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Home Telecare and the Elderly Domesticated



The increasing amount of people over 65 years in Europe has led authorities and researchers to wonder insistently how to achieve a 'successful aging'. New assistive technologies and new discourses on aging are emerging in response to this question. The answer does not only 'solve' the issue of aging populations; they are also creating new challenges of their own. This study examines how home telecare services deal with one of this challenges: the conciliation, in practice, of two different forms of 'aging well': 'aging in place' and 'active aging'.

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Home telecare is a remote care service which is used in Spain since the 90s. This service is mainly oriented to the attention of older people living alone in their homes and people in situation of dependency. In recent years, a group of researchers from the Department of Social Psychology at the UAB has carried out several ethnographic studies on the implementation of telecare technologies in the Spanish context, and its impact on older people's everyday life.

In a recently published article, the researchers' attention has focused on a paradoxical effect of telecare: in a context in which the policies and programs fostering 'active aging' have become very popular, telecare predominantly promotes a form of 'aging at home' that emphasizes the permanence of the user in his/her house. In recent decades, the discourses on active aging and

aging in place have begun to change entrenched stereotypes about old age and aging. The authorities and industry are confident that these two forms of 'aging well' can be promoted by using telecare technologies, domotics, robotics and telemedicine. However, our study shows that this is not necessarily the case.

The study was conducted primarily through ethnographic research techniques. Interviews and focus groups with telecare users, formal and informal caregivers, social and health professionals and telecare professionals were also carried out. The data analysis shows that telecare services work in promoting an ideal of 'safe' later life which requires spending a significant part of the day at home. This way, the service can warrant that their technologies are properly fulfilling its function. The users' conformity to this ideal of secure later life is achieved through a set of practices including the transformation of the elderly's self-perception (older people start to see themselves as fragile and in need of care); learning new routines that incorporate self-care and tele-care in daily life; and the use of assistive technologies that only work at home.

The above-mentioned practices are deployed by telecare personnel, but also by user's relatives, caregivers and social and health professionals. They are also incorporated by users themselves. The outcome is a sort of 'domestic' - or 'domesticated' - person whose lifestyle is inconsistent with an active way of life. Indeed, the study shows how older people who describe themselves as 'active' resist the use of home telecare as well as the modality of 'aging in place' that the service seems to prescribe. These results draw attention to the fact that a given technology may have a number of meanings for different types of users. This variability in meanings is an issue to be taken into account in technological design processes. That way it would be possible to create products which are consistent with different forms of 'aging well'.

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