

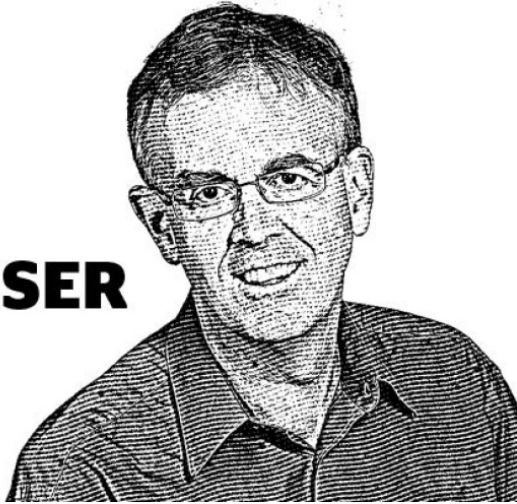
OLDER AND WISER: Making the Internet affordable to all

Question: Is the Internet a luxury or necessity?

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Older **AND WISER** Tom Carney



Older doesn't just mean wiser. It also means cheaper.

Yep, we're talking about the seniors discount here folks.

Not a senior? No worries. When it comes to getting in on the savings, 50 is the new 65.

Now, if we pushed the student discount up to the age of 49 no one would have to pay the full price for anything ever again. Just kidding.

Retailers offer a discount to seniors because it's good for business. They've figured out that seniors actually have money and in many cases more money than their 30-something kids.

Governments don't have to worry about making a profit. They're more focused on getting re-elected.

Reducing the discount for seniors using the BC Ferries system was a bit of a risky move by the provincial government. Eliminating the senior discount on property taxes would, in my opinion, be political suicide. And while governments around the world are increasing the age of eligibility to collect old age security in Canada, we've just rolled it back to the age of 65. That's good politics but it's not very good tax policy.

I'm not entirely comfortable with the notion that a person is entitled to a special deal or perk based simply on their age. Ageism works both ways. If you don't want to be treated like an "old" person then don't show up at a restaurant for dinner at 4 p.m. demanding a discount because you are a senior. And don't get me started on the issue of subsidizing taxes and user fees for "seniors" who can still afford them.

Let's be frank, if a senior is paying less, someone else is probably paying more.

Now with all that said here is a question from one of my readers: Is there an Internet service provider for people on a limited budget or any help from government to address the issue of Internet affordability?

Hmmm . . . perhaps it's time to consider a seniors discount for the Internet. The Affordable Access Coalition, a group of public policy consumer advocates and anti-poverty organizations, is one step ahead of me. They are currently petitioning the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) to subsidize access to Internet services for low-income and rural Canadians.

The problem there is that the CRTC does not regulate Internet retail rates in Canada. There are a few low-cost Internet pilot projects from the service providers targeting disadvantaged groups but the cost for the rest of us is likely headed higher.

The Seniors Advocate has floated the idea of the government offering low-interest loans to seniors to help them cover the costs of certain monthly expenses like utilities, home insurance and repairs until their death or the house is sold.

The NDP has proposed making hydro rates (and by extension other utilities I would think) cheaper for people with low incomes.

Here is the critical question. Is the Internet a luxury or a necessity? No one, to my knowledge, has died from losing their Internet connection for a day.

Cut people off from their Facebook account for a week or a month, well I'm not so sure.

It appears that some people are being priced out of being able to afford Internet service. How do we fix that? My guess is that will likely involve some form of government oversight or regulation.

Tom Carney is the former executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome.

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