

Podcast Orange – Episode 10

Confinement: How can we continue to socialise?

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A : Orange

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Introduction :

- Joe :

Faced with the coronavirus pandemic, countries have had to take extreme containment measures meaning that workspaces and offices around the world now lie empty.

Like almost everywhere else, the 500 journalists of French newspaper Le Monde are now working from home. One editorial at this 76 year old daily publication talks about how they needed to completely reinvent their working methods in only 48 hours.

Within half a day new workflows and tools were up and running, say the journalists. The editorial meeting at midday, normally attended by around 30 editors in the newsroom, happened via video conferencing apps.

Many of us are also experiencing a similar situation: Whether it's seeing inside the apartment of a colleague we didn't know very well, or the appearance of a child or animal during a meeting. Or even hearing an intimate conversation when a microphone is left on.

But as one Le Monde reporter says, deprived of on the ground sources, they "have never been further from their stories."

So - can digital ever really compensate for physical presence? How has the way we communicate with each other evolved over the past few days?

[Identité sonore]

- Joe :

Hello Chloe! Hello? Can you hear me? Wait, I'll turn on the video...

- Chloe :

Hello Joe!

- Joe :

Welcome to this second edition of the Memo dedicated to confinement. Today, we are going to talk to you about a subject which might seem light, but which has a considerable impact on each of us: how do we keep a link with others and the outside world when we are confined? And it starts with work, doesn't it Chloe, for those who are able to do their work away from an office.

- Chloe :

Yes, and the Guardian is questioning whether this sudden wave of working from home could be the start of a more permanent transition to distance working. "Lots of employees are even wondering why they were going to the office in the first place." writes the journalist. And it's a real boost for tech companies proposing collaborative tools. Startups like Slack and giants like Microsoft or Google are all mobilising to offer support to companies in this sudden shift towards working at a distance for a large part or even all of their employees.

And I read in Les Echos that a tool like Microsoft's Teams has already won 12 million users across the world in only a few days. The boss of Slack says that since the start of the confinement measures, they've seen the most productive few weeks their business has ever experienced.

- Joe :

Yes but the issue of keeping a link with each other and continuing to work together without seeing each other, is something that surely goes beyond digital tools.

- Chloe :

Yes the Harvard Business Review, the renowned American magazine dedicated to management, has a few warnings. Among them is the feeling of isolation that can result in a drop in employees' feeling of belonging to a company; a drop in engagement.

- Joe :

And what do they suggest to avoid this?

- Chloe :

Well at first they suggest establishing a daily ritual to get the latest news from your teams. That could be an individual phone call at a set time, for example. But it also means establishing rules surrounding exchange, sharing and frequency of contact. The second advice they have is to make tools available that go beyond email: Those collaborative tools we were talking about before. Video tools in particular, those that allow you to speak face to face. They say supporting and interacting with your employees is key, because some people can handle working from home badly.

- Joe :

In a way, can this period of working from home fundamentally change the way we interact with our colleagues?

- Chloe :

Yes, that's what Kaitlyn Tiffany claims in the Atlantic. Paradoxically, we can even feel closer to our colleagues, she says. Video conferencing tools have allowed colleagues who might never see each other outside work to see intimate details like someone's greasy hair or maybe a chipped mug. She even says that during one meeting her boss started with, " It's great to see everyone's book collection!"

- Joe :

And in a way we need this kind of sharing...

- Chloe :

Yes, that's what Kaitlyn Tiffany says in her article. We need to see human faces. She cites a study led by researchers from Georgia Tech in 2014, who demonstrated that images representing a human face are much more likely to receive likes on Instagram. The University of Granada has also shown that when we look at the picture of a face, our heart rate increases. In short, there is a reason why we continue to update social media, even when nothing interesting is happening to us and we're stuck at home. That's why we've quickly adopted new rituals, videoconferencing happy hours for example. The journalist concludes that in this difficult period, posting on social networks and showing our faces is even a social responsibility. "I need to see you," she says, "even if I didn't realise it before."

- Joe :

Well that explains the success of all these collective events online. It's a need to feel like we are all together.

- Chloe :

Yes, an article by FranceTVInfo has listed all the current ways of sharing moments at a distance. For example, there are ways we can watch series together.. But there are also even sports coaches who offer live sessions on Instagram.. Artists who give concerts.. And of course, the famous online aperitif.

- Joe :

We could almost reconstruct our entire lives online...

- Chloe :

Well, the New York Times quipped that “We live on Zoom now.” Zoom is an application that facilitates video conferences. Teens had already latched on and were widely using it. But it has now taken on a new dimension since containment measures started. Many universities are using it to continue teaching their courses. And students have invented games where they use the functionality allowing you to change the wallpaper to share memes... On Sunday March 16th, 600,000 people downloaded it. People are now using it for religious services, concerts... even romantic dates.

- Joe :

But we should be paying attention to our personal data, all the same...

- Chloe :

Yes: Beware of the terms and conditions of these new video conferencing tools.. One article on CNet reminds us that just because we are all having to find solutions to talk to colleagues or relatives, we shouldn't let down our guard. The article says that one feature of Zoom can notify the organiser of a chat if you are doing something else during a session. Another permits the organiser to save the whole conference in the cloud, along with its automatic transcription. It's also important to remember that some applications use the data they collect to send targeted ads. And then there are also non-authorized third parties who can sometimes connect to conferences where they're not invited.

- Joe :

That's a lot!

- Chloe :

Yes and that's why we should really get to know these new actors benefiting from confinement- maybe even going so far as to stick with more traditional tools and applications while taking the time to comb through the fine print of their terms and conditions.

- Joe:

Then of course it's probably worth mentioning that not everybody is familiar with these digital tools.. So remember to pick up the phone and call your loved ones now and then!

Thank you Chloe and thank you all for listening to us, see you next week for a new episode of the Memo.