

Podcast Orange – Episode 11

Does lockdown mean unbridled screen-time?

- Joe:

My television is on. My computer is open. My phone is unlocked, glittering. I want to be covered in screens. If I had a virtual reality headset nearby, I would strap it on.

The screen is my only contact with my parents, whom I miss but can't visit because I don't want to accidentally kill them with the virus. It brings me happy hours with my high school friends and gives me photos of people cooking on Facebook.

(...)

Do you recognize yourself in these words? So do I. I read them in the New York Times. The journalist writes with relish how all our grand principles around social media, screen-time and binge watching have gone out the window in just a few weeks. Not just for children, but adults as well.

Carolyn Guss, for instance, works at a cloud-computing company and had a strict schedule thought out for keeping her kids, 8 and 9, off screens. "By Day 3, I had given up," she confessed.

You might remember how a few weeks ago, we were talking about the attention economy, how apps are vying for our attention and how we're losing control of our time. So, have screens simply won? Or are we right to indulge in them?

[Identité sonore]

- Joe:

Hi Chloe!

- Chloe:

Hi Joe!

- Joe:

Welcome to the third issue of the Memo, dedicated to confinement. Today we are going to talk about your screen-time. Because yes, for the past 4 weeks, whether it's talking to friends and family, working, playing sports, having fun, doing paperwork, or staying informed...We don't really have much of a choice in the matter, it's all happening on screens. So, Chloe. Is it really that bad?

- Chloe:

Well, in the article you mentioned, the New York Times reporter mentions a few positive effects... Take Carolyn Guss, that mother of two, who finally gave up on limiting her kids' screen-time. She realized that her son learned to use video editing software and now they spend their days shooting short movies... But of course, what really eats up most of our time is talking to each other, and socializing through our screens....and Sherry Turkle, a social sciences professor who has warned against dinners where everyone's eyes are glued to their screens for years, puts things into

perspective: "Now, forced to be alone but wanting to be together, so many are discovering what screen time should be."

- Joe:

Okay, but it's mainly children's screen-time that we're worried about...we often hear that we have to set boundaries, limit the number of hours they can spend on it per day and per week... Even Silicon Valley executives are sending their children to screen-free schools... Now, what with schools having gone online and parents busy working from home, where does that leave all these parenting principles?

- Chloe:

Also in the New York Times, psychologists Pete Etchells and Andrew Przybylski from Oxford University tell us: "Don't freak out." Especially now, because as they explain, the internet is the best tool for social distancing. The two authors remind us how every time new technologies have emerged, parents have worried whether they might literally melt their children's brains. And they're just plain pragmatic: they admit that screens can be an excellent tool in this complicated period of confinement. They ask the question: is it really a good idea to restrict screens at a time when children are bursting with energy, in a very annoying and perhaps even dangerous way? As long as use stays within reason, the authors don't see any harm.

- Joe:

But aren't there studies on the harmful effects of screens on children?

- Chloe:

The truth is, we don't know. We don't have enough perspective yet. Yes, some studies show that screen-time reduces children and teenagers' ability to concentrate, and if excessive, can cause feelings of depression. But more recent studies have shown that in reality this effect is limited to a tiny portion of observed cases....The two experts I mentioned earlier think this period of confinement could be an excellent testing ground to sort the facts from the anti-screen "hype".

- Joe:

How are we supposed to stay "within reason" at home then?

- Chloe:

We often read rules that change, depending on the age of the child. In the United States, it's no screens before 18 months. In France it's nothing before age 3, and then you add more time gradually with every year. I came across an article in the Washington Post that reminds us of these rules...while also observing that in the COVID-19 era, they don't really work anymore.

A pediatrician at the University of Michigan reassured parents, explaining that exceptional times may call for exceptions to one's principles and rules. She also reframes this as an opportunity: to show children that digital technology can be used in constructive ways, to follow their lessons for instance. It's also an opportunity to set up family rules, adapted to each child's needs and that aren't just a blanket application of national recommendations. And consider this: it's also up to the parents to set the example!

- Joe:

So, we all get to play video games, right?

- Chloe:

It is even recommended by the WHO. I read this in an article on BFM, the French 24-hour news channel: the World Health Organization is encouraging us to play video games. Their campaign: "play together, apart". Game publishers have started to encourage social distancing. It's a turning point for the WHO, which had recently added gaming addiction to its list of psychiatric conditions and included Gaming Disorder in its International Classification of Diseases.

- Joe:

But what's happening on the adult side? Aren't we going to completely blow up our screen time?

- Chloe:

Absolutely. The French daily *Le Parisien* published a study carried out in France by Ifo for Oppo mobile, a smartphone manufacturer. 62% of respondents said they spent more time on their phones now than before lockdown. What's new is that they're use their devices more to communicate with loved-ones than to watch videos. Video conference cocktail hour: it's all the rage. The study doesn't mention work... though many people in France and elsewhere are unemployed and stuck at home, a large proportion are still working remotely.

- Joe:

Yes, precisely, with working from home, isn't there a risk of being hyperconnected? Especially for those of us in lockdown alone, we might find keeping a work-life balance much harder.

- Chloe:

That's right. Philosophy and Political Science researcher Will Stronge warned us about this in the Guardian, calling answering work-related emails outside of hour an insidious form of unpaid labour. The article dates back to February, so before confinement, but concerns even more people today, when working remotely has become widespread.

In the UK, Rebecca Long-Bailey, running for leadership of the Labour Party at the time, had proposed to introduce the right to disconnect, modelled in part on French law. The op-ed writer notes how replying to an email in the evening may not really look like work... you may not have the impression that you're working beyond your contracted hours, but in reality, digital tools are what he calls an "electronic leash". 5 million British workers have claimed they answer messages outside of their working hours: that totals nearly 2 billion hours of unpaid labor.

- Joe:

So how do we disconnect?

- Chloe:

That's the question a reader asked sociologist Caroline Datchary in a live chat with the French daily Le Monde in late March. He explained that he tends to feel guilty when disconnecting in the evenings during the week. There's the feeling that when working from home, you have to be *even more available* than at your office. The sociologist replied that in France at least, the right to disconnect has been written into law since 2016, though there's no clear guidance for how to apply it. But in any case, you can't be expected to be constantly available, so if you work during office hours, there shouldn't be a problem.

- Joe:

Yes, but at the moment, many of us are forced to work at unusual times, partly because we have children at home.

- Chloe:

Yes, and in that case, the sociologist suggests you schedule emails so as to send them out during regular work hours. Most email systems have this function. That way, you avoid inadvertently inducing your colleagues or contacts to work outside normal working hours as well.

- Joe:

A little self-discipline then! I'll give that suggestion a shot. Thank you, Chloe, and thank you all for listening. See you next week for a new episode of the Memo!

Resources :

[Coronavirus ended the screen-time debate. Screens won.](#) (The New York Times)

[Don't freak out about quarantine screen time](#) (The New York Times)

[Our screen time rules don't work in this new world. And maybe that's OK.](#) (The Washington Post)

[L'OMS recommande de jouer aux jeux vidéo, le temps de l'épidémie](#) (BFMTV)

[Confinement : les Français plus que jamais accros à leurs smartphones](#) (Le Parisien)

[Let's call time on unpaid electronic labour with a legal right to disconnect](#) (The Guardian)

[Confinement et surconnexion : « Il n'y a pas à culpabiliser de se déconnecter du télétravail »](#) (Le Monde)