Le mémo épisode 12

Confinement : How can we bridge the digital divide?

Linda has been isolated for several weeks in her house in Bellevue, Washington with her poodle Lucy as her only companion.

To stay in touch, her family offered to call her using a video conference application. But 5 minutes before the call, Linda had a problem: She couldn't remember her computer password. She hadn't used it for four months. She said to the New York Times that her "mind was completely empty."

A little panicked, Linda called her 20 year old grandson. He was the one who had set up her computer for her and by chance he still remembered the password for the machine. She was able to chat with her family again.

The coronavirus epidemic has revealed the problems some of us face in gaining access to vital tools, especially digital ones. Taking Linda's story as an example, confinement can clearly be more of a problem for those unable to use a computer; let alone the internet. They're mostly elderly people, but this group also includes students, or those in different forms of care. Does the confinement not just reflect a wider isolation in general? What can we do to help these people?

[Identité sonore]

☐   Joe :

Hello Chloe.

☐   Chloe :

Hello Joe.

☐   Joe :

Welcome everyone to this episode of the Memo. This week we are delving into the issues surrounding digital access in these times of confinement. Chloe, the story about Linda and her password is touching, but I imagine that it's not the only example.

☐   Chloe :

No indeed. One article from Le Monde lists testimonies from other people not accustomed to digital tools. One of the leading reasons is cost: Some budgets don't stretch to buying a computer, a smartphone or an internet connection package; they're not seen as 'necessary' expenses. It's easier to get around it in 'normal' times; Marie for example relied on computers at her university library to write her homework. Now the libraries are all closed and the student has been forced to write assignments on the

word processing application on her phone. As a result, she is late handing in work and her classmates and teachers don't necessarily take this stress into account.

    ⏹ Joe :

That's the exact opposite of Linda's story that I was talking about earlier. She *had* a computer and an internet connection but didn't know how to use it.

    ⏹ Chloe :

That's true. Using these digital tools may feel fluid and natural for some, but for others it's a real headache. This is called "digital illiteracy", a term to describe the difficulties- even the impossibility- for a person to use a digital tool because they don't have a clue about how it works. That's what a large part of the testimonies show. However, while the cases of Marie the student and Linda the retiree are very different, the two scenarios are often linked.

    ⏹ Joe :

What do you mean?

    ⏹ Chloe :

A person without a computer or an internet connection may not be able to understand how to use them. Isolated people are often the most affected. That's what one study found at Insee on the 30th October last year. Around 16.5% of French people older than 15 were found to be "digitally illiterate." Among them, more than 40% were retired, around 26% without a job and 9% unemployed.

    ⏹ Joe :

I read that in the United States the situation was more or less similar.

    ⏹ Chloe :

In effect, it's the people who are most socially economically or geographically isolated who face the most difficulties. The problem is exacerbated when you look at the number of people who don't have access to broadband. This is what I read in an article published in Quartz. There are thought to be between 42 and 163 million Americans without access to a good connection during this time in confinement. Particularly in isolated rural regions where a lot of people simply don't have the technical means to connect to a network.

    ⏹ Joe :

Why such a large number?

    ⏹ Chloe :

Shirley Bloomfield is the head of a group representing small broadband providers in rural America, and she can answer that for you. "In rural America, a lot of [of the disparity] has to do with the ability to deploy out there… The cost is really high." And the internet providers aren't simply encouraged to set up shop. However, if you're a family forced to stay at home with low speed internet, sharing the connection can become very difficult to manage- or so says an article from the Guardian.

    ⏹ Joe :

So confinement is accentuating the fractures in our society. Now we have to go online for essential resources surrounding employment, or do our shopping, or work from home- these people without such skills find themselves more excluded?

⯍ Chloe :

Yes, they had up until now managed without an internet connection or a computer. In normal times, it's more or less possible; administrative offices are normally open for procedures, you can go to the library or another place that provides access to equipment or you can ask for help from a neighbour or relative. With the ban on assembly and the closure of public places- but also the general shift online for daily admin, it's impossible to manage. These networks of solidarity between people are failing and that makes things really difficult.

⯍ Joe :

But surely there are plenty of solutions to these problems?

⯍ Chloe :

Yes, and they mainly come from these very solidarity networks. Organisations who normally held meetings or events in reception centers, classrooms or collective workshops are reinventing the way they operate. In France, an article in *20 minutes* focussed on how digital mediators on "MedNum" set up a free telephone line open from 9am to 6pm to help people in difficulty.

Emmaus connect, which helps the most vulnerable people in France to use digital tools, has tried to get urgent IT equipment and connections for the most disadvantaged. On top of that, social media is flooded with calls for computer donations.

There's also the "Share Your Wifi" initiative run by Radio France Inter which encourages people to share their network with those who don't have access to the internet.. or even the "Free Plugs" initiative from the Salvation Army which pushes us to leave an electric extension cord outside our window so a homeless person can benefit from it to recharge their phone.

⯍ Joe :

Then there's thinking beyond the crisis- and what part the internet could play in the aftermath.

⯍ Chloe :

In an article on smart cities, news site Forbes talks about how cities like Birmingham in the United Kingdom, Goyang in South Korea or Nagpur in India set up public wifi networks before the crisis. In most cases it was a technological objective to allow greater connectivity in order to develop a "smart city". But not only that: Public wifi is, they say, a means to promote greater social equality.

Eric Durand, in charge of digital inclusion in the la Creuse region of France, took stock of the challenges to be faced after the crisis and the great potential for continuing solidarity. Quoted in *20 minutes* he argues that to make public services successfully go paperless by 2022, it will be necessary to mount "a real Marshall Plan to develop the skills of an entire population."

▣ Joe :

Thank you Chloe, and thank you everyone for listening. If you enjoyed this episode, please feel free to share it. All the articles which supported the content of this episode can be found in the description, we also put some links to initiatives in there too. See you next week, until then- stay well.

Ressources :
- As Life Moves Online, an Older Generation Faces a Digital Divide (New York Times)
- « Le visio-machin, je n'y connais rien » : la fracture numérique en France aggravée par le confinement (Le Monde)
- Une personne sur six n'utilise pas Internet, plus d'un usager sur trois manque de compétences numériques de base (INSEE)
- Coronavirus pandemic exposes why America's digital divide is dangerous (USA Today)
- America's digital divide is even more urgent during the pandemic (Quarz)
- US's digital divide 'is going to kill people' as Covid-19 exposes inequalities (The Guardian)
- Coronavirus : Initiatives solidaires pour les exclus du numérique, de plus en plus isolés par le confinement (20minutes)
- « Partage ton Wifi » ou le système D pour lutter contre la fracture numérique (France Inter)
- L'Armée du Salut lance l'opération « Free Plugs », des prises électriques mises à disposition des sans-abris (France Bleu)