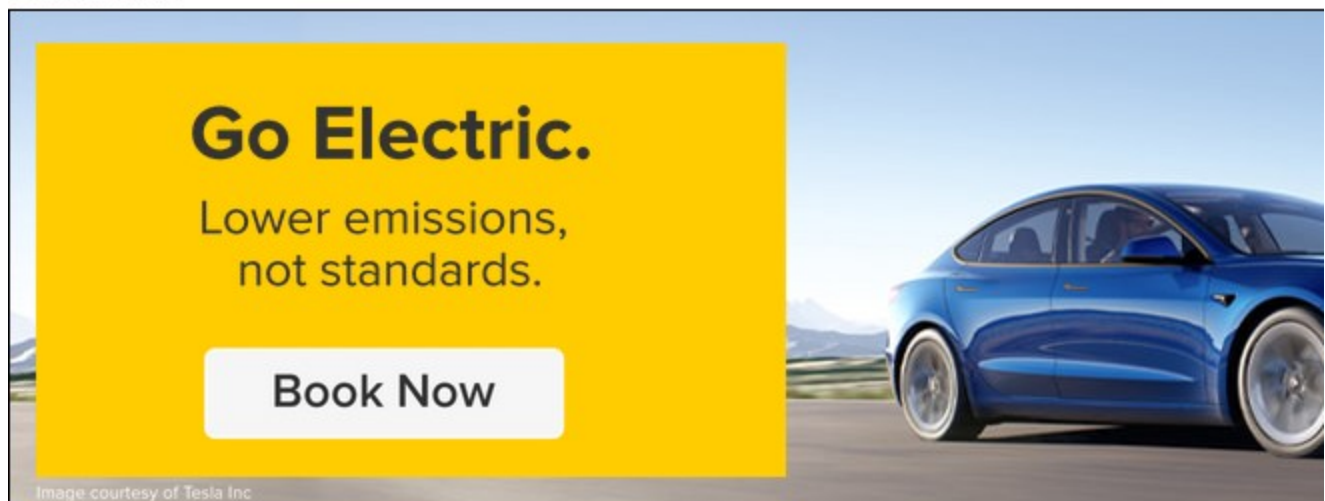




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Help the aged: From car parking to banking and GP visits, we must stop punishing the elderly for the crime of not being able to work an app, writes BARONESS ALTMANN

By [BARONESS ALTMANN FOR THE DAILY MAIL](#)

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The digital travails of a man called Chris Paphides, narrated in a series of poignant posts by his son Pete on social media this week, are a parable for our times.

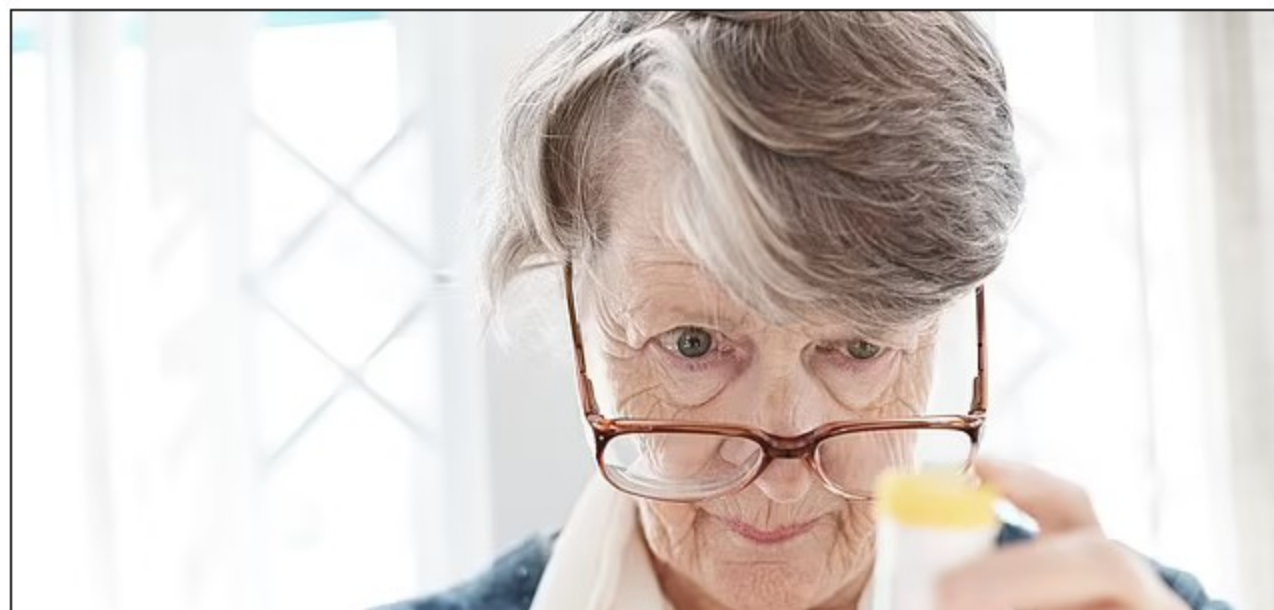
On arriving at the Greek Cathedral in [Birmingham](#) for a friend's memorial service, the 84-year-old was shocked to discover new parking arrangements which meant he could only leave his car if he paid by app or used an automated payment line.

In this age of 'computer says no', he could not get to grips with either of these options but, rather than miss the service, he decided to leave his car anyway.



Back home, he called his son to ask if he could help explain to the parking company what had happened and try to remedy the situation.

Nobody took any notice of Pete's explanations and it wasn't long before a fine landed on his father's doormat — a fine he will never be able to pay as he had sadly passed away in the interim, leaving his grieving son to navigate the labyrinthine administration involved in trying to have the penalty annulled.





'For centuries older generations have had to accommodate the advances taking place around them. Nonetheless, the speed of change in our digital world is unprecedented'

The episode is a disgrace and I wish I could say it was an isolated incident. Alas, it is as familiar to me as it is distressing, a small but all-too-real illustration of the struggles faced by so many of our precious older generation in a digitally obsessed age, when everything from paying your bills to making an appointment with your doctor needs to be done over the internet or via a smartphone app.

For those of us who are fully at home with both of these methods, this may not be a big deal, but it is quite the opposite for those who aren't.

The majority of those left behind by the drive to digitise even the most vital services are elderly or disabled. For assorted reasons they cannot — or do not feel confident enough — to embrace digital technology and, as a result, they find themselves excluded from accessing vital services.

And they represent a not insubstantial proportion of the population: last year, the Office for National Statistics reported that three million people were 'offline' — meaning they did not access the internet — more than two million of them aged 70-plus.

Even among mobile phone users, ten per cent don't own a smartphone, denying them the capacity to download the 'apps' with which so many companies seem to be entirely obsessed and increasingly foist on their customers in an effort to cut costs and increase their profits.

As a result, a large section of society is left feeling at best marginalised, at worst completely forgotten — not my words, but those of the writer of one of the many letters I receive each month as a result of my work championing the rights of older people.

When I was Pensions Minister in David Cameron's Conservative government in 2015, the Prime Minister wanted me to accept a new cross-Government role as Minister for Older People, and I was thrilled.

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Sadly, my department squashed the idea and there is still no government minister with specific responsibility for looking after the interests of older citizens. Yet that role is much-needed.

I constantly hear from older people who are fed up with organisations that trumpet their technological advances in the name of progress and efficiency but, in reality, are mostly cutting costs to please their shareholders while increasingly disadvantaging digitally excluded groups.

In my view, this is nothing less than discrimination.

How else to describe the plight of the lady who wrote to tell me she could no longer visit her local park because she can't use the new car-parking system, which — like the one that confronted Chris Paphides — requires you to download an app, which she can't do as she doesn't own a mobile phone.

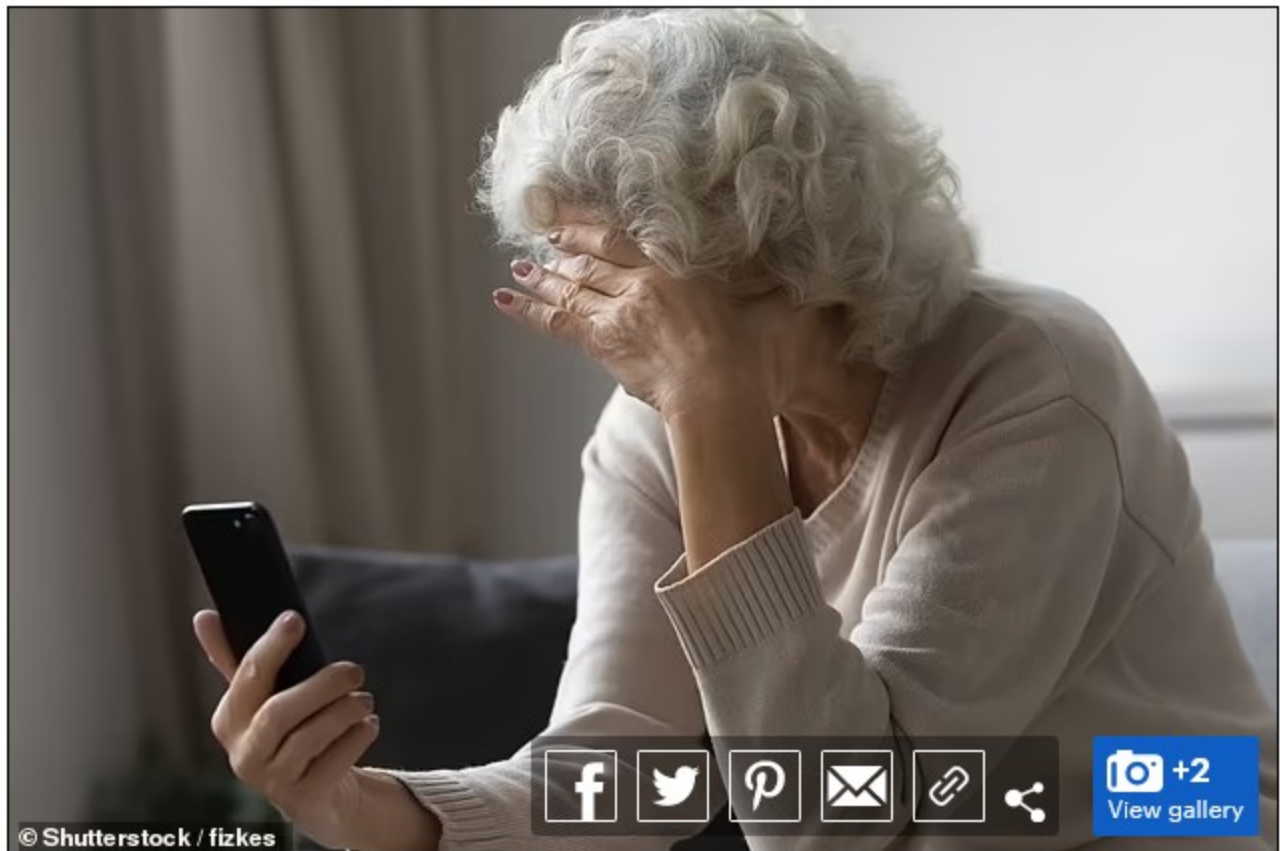
Or the 87-year-old who, befuddled by his bank's automated system, has to rely on a kindly neighbour to make a 30-mile round trip to his nearest bank to withdraw cash and pay his bills since his local branch closed.

Unrecognisable though this attitude may be to the younger generation, he just doesn't trust any form of online transaction.

Time and again these letters land on my desk, filled with every emotion from frustration to heartbreak, bewilderment to anger.

One woman wrote of her struggle to visit her ailing husband in hospital as she couldn't use the automated car park, forcing her to rely on often unavailable neighbours for lifts.

In her 70s, she would love to adopt the new technology but her arthritic fingers make it impossible for her to use a smartphone.



'I constantly hear from older people who are fed up with organisations that trumpet their technological advances in the name of progress and efficiency but, in reality, are mostly cutting costs to please their shareholders'

A lady in her 80s who lives alone and is almost blind contacted me in despair at the impossibility of engaging with almost anyone from her bank, and even from official bodies or major stores.

As she put it, the assumption is made that everyone in the country has a smartphone or an iPad and an array of apps to rely on.

'There is now no way you can pick up a phone, dial a number and be answered by a voice asking how they can help,' she wrote. 'Is this too much to ask?'

Apparently so, and never more than in the past two years: alongside the pandemic's many horrors was the sense of heightened isolation experienced by the elderly, many of whom found themselves locked out of the simple pleasures that gave their life structure and meaning, be it a visit to a café or a trip to the shops. The elderly have emerged from two years of on-and-off lockdowns to find those same cafes and shops have not restored previous services.

Meanwhile, having found a convenient excuse for limiting human interaction, public services from utility companies to GP surgeries seem determined to force everyone online, without making any provision for those who are incapable of doing so.

Many elderly people rely on simple human contacts for help with their queries or complaints. But all too often, the first point of contact is an automated telephone system designed to make it as difficult as possible to speak to an actual person.

Little wonder that the elderly — by and large a stoical generation, not inclined to kick up a fuss — feel marginalised and ignored, and sometimes feel they are being wished away as a troublesome inconvenience.

I don't want to suggest for a minute that these sentiments apply to everyone: I know ninety somethings who are incredibly technologically switched on and adaptable, including my 90-year-old mother, who, while far from a tech whiz, learnt how to email during lockdown, to the great surprise of her offspring.

Meanwhile, for many younger people and those working long hours, moving to digital is welcome time-saving progress.

This is not about resisting change. Life is a permanent state of transition and for centuries older generations have had to accommodate the advances taking place around them. Nonetheless, the speed of change in our digital world is unprecedented.

Progress should not be dressed up as improvement if, in reality, it leaves out millions of people.

Instead of prioritising profit, companies must consider the needs of their customers as a whole, rather than dumbing down to the lowest common and cost-effective denominator while abandoning so many good people.

As Pete Paphides put it at the end of his social media post, it is heartbreaking how difficult we have made it for the elderly to go about their daily business, 'terrorising' them for the crime of not knowing how to download an app.

It has to stop. We require urgent action to ensure the needs of those who can't participate in this brave new online world are taken into consideration — a belt-and-braces approach, as Dame Esther Rantzen put it yesterday, that combines access to smart technology with the opportunity for others to speak to a human being.

This cannot be too much to ask. After all, it has long been said that you can judge a society by how it treats its elderly and vulnerable. And by that reckoning, we are currently failing.

- Baroness Altmann is a former pensions minister.