common understandings of old age. Ruth Ray’s study of elders reveals that social scripts place rhetorical demands on
elders’ practices of writing their own life stories (76). In her investigation of aging and technological literacies among writing faculty, Angela Crow suggests that age stereotypes may have to be identified and addressed before some older adults engage with new literacies. Heidi McKee and Kristine Blair’s interviews with older adults learning to use computers reveal that “the message that technology is for the young is something that many older adults seem to have internalized” (25). By examining the rhetorics repeatedly circulated by AARP, I further capture some of the values that are associated with older adults and literacy technologies in texts targeted directly, and repeatedly, toward older audiences. AARP was founded with two goals (both of which support and extend its ongoing role as a lobbyist group) that have proven divergent at critical junctures throughout its history, and that persist in the organization’s current work: (1) the (re)education of older Americans and (2) sales of insurance policies, pharmaceuticals, and advertising. These founding objectives, I argue, shape the messages about literacy and literate activity forwarded in AARP publications by perpetuating limited representations of aging identities.

Throughout this essay, I draw from John Duffy’s “rhetorical conception of literacy development” (7, 17) which not only understands literacy as a social practice, but also acknowledges that social worlds cannot be divorced from rhetorical symbolic worlds. Deriving his conception of rhetoric from Kenneth Burke, Duffy views rhetorics—to which literacy might grant access and membership—as symbolic worlds in which ideologies are “imposed, shared, understood, and overthrown” (17). For the purposes of my study, then, literacy is a way into age-based rhetorics: the symbolic worlds that circulate ideologies of aging. The rhetorics detailed here are only a small part of the symbolic worlds in which older adults participate, but the presence of these rhetorics, and the ways by which they are made available to aging audiences, might have something to say about the rhetorical choices that older adults can make and the ways they identify themselves as literate elders.

**Independence, Dignity, and Purpose: AARP and the Second Career**

Today claiming over 35 million members, publishing the world’s largest circulating magazine, and generating hundreds of millions in annual revenue (AARP Services, Inc.), AARP is the largest organization for older adults. Although there are many elder-interest groups in the United States, including the more politically conservative American Seniors Association and the National Seniors Council, AARP remains the most recognizable. AARP is believed to be so large and powerful, in fact, that it has been repeatedly identified as a formidable “eight-hundred-pound gorilla” lobbying for pro-elder public policy (Howard 127; Morris xii). In short, messages endorsed by AARP reach audiences beyond its already vast membership. In this section, I sketch
a brief history of the organization in order to illustrate the group’s concerted efforts to influence the meaning of old age in America through an internally conflicting curriculum of aging. In its efforts to reach out to older audiences through the distribution of texts—and to profit from those connections—AARP has embroiled itself in the literate lives of millions of older adults, and not always with positive effect.

The history of AARP, in a sense, begins in 1944, when the first woman principal in California retired at age sixty (McCay; Rasmussen). Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, a former English teacher and principal at Lincoln High School in Los Angeles, had spent her forty-year career promoting social unity through community participation in education (Andrus, “Education”). Newly retired, Andrus transitioned quickly to a volunteer position as director of welfare for the California Retired Teachers Association (CRTA). After reportedly discovering a destitute retired teacher living in a chicken coop outside Los Angeles (Liu), Andrus launched what what was basically a second career. According to her AARP biographers, her experience with CRTA (and, no doubt, her successes at Lincoln High) “led her to formulate her philosophy that the aging can attain goals of personal dignity and social usefulness by recognizing their own individual worth in a crusade for service” (Crippen et al. 10).

Andrus’s crusade for service began in earnest in October of 1947, when CRTA’s efforts to secure elders’ access to health insurance (among other arguments of national import) led to the founding of the National Retired Teachers Association (NRTA). Andrus became its first volunteer president. By 1958, Andrus’s mission reached out to retirees of all professions, as she became founding president of the American Association of Retired Persons, known today simply as AARP. For former educator Andrus, the nascent AARP’s primary objectives were to improve the everyday lives of elders and to establish a recognizable place for elders in modern society. Serving as editor for both the NRTA Journal and AARP’s Modern Maturity until her death in 1967, Andrus used her public voice to respond to the view of old age circulating in mid-twentieth-century America: that it was a phase of decline in which active citizenship was no longer possible.

Andrus’s philosophies on aging align with the American ideal of “civilized” aging, propagated by nineteenth-century “aging manuals” (Cole 143). Texts that focus explicitly on the process of growing older, aging manuals document and represent the human life span to raise awareness, and to offer “instruction, inspiration, consolation, and advice about aging” (Cole 67). Marking a shift from previous cultural attitudes toward aging in later life as simply the declining ability to achieve one’s goals, early aging manuals emphasized the positives of advanced age. Emphasizing old age as a “public good” or as a “value to society,” Andrus’s editorial work responded to long-held beliefs in the opposite: that older adults are citizens who have outlived their usefulness. As an extension of this belief, older adults were (and are) commonly defined by a perceived dependence upon others, including charities
and the welfare state, based on the pre–Social Security status of older Americans as
generally unemployable and thus poor (Palmore 71–72). In response, Andrus used
her editorships to craft a curriculum of aging—one based on Christian, middle-class
values and aimed to “promote independence, dignity, and purpose” in later life
(AARP, “AARP History”).

Andrus’s role in the founding of AARP was crucial, but her efforts to construct
a curriculum of aging were undermined from the first because, as Eric Schurenberg
and Lani Luciano pointed out in a 1987 report, “AARP the advocate and AARP the
salesman are both firmly embedded in the association’s origins.” Although not ap-
ppearing in AARP’s public accounts of its own history, insurance salesman Leonard
Davis had as much—if not more— influence on the establishment of the group as
Andrus did. Davis, who set up a wildly successful by-mail health insurance plan for
NRTA, invested $50,000 to establish AARP, with most of this investment going
toward Modern Maturity, which advertised Davis’s insurance among the pages of
Andrus’s editorial reeducation of American elderhood (Morris 24). Although the
ability to obtain health insurance was much needed prior to the Social Security Act
Amendments of 1965, AARP’s insurance dealings and health care–related lobbying
have landed the organization in hot water more than once. The group continues to
serve as a scapegoat in political debates, often stirring up both implicit and explicit
“greedy geezer” accusations, particularly in regard to health care policies and costs.

More than a sign of the group’s conflicts of interest, the perennial dramas of
AARP’s health care politics are at the heart of an emerging curriculum of aging that
departs from Andrus’s original vision. Eclipsing any efforts to establish an active
senior collective, AARP overemphasizes health and the aging body as “the” central
topic for elder Americans in order to ensure AARP’s political and financial survival.
The business logic is simple: if Americans are concerned about their aging bodies,
they might purchase protection in the form of AARP-backed insurance, medical
products, and pharmaceuticals. But by placing undue emphasis on the health chal-
enges of older adults, AARP’s texts squeeze out other available meanings of old
age—including the intellectual, creative, political, and social growth that might result
from richer representations of late life.

Before turning to analysis of recent AARP publications for the ways in which they
support or constrain the relationship between older adults and literacy technologies,
I first need to illustrate the impact that “AARP the salesman” has on the organiza-
tion’s rhetoric. In the next section, I identify one way in which AARP has deployed
a body-centered curriculum of aging in its central publication, AARP The Magazine.
By continuing to construct itself as a self-help guide to aging—what might be called
an aging manual—the magazine enacts the kind of relationship that older adults are
expected to have with literacy in the twenty-first century: reading and writing to
manage health and monitor the body. This profitable focus on the practices of body
maintenance and repair might, as I demonstrate later, inhibit both the development of technological literacies and the broadening of what old age and aging can mean.

**The AARP Reading List**

“[A]ll elements of literacy instruction,” Duffy argues, “including the selection of reading materials [. . .] are ultimately rhetorical and ideological, ultimately intended to promote a vision of the world and the place of learners within it” (17). As Linda Brodkey recalls her childhood spent poring over classic literature and emulating middle-class literate tastes and culture, we are further reminded that literacy embodies ideology, and literate activity can bring ideology into contact with a sense of self. As a widely read text that purports to represent the interests of a particular population, *AARP The Magazine* actively attempts to configure ideologies of aging. AARP’s editorial texts remain reminiscent of nineteenth-century aging manuals, which, like conduct, etiquette, and other self-help texts, seek to shape readers’ tastes and behaviors, as well as to provide advice and inspiration about getting older. As part of these efforts, *AARP The Magazine* represents and recommends literate activity for aging adults. In AARP’s curriculum of aging, as represented in its print magazine, the primary work of literacy is to assist in tracking and repairing the aging body.

Echoing the discourses of American self-help literature since Andrus’s time as editor, *AARP The Magazine* urges readers to take charge of later life, including health, family, finances, spirituality, and national welfare. Featured most prominently, however, is a directive to take charge of the aging body. For instance, the magazine calls on readers to supplement professional medical care with self-care in articles such as “Calling Dr. Feel-Good,” which recommends ways for readers to reduce stress without doctors, for example to “crack a joke” or “walk it out” (Wooldridge). These and other self-help rhetorics offer directives on how to age well in the twenty-first century. Following a particular habit of aging-manual writers, AARP defends old age through “the recitation of its accomplishments” (Cole 143) by citing celebrities, marathoners, and senior Olympians, and by printing photos of youthful-looking older adults with few wrinkles, strong white teeth, and thick heads of hair. In this way, AARP offers inspirational stories of people who, by AARP’s standards, are aging successfully, with “success” often measured in bodily terms, as in articles about older super-athletes (Goodson; Hise), or news about celebrities, such as Clint Eastwood, who “show no signs of slowing down or losing traction” (qtd. in Hochman 24). Indeed, as former AARP contributor Susan Jacoby claims, AARP underscores the experiences of the “young old” and the exceptional “old old,” usually ignoring the majority of older adults (19). Such references to youthfulness attempt to establish a positive model for aging that places emphasis on physicality, creating personal goals that demand the money, time, and technology such youthful physiques might require.
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Although the language of self-help can be affirming in that it helps readers to envision their own agency and possibilities for transformation (Grodin), it can also have detrimental effects. Marking “normal” bodies as unfit, discourses of self-help encourage disenfranchised readers to take personal responsibility, “to see themselves as objects,” as Victoria DeFrancisco writes of women self-help readers, “and to define their bodies as possessions, finely tuned machines, or enemies” in order to uphold social norms (109). Through what Michel Foucault calls “technologies of the self,” the targeted readers of self-help are urged to accept the text’s ideas about what constitutes a normal or good life and self, and to expend serious amounts of time and energy on policing the self—especially, as in the case of AARP, on policing the body. In such an effort, AARP writers advise readers to carefully consider food choices (Oz), how they move (Crandell), and even what they wear (Redford).

Generally situated within the genre of self-help and the subgenre of the aging manual, AARP The Magazine embodies the purposes for reading that AARP appears to recommend for older adults. In so many ways—more of which I demonstrate in what follows—AARP writers assume that a dedication to bodily protection and repair is the sole motivation for reading in later life. Moreover, the reading-for-health mandate goes beyond the pages of the magazine. Occasionally, this policing of the body directly recruits writing activity, as in advice given to keep dieting journals (Gotthardt), to write a diary or novel in order to promote brain health (Doraiswamy 42), and to write down health goals (Fischer). AARP The Magazine also takes aim at its readers’ broader literacy habits through the promotion of books on body and health maintenance. The 2009 and 2010 issues of the magazine featured many books that could be categorized as aging manuals, including Passages (Sheehy), Staging Your Comeback (Hopkins), You Staying Young (Roizen and Oz), and The Blue Zones (Buettner).

The body is a central organizing trope for twenty-first-century aging manuals, including those promoted by AARP. For example, makeup artist Christopher Hopkins—the expert behind AARP’s 2009 makeover contest—states that the goal for older women’s cosmetic care is for the outer body to match an “authentic” identity. As he writes in Staging Your Comeback, “There is something magical that happens when you look right, when you say, ‘That’s so me!’ You stand taller, and your best self seems to come out naturally” (28). Although AARP’s effort to make clear that older women (and men) have a right to feel beautiful is in some ways commendable in the face of a youth-obsessed beauty culture, the resulting changes in hair, clothing, and makeup suggest that beauty means creating a high-maintenance, expensive, and (still) youthful appearance—a habit that points once again to AARP’s commercialist ties and middle-class sensibilities. In order to feel like an “authentic self,” one must police the body at all times, lest a dowdy silhouette, a shaggy haircut, or other signs of aging appear. It is important to point out here that AARP did not promote
Hopkins’s book only by offering a short review or casually mentioning the title; as it has done with other aging manuals, AARP undertook a major promotional initiative that recruited the actual participation of AARP members, some of whom were given on-camera makeovers. For AARP, such initiatives seem to provide appropriate information for older Americans not only to read, but also to physically embody.

Through this review of recent issues of *AARP The Magazine*, I do not intend to suggest that all AARP readers—or readers of any self-help text, for that matter—engage in uncritical readings of *AARP The Magazine* and necessarily follow its recommendations for lifestyle or literacy. Certainly, as Kelly Coyle and Debra Grodin would argue, many readers bring complex interpretations of both the magazine and its recommended readings, just as they would to any other self-help literature. However, even if a reader isn’t directly persuaded by a particular piece of advice or representation offered by AARP, I agree with Coyle and Grodin’s assessment that reading self-help texts necessarily involves identity work, as self-help texts actively and forcefully attempt to shape readers’ thoughts and behaviors (62). In considering such texts, I contend that the literacy practices and activities recommended by AARP have, even if in small or subtle ways, an impact on aging identities. Older adults who read AARP’s serial aging manual encounter, even if they ultimately reject, a text asking that they identify as older primarily through problems with their bodies. Although the biological process of aging entails cellular breakdown, it is a mistake to constrain discussions of aging to biomedical definitions of old age. Especially given the broad age range included in AARP audiences, AARP does a disservice to its members by asking them to identify as older primarily through the experience of bodily decay. In a more in-depth rhetorical analysis of a broader selection of AARP texts, I next examine the implications of this method of identification for technological literacies, and thus for the potential development of newer literacies in later life.

**Rhetorics of Gerontechnology: AARP and Technological Literacy**

As a further extension of its long-held interest in keeping aging bodies at the center of its members’ attention, AARP’s self-help discourse and curriculum of aging present a particular attitude toward technologies in the lives of older adults. Regularly, AARP adopts a popular move for producing (and profiting from) technologies marketed toward older adults, which relies heavily on the widely familiar idea that “old age is a problem” (Gullette 7) that is best resolved “through willpower, aided by science, technology, and expertise” (Cole xxii). Thus, “technologies for seniors” marks a belief that technologies in the lives of older adults are primarily about bodily repair and protection. I call discourses representing such beliefs *rhetorics of gerontechnology*, borrowing a neologism from a nascent field by the same name.
Gerontechnology emerged in the early twenty-first century as a transdisciplinary field for shaping new and developing technologies to support the growing senior population (Bouma). The stated values of the International Society for Gerontechnology include providing support for aging adults’ social ambitions and “enhancing their dignity.” In practice, much of the field’s work emphasizes medical technologies, treatment compliance, and accessibility—projects that figure older adults’ primary technological needs as related to disability and pathology. Regardless of the Society’s social goals, what gets most public press are the gerontechnologies that promise easy profits because they speak readily to the idea that aging is a body problem; these technologies include wearable GPS trackers for Alzheimer’s patients, telemedicine systems to monitor older patients, and other “machines to the rescue” (Taylor). Although such innovations may revolutionize geriatric care and, in many cases, help older adults sustain a higher quality of life, they represent only one way that technologies might be taken up in older adults’ lives, displacing other potential social, cultural, or even spiritual meanings and uses of technology. Likewise, when AARP has addressed technology in recent publications, it has usually done so to proclaim technology’s ability to repair, protect, or assist aging bodies—for example, when its texts hailed “Medical screenings that can save your life” (Fallik) or presented a feature article on how “hearing loop” technologies assist hard-of-hearing passengers on New York subways (Gandel).

To capture these dominant rhetorics of aging and technology, I turn to regularly published and updated AARP texts that operate through or directly discuss technology in the everyday context of later adulthood: AARP The Magazine, the organization’s technology page at AARP.org, AARP’s official Facebook page, and AARP’s Twitter page. Through a systematic survey of these four media, I archived and reviewed rhetorical units, isolated based on the visual layout of the page or screen (Wysocki); the units include a wide range of genres and modes: articles with images, advertisements, linked Web pages, videos, reported interviews, and so forth. In all cases, my goals of analysis were (1) to identify where and how often AARP represents technology in general to its audience of older adults; (2) to identify more specifically where AARP represents literacy technologies to older adults; and (3) to assess how technologies are presented to that audience in relation to technological literacy.

**Texts**

AARP’s magazine and website possess the broadest level of outreach through wide circulation. The bimonthly AARP The Magazine boasts the longest history of all AARP publications and claims to be the “world’s largest circulation magazine,” reaching nearly 24.5 million in circulation in the United States in 2009 (Magazine Publishers of America). Also a relatively long-standing media source, the AARP website was
established in the mid-1990s and currently draws over 2 million visitors per month (AARP, “AARP Interactive”). The audience for both texts likely includes older adults across the spectrum of technological literacy, ranging from early-adopters to magazine-only readers who have not yet incorporated extensive use of digital media into their everyday practices. In my analysis of the magazine, I reviewed twelve consecutive issues of 2009 and 2010, all published under editor Nancy Perry Graham.10 The website, when analyzed in June 2010, was organized by a tabbed menu of thirteen different subject areas. In order to better target technology-related discourse, I reviewed Web content organized under the “technology” tab; these thirteen subjects, however, were used in categorizing the other AARP media content (see analysis that follows).

Capitalizing on the recent wave of adults joining social media services (Lenhart; Madden; Madden and Zickuhr), AARP has also established its own Facebook profile page and an official Twitter account. As of July 2010, AARP’s Facebook fan page had gathered over 14,000 fans, and its Twitter profile claimed nearly 1,500 followers. (It is unclear how many subscribers are actually older adults, as nonmembers of AARP are permitted to join the Facebook page and subscribe as AARP followers on Twitter.) During the study, AARP updated its Facebook status approximately twice per day and tweeted anywhere from 5 to 100 times per day. From April 1 through May 31, 2010, I archived Facebook updates and tweets created and published by appointed AARP microbloggers, excluding tweets that were direct replies to a single Twitter user.

Analysis

In order to identify the contexts of AARP’s discussion of technology for older audiences, I first categorized all primary rhetorical units from the magazine, Facebook, and Twitter based on their subject content (AARP.org texts were already preselected under the “technology” subject heading, so did not need to be further coded by subject). The categories were adapted from the list of thirteen subjects on the AARP website’s navigation menu: (1) health, (2) money, (3) work, (4) personal growth, (5) politics and society, (6) relationships, (7) home and garden, (8) food, (9) travel, (10) entertainment, (11) technology, (12) giving back (volunteerism), and (13) member benefits. I added a “phatic chat” category to the list to account for social media updates that functioned as phatic communion: utterances that make a social gesture rather than provide information (Malinowski 315), such as “Good morning, tweeps!” The results of this subject coding are illustrated in figure 1 below.

Despite AARP’s long-standing mission to promote a sense of dignity, independence, and purpose among older adults, the most Andrus-like categories of “politics and society” and “personal growth” were underrepresented in the magazine and on
Facebook. Instead, health, money, and entertainment consistently ranked as a top priority in terms of sheer quantity of media space. When it came to texts featuring technology as a central subject, *AARP The Magazine* had little to offer. Not surprisingly, however, Twitter and Facebook had more to say about technology, often linking to Facebook news or information about Twitter in metadiscussions of social media technologies. On Twitter, for example, technology became the central topic for several days when AARP microbloggers tweeted frequently from a social media conference.

In the second phase of coding, I identified all references to technologies within all rhetorical units in the magazine and social media. Although *technology* is an elusive term that can range in meaning from simply “tool” to a shifting set of human processes (Haas xii), this project sampled discourse in which objects, practices, and designs were presented as new or newsworthy by AARP. While this coding definition did include the kinds of digital technologies used for reading and writing practices, it also included other kinds of “new” technologies, which, in this case, were primarily assistive, medical, and safety devices and pharmaceuticals. Defined broadly, technology was, in fact, referenced regularly in AARP texts: about one-fifth of all magazine and Facebook rhetorical units and nearly one-third of all tweets referenced technology in some way. In short, readers of AARP texts receive regular exposure to technology talk through AARP’s curriculum of aging. However, technologies were not—with the exception of some Twitter work—consistently represented in activities beyond health, money management, and pop culture entertainment.
Further confirming the consistent association of technology and medicalized bodies, my analysis of AARP advertising categorized 411 print ads from all of the 2009 and 2010 issues of AARP The Magazine. Nearly one-quarter of the ads promoted assistive technologies, such as Hoveround electric wheelchairs, Life Alert emergency notification systems, and disability-accessible vehicles. An additional 14 percent of advertising was dedicated to bodily treatments, such as erectile dysfunction devices and pharmaceuticals, and a smaller portion of advertising (9 percent) represented media technologies—most commonly cell phones and the Bose sound system (no ads included computers or software). However, even media or home-use technology ads were regularly configured in the language of gerontechnology by promoting the product’s benefits for bodily assistance or repair. For instance, in advertising the Doro PhoneEasy for Boomers by touting its “Large, bright screen & text,” “Loud and clear sound,” and “Big raised buttons,” Consumer Cellular reminds AARP readers of the inseparability of age and disability, rather than suggesting the social or emotional benefits of cell phone use that we might see represented in ads for broader (that is, younger) audiences.

Having captured the larger, quantitative picture of how often and in what context AARP mentioned technologies, I was prepared to conduct a focused, in-depth analysis of rhetorical units relevant to technological literacy. In order to determine how AARP offered rhetorics of gerontechnology that might reinforce resistance toward technological literacy among its audience members, I reviewed each technology-related unit and noted emerging patterns that characterized AARP’s rhetorical positioning of technology use. I understand these patterns to be a part of AARP’s overarching (though sometimes conflicting) curriculum of aging. In the following section, I outline the patterns of AARP’s textual unity-making and identification through a discussion of important principles of technological literacy currently ignored by AARP in particular, and by American culture in general.

Three Principles of Technological Literacy for Older Adults

Analysis of representative texts reveals that AARP frequently reinforces rhetorics of gerontechnology by presenting limited ideas about what technologies can mean for the lives of older adults. By way of responding to AARP’s rhetorical limitations, I identify three principles that AARP—and other elder advocates—should consider when representing the technological literacy of older adults.

1. “Technology for elders” means more than addressing the physical problems of aging.

With remarkable consistency, AARP writers highlighted connections between technologies and failing bodies, pitching technologies as solutions or adaptations to older
adults’ body problems. The representation of technology as oriented primarily toward health and disability concerns was most readily apparent in analysis of *AARP The Magazine*. In addition to the dearth of articles primarily about literacy technologies (only 6 percent), most articles that did include technology (broadly defined) as a topic of interest either were explicitly about health, or else described technologies in the medicalized context of the aging body. In a representative example, the May–June 2010 issue included forty-three articles, six mentioning technologies. Of those six, three discussed medical technologies (pharmaceuticals and treatments), one offered a discount on a home security system, and the remaining two mentioned technology in relation to billing fraud and social etiquette.

When encouraged at all in the magazine, the use of digital technology was often constrained to body repair, disability assistance, or damage prevention. In March–April 2010, an artistic rendition of the findings of an AARP-sponsored survey of Baby Boomers depicted nine technological innovations, of which four (exercise clothes, health-record implants, smart houses, motion-sensor video games) promoted better health and safety, and two (cell-phone projection and domestic robots to help “load the dishwasher”) were assistive (AARP, “Future Tech” 70). In May–June 2010, readers were encouraged to consider the use of technologies to communicate with their doctors (Ponchione 19). This pattern is consistent with AARP’s print advertising, with its leading advertising clients including Acorn Stairlifts, Life Alert, Loud ‘N Clear hearing devices, and other gerontechnology brands.

As with the magazine, AARP’s other media promoted technologies in relation to body care and repair. As evidenced by the frequency of health tips and topics in AARP Facebook updates (about one-third of all Facebook updates were health related), AARP microbloggers set up the group’s social media as a kind of health-focused gerontechnology, used for sharing tips on weight loss (AARP, “Check out”), receiving warnings about taking aspirin every day (AARP, “Do you”), or gathering facts about Alzheimer’s disease (AARP, “Does Alzheimer’s”).

In *Aging Literacies*, Crow highlights a crucial tension plaguing designers of new media texts: the seeming incompatible goals of creating sophisticated texts that respect the audience’s intelligence and curiosity, and designing accessible texts that account for the physical and cognitive challenges that commonly present themselves with advancing age. I would further add that, in addressing the difficult balance between over-accommodation and under-accommodation, it is important to recognize that aging and disability, though certainly related, are not one and the same. This, I find, is a message yet to be learned by AARP; although the organization doesn’t generally fail in its own (limited) digital design work, its practices of advertising media technologies as “senior-friendly” suggests that technologies must be, above all else, appropriate for disabled bodies in order to be considered valuable to older users (see, for example, Gandel; Greenburg; AARP, “Sweet Spots”). Although AARP’s
Twitter activity was less prone to emphasize the repair model of technology, it did occasionally reaffirm the repair metaphor in the midst of rich talk about emerging technologies by emphasizing ease of use. In one notable instance, AARP uncritically retweeted (forwarded) a message about “iPad apps for Seniors” (Carpenter, “RT @ ElderGadget”), linking to an article about a digital version of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The article explains, “While the story is one designed for children, seniors will definitely appreciate the ingenuity of the app and share the story with children or grandchildren. The text appears clear and easy to read, and the navigation arrows allow for an easy page-turning experience” (ZBarangan).

As in ads for the Doro PhoneEasy and other “senior-friendly” tech products, emphasis on ease of use suggests that technologies for older adults must be simplistic and perhaps childish in order to adapt to older adults’ failing bodies (and minds). Further, such efforts must encourage seniors to buy separate technologies made exclusively for their age group (as though the regular technology would never serve older users), thus fostering a senior niche market. In critiquing the implication that senior-friendly must always mean simplistic, I do not intend to critique efforts to streamline technologies in ways that are accessible and welcoming to new users, young or old. Being certain that technology is user-friendly, intuitive, and adaptive to a range of needs is crucial for any technology. Yet it is perhaps equally crucial for newcomers to technological literacy practices to envision other relationships between their bodies, their lives, and new technologies. Unless potential users are able to envision new technologies as possibly meaningful (more than just “easy”), it is less likely that a non-user will take sufficient interest to meet the challenges of learning to use new literacy technologies.

2. *Elders can be critical users, not just fearful victims, of literacy technologies.*

Occasionally, AARP extended the repair metaphor of gerontechnology and promoted discourses of fear, reinforcing the widespread idea that old people are, or else should be, afraid of new technologies. Fear of technology, particularly communication technologies, is in many ways a response to the physical problems of aging: anxiety about being harmed or victimized follows a sense of physical or mental vulnerability in old age.

Although such cases occurred in all four media, several egregious cases were reproduced on AARP.org, which featured “Confessions of a Facebook Addict” (Delahanty), “May I Have My Attention, Please?” (Read), “False Friends on Facebook” (Kirchheimer), and other cautionary tales that paint a threatening picture of digital media technologies, particularly social media, as monsters that destroy personal relationships, waste time, and change everyday life for the worse—rather than representing the possible ways that technologies might be meaningful for older adults. After reading the story of Bryan Hutberg, who became a victim of “a scam that is
increasingly occurring on websites like Facebook, MySpace and class reunion sites” when his Facebook account was hacked and used to swindle hundreds of dollars from his friends (Kirchheimer), it is unlikely that many reluctant users of social media would be inspired to try. With the exception of Twitter bloggers, AARP writers spent more time cautioning readers against the potential dangers of technologies than describing how they might bring social or intellectual enrichment to everyday life—as millions of regular social media users have already discovered.

That older people are afraid of or stubbornly resistant to learning or experiencing new things is, of course, a durable stereotype (Butler; Morrell, Mayhorn, and Echt; Palmore). However, researchers have found that some older adults do experience fear and anxiety when working with new technologies (McKee and Blair) and, as with any age group, older adults are often victims of cybercrime (Internet Crime Complaint Center). For the same reasons that parents and schools should recognize a responsibility to educate young people about safe Internet use, it is certainly within the purview of AARP to advocate for informed use of communication and information technologies. In fact, such efforts might participate in generating the “rhetorical literacy” Stuart Selber calls for in the digital age, thus fostering the potential for older adults to become “reflective producers of technology” (182). However, the imbalance between AARP’s representation of reasons to adopt and reasons not to adopt technological literacies could potentially curb the motivation of would-be learners altogether, thus quelling opportunities for deeper critical engagement and active participation.

3. Cultivating technological literacy means reaching beyond audiences of eager-adopters.

AARP’s very presence in social media represents an important effort to reach out to older audiences who may be exploring technological literacy practices for the first time. AARP bloggers are especially active on Twitter, not only promoting AARP services and events or retweeting aging-related news, but also modeling affective, embodied technological literacy practices. Tammy G, one of the most active AARP bloggers during the period of study, regularly shared personal information in her tweets: “Went to the farmers market today & picked up mushrooms and asparagus. What are you up to? #Weekend ^TG”; “is cheering on her friend @sarahstanley who’s running the Boston Marathon today. Anyone else know someone running? ^TG.”

Such models of social media use may be valuable in helping newcomers to see the personal and affective as well as commercial and professional value in the technological literacy practices of social networking. However, these messages are not necessarily connecting with the right audience, as AARP regularly “preaches to the choir” by doing its best literacy advocacy within communities of elders who have already expressed interest in social media use. Compared with other popular media (including Facebook), Twitter reaches virtually no one who would likely be considered
among statistics of the so-called gray divide: according to Tammy G, only AARP’s most techno-savvy “cusp” members use Twitter (“AARP isn’t”). Although AARP serves its community well by maintaining a presence at the cutting edge of social media, it should also seek to represent technological literacy practices in venues most likely to reach audience members who might have reservations about first ventures into virtual communities, as well as those who are less likely to have easy access to technologies in the first place.

Yet, the publication reaching the largest audience of elder adults, *AARP The Magazine*, has the least to say about technological literacy, choosing instead to focus its occasional technology talk around issues of AARP self-promotion, health, and money, and only calling attention to Twitter twice during the period of study (Bloosten et al. 61; Fallow). Truly reaching out to elder adults means more than establishing a welcoming presence online; it also means finding ways to actively bring elder adults in, to help them to see that technologies might be useful and meaningful beyond the ability to preserve or repair the aging body, and to help them seek out the necessary resources for accessing those technologies. Above all, reaching out means representing what real older adults already do with literacy technologies, and what technological literacy has meant for their lives.

**Beyond Repair**

Facing a diverse audience brought together by birth date and American residence, AARP attempts, as Burke might have said, to “confront the implications of division” (Burke 22) and argue for the unity of AARP members. Through its texts, AARP attempts to reach out and identify with a massive audience by relying on rhetorics of gerontechnology that, while familiar and highly marketable, also carry narrow ideas of what meaningful activities and pursuits of later life might include. Although these AARP texts are not necessarily persuasive to all readers, they are at least pervasive. Rhetoric is often not simply a singular speech or text, but a “body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill” (Burke 26; original emphasis).

It is perhaps in part through the regular reinforcement of the belief that aging is a problem best solved through technological intervention that some older adults have difficulty seeing any other purpose for technology in their lives. Developing literacies to engage in a new semiotic domain, as James Gee describes, requires that learners are “willing to see themselves in terms of a new identity, that is, to see themselves as the kind of person who can learn, use, and value the new semiotic domain” (original emphasis; 54). As many older adults read and potentially internalize AARP’s self-help advice and its efforts to unite an older audience based on physical failure and rhetorics of gerontechnology, it may become harder to envision themselves as savvy
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literacy technology users, who can both benefit from and have a hand in shaping the affordances of twenty-first-century literacies.

Although I do find that technological literacy has the potential to enrich lives through social involvement and even (for some) to secure rhetorical power, I do not uphold a “literacy myth” that technological literacy could bring only hopeful outcomes for older adults, or that positive outcomes will be shared by all. I will affirm, however, that AARP’s curriculum of aging and its implications for older adults’ technology use are a reminder of the need to examine the rhetorics of aging and literacy in addition to addressing issues of access, accessibility, and training. While we must of course continue to support the development of literacy-related and other technologies for learners of all ages, we must also be critical of how the rhetorical context of those technologies might create or reinforce negative stereotypes in ways that counteract the gains of increased mobility, independence, and agency. Until rhetorics aimed toward aging adults represent technologies and literacies in terms that do not feature body failure as a defining characteristic, it will remain difficult to expand the social roles of older adults and the meanings of old age and aging.

Literacy researchers and teachers can continue to contribute to a critical awareness of rhetorics of aging and literacy, and—more important—to consider how these rhetorics circulate. We might ask, how do age-based assumptions about literacy manifest within our classrooms? Our departments? Our everyday lives? What opportunities for community-based literacy projects might support cross-generational collaborations, potentially fostering new understandings of aging? Further, in our research, we must seek opportunities for recognizing and talking about the meanings that older adults already make in their technological literate practices. We must consider, who and what counts as literate in digital times? To begin to answer such questions, we too must think beyond repair, and must expand efforts to recognize, hold value for, and represent the technological literacies already burgeoning within communities of elders.

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Notes

1. I adopt the term technological literacy, as opposed to digital literacy, computer literacy, or electronic literacy. Selfe and Hawisher employ the term technological literacy to refer to literacy in online environments; I intend to leave open the connection between literate activity and technologies, which can include pre-digital-age technologies.

3. AARP was the focus of a 1978 60 Minutes exposé, in which the organization came under fire for its relationship with Colonial Penn Life Insurance Company—a relationship established by Leonard Davis, who was “honorary president” of AARP and founder of Colonial Penn (Morris 39). After a lawsuit and a congressional investigation, AARP extricated itself from dealings with Colonial Penn.

4. The greedy geezer stereotype reproduces the belief that older adults in the United States share a selfish desire to prioritize aid for elder populations, even at the cost of funding for future generations. Much of this stereotype surrounds health care debates (Surowiecki).

5. Much of the self-help discourse found in AARP The Magazine echoes the discourses of women’s magazines that construct femininity according to conservative norms—one needs only to glance at the cover lines on women’s magazines such as Good Housekeeping, Cosmopolitan, or Redbook to note comparable trends in body maintenance, for instance. As Joke Hermes finds in her study of women’s magazine readers, many value the sense of “connected knowing” offered by such texts, providing “material for comparison” to their own everyday lives (149)—a process that I recognize as rhetorical identification. Readers are not necessarily uncritical of such encounters.

6. Further, as Micki McGee argues, the “makeover culture” and self-help literature often create more social anxieties than they soothe, reinforcing a sense of perpetual inadequacy (18).

7. The official journal Gerontechnology lists potential audience members as “designers, architects, standards developers, builders, engineers, marketers, manufacturers, medical doctors, pharmacists, decision makers, and related professionals in the health, social, business and technology professions” (International Society for Gerontechnology).

8. The AARP texts analyzed here also include moves that support technological literacy. Further, AARP works to establish representation of its members in new and emerging technological environments (for example, Twitter). Thus, although I remain critical of its problematic rhetorics of gerontechnology, it is not my intention to represent AARP as wholly negligent or silent on the subject of technological literacy.

9. Excluded from this study is AARP Bulletin, a print text that focuses primarily on the organization’s lobbying activities and political interests, but which also contains material similar to articles found in AARP The Magazine. Because virtually all information printed in the Bulletin is reproduced on the AARP website, I have analyzed only website content for the purposes of this study.

10. Tellingly, Graham previously worked as a journalist for Fortune, Money, and People magazines, and won an Investigative Reporters and Editors Award for an article on medicine (AARP, “AARP Experts”).

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