



Older people

'Computers are marvellous!': older people embrace internet in lockdown



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Before the pandemic struck, 79-year-old Jim Whelan barely used his computer. The online world was a mystery and an irrelevance to him. A year on, however, Whelan can give computer geeks half his age a run for their money.

“Although I had been online before the pandemic, it was just the occasional answering of emails. Now I’m a past master at all sorts of amazing things,” said Whelan, a former Coronation Street actor who before the pandemic used to travel around local community groups to give talks about his 50 years in the acting profession.

“I went from not even knowing what PowerPoint was to recording four 40-minute programmes that I can send out to groups across the UK who want to hear all my Coronation Street gossip,” he said. “It’s amazing, really. I’ve created these

programmes on my own, without a director, cameraman, lighting or the many people who go to make a TV show. I've done it all on my own, with only a laptop."

Whelan, who appeared in Velvet Goldmine with Ewan McGregor and Snake Eyes with Nicolas Cage, has also taught himself to record auditions for acting jobs and send them off to casting directors. "I've even got [my own website](#) now, created for me by a friend, which I have linked my email signature up to," he added.

"Learning about the endless possibilities of the online world has been a lifesaver to me. I have learned so much about the modern world just in the past year. It's opened the UK up to me: I can now give talks via Zoom to groups in Scotland, whereas before I was limited to the 15 miles around where I live because that's where I could drive to, to give the talk in person."

Whelan is not alone. The pandemic has encouraged older people across the country to confront their insecurities about venturing online and discover its endless possibilities.

Rita, 84, didn't own a computer before the pandemic. "My daughters bought it for me so that I could do online shopping instead of going to the shops myself," she said. "It took a bit of getting used to, but I'm a practical person and not scared of new things, so after I'd got the hang of it I thought it was all rather wonderful."

Having mastered online shopping, Rita decided to tackle Zoom when her choir began having online rehearsals. "I then decided to explore what else the online world had to offer and found the [University of the Third Age](#)," she said. "I've been doing all sorts of interesting courses in subjects I've always wanted to know more about but never quite got round to investigating. It's really transformed the experience of lockdown for me: I wasn't nearly as lonely or bored as I would otherwise have been because I had all these wonderful new worlds to explore."



▲ Syd Matthews Photograph: Supplied

Syd Matthews, 85, is now “enthralled” by the internet, whereas before the pandemic he had to ask his children how to turn his computer on.

“I was nervous of the internet before the pandemic,” he said. “I had never used Google or surfed the web. I’d decided, because of all the stories of scams you hear, that it was safer just not to get involved in that world at all. But when my local

Probus meetings moved online during the pandemic and after some encouragement from my younger friends, I began to explore and I must say, computers are marvellous!”

Matthews has mastered Zoom to the extent that he is the one now giving the presentations to his [Probus club in Cirencester](#). “I’m interested in family history and have realised that I can do so much research online,” he said. “It’s incredible what’s out there. I’m also interested in photography too and have found that I can take photos on my iPhone, upload them to the internet and manipulate them, edit them and enhance them in all sorts of interesting ways.”

Matthews said his newfound confidence with technology had opened his life up in other ways too. “Now I’m more confident with technology, I’ve discovered that I can link my hearing aid up to my iPhone and to the TV using Bluetooth, which is life-changing,” he said. “My learning curve has been extraordinary; it’s enhanced my lifestyle no end and when the pandemic is over I will certainly carry this knowledge over into my life going forward.”

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