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The internet comes of age

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Silver surfers, defined as internet users over the age of 65, spend more time on the web (42 hours a week) than any other group, according to the annual report of [Ofcom](#), the communications regulator.

Good. Now let's get rid of them: not the people, the phrase. It is as patronising as it is counterproductive to call someone a silver surfer, conjuring up a picture of granny actually being able to type a few words into Google and then press carriage return all on her own. A lot of today's over-65s, let alone the over-50s, lived through the personal computer revolution of the early 1980s, sparked by the arrival of the BBC B computer and the Sinclair Spectrum, either actively themselves or through their children.

Now, with more time on their hands and in many cases more money, they are the natural beneficiaries of the innovations that are now sweeping the web, especially social networking sites, such as [Facebook](#), which have so far not taken off for older people.

Yet there is still a lot to be done. Over-50s may account for nearly 30% of all time spent online, but they represent 41% of the population. So they are still badly under-represented.

The biggest barrier for poor people is that, although prices have been coming down fast, broadband still unaffordable for many, particularly poorer pensioners. A lot of older people still do not realise that once you have fixed up a broadband connection (which admittedly can be dodgy with some service providers) it is very easy to buy or sell things on the auction space eBay (the most popular one in the UK); to buy a book from [Amazon](#) or the wonderful [abebooks](#); or to Google or email.

But the biggest opportunity for older people is to colonise one of the new social websites, of which Facebook is the most suitable. It is all the rage among certain strata of younger people, but it is when people grow older and more socially isolated, as relationships at work fade and the difficulty of travelling increases, that they are most in need of them.

Older people don't want a ghetto created for them that says "If you are old, come here": that would make social isolation from the rest of the world self-fulfilling. They do want to keep up with old friends, but they also want to make contact with other people of whatever age with whom they share a common interest. Age may be something you have in common but it is not a common interest.

Social sites also offer tantalising political opportunities. A third of people eligible to vote are over 55, and they are twice as likely to vote as younger people. Networks such as Facebook, with subgroups (or lobbies) that have the potential to attract millions of members who can be contacted instantly, offer a possible solution to the age-old difficulty of organising older people. Think what a debate over the size of the old-age pension would be like if millions of older people formed an online lobby to influence the government, threatening to switch their votes.