

Preface: A Designed Dialogue—the Editor and the Users

Dear Reader,

Yes, it is nice to have the Head of an AAL funding unit, a science minister or even Barack Obama write a preface; giving a book, and in our case also the related project, a high standing. But let us face it: neither of them would really have much of knowledge nor much of heart and empathy regarding the contents. How could they possibly?

Thus, when I was pondering who should write such a preface I soon realized who would be the perfect authors, combining intimate knowledge with heart and empathy regarding the contents of this book: It is the users, the very active, interested and supportive group of elderly people who helped us make the SI-Screen/Elisa project such a success. They accompanied our innovation from the very start: From telling us what social interaction means to them to testing the third prototype in their own homes.

The theory infusing this collaboration and examples of its impact are addressed in various chapters of this book, but the actual voice of the elderly is hardly heard. So in what follows I “design” a short dialog as, or one may say instead of, a preface, summarizing some typical questions we asked and throwing in original answers of our valued collaborators. With this I like to devote the whole book to those whom we addressed in our project, and who helped us so much throughout the work on it. Thank you so much, dear users in Spain, and dear users in Germany.

“You told us you don’t use communication technologies much. Why is that so?”

“I’m afraid to touch something because my children work with computers and they tell me off if I change the configuration of something.”

“And it all changes from one day to the next; and you need the whole morning to re-learn everything.”

“But you appear to like communication? Why don’t you like the computer for that?”

“It’s not the same, it’s cold.”

“Many people are excluded by the Internet! It always says if you want to know more, please look it up on the Internet!”

“The non-verbal communication is very important. Technology cannot replace that.”

“For me, it is idiotic when people walk and at the same time talk on their mobile phones.”

“You said you did use communication technologies at times. Do you remember any positive experiences?”

“When my grandchildren stayed in Australia, I had more contact to them via Skype than I have today.”

“Yes, Skype is fantastic. But I do not know how to install it.”

“Before everybody had the possibility [to connect to the Internet], contacts to former colleagues were rare, because everybody was so busy. Maybe you would have called every second week, now you have contact every second day.”

“Ten years ago, I hated e-mail accounts, now I hate people who don’t have an e-mail account! It is the same with computers and the Internet.”

“And are there things you are really afraid of?”

“What I will not do is Facebook. You never know what happens with the data.”

“And I do not know what we want to do with the entire information flood.”

“I cannot establish contacts via the Internet—that is something for younger people.”

“I am still afraid of the computer, because I think: It will win against me!”

“Maybe you can also tell us about some specific experiences?”

“The worst ever was to reach the telephone hotline of the train.”

“PCs are frustrating—I do not find what I want, I do not see properly—and nobody has the patience to explain it to me.”

“PCs are dangerous—you can make a lot of mistakes and you will see them on the telephone bill.”

“Since the cable broke I do not have access to the Internet anymore.”

“Well, we have the idea to develop a social interaction device entirely tailored to your needs, interests, and wishes. What do you think about this, what would you like about it?”

“I would love to try it and to have the possibility to join [the Internet].”

“I have a friend who helps me with smaller problems with the computer via Team Viewer. But for larger problems, it would be nice to have a hotline that you can always call. I would even pay for this.”

“If I had internet, I would do that [booking flights] by myself.”

“It is good to have someone in my circle of friends, who is familiar with the Internet.”

“So, now you have tested our solution; even our third prototype. What do you think?”

“Before the test I was very skeptical, but then I was pleasantly surprised by the Elisa system and its possibilities!”

“It helps to find just the information I am interested in.”

“You can find somebody to go for a walk or something else—it is like an Elisa community.”

“Can you tell us about your most interesting experiences?”

“After three days I had learned all about the Elisa system. I think it is very good for people who don’t use computers.”

“At the beginning I had big problems, but then it got better and better and in the end I even had fun!”

“The way you move to other pages is really simple and the font size seems adequate.”

“And your final judgment?”

“I think Elisa could be a real chance to enlarge social contacts.”

“It is an opportunity to find other people with similar interests.”

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