

The Memo – Episode 4

Can public services go completely paper-free?

— Joe:

Josiane is 66 years old. When the internet reached France, she hadn't even reached her sixties. She simply ignored it. "It worried me a bit," she admits. Sending an email, finding information on the web, it was all completely foreign to her. She said all this to a journalist from Le Monde. Josiane is one of the 17% of French people who are "technophobes"- the word we use to describe people incapable of using electronic tools.

Josiane is a bit worried about having to pay her taxes online under the new French system. "Too complicated, too many figures," she says. She has now signed up for a workshop run by an association every Wednesday to learn the basics.

These days she just doesn't have the choice: From benefit payments to health insurance, most social administration is now done online. It's certainly true in France, but it's also the case across the world; and across all sectors.

We often hear that a paperfree world is the solution to simplifying and modernising the way we interact with institutions. But does it not mean leaving a significant amount of the population behind on the push to progress?

[Jingle]

— Joe :

Hello Chloé!

— Chloé :

Hello Joe!

— Joe :

Welcome to this new episode of the Memo. Today we're discussing the digital transformation of public services- and while I've been talking about France until now, there's one country that really stands out in this field- and that's Estonia. Chloe, how has this country gone from the chaos of the fall of the Soviet bloc to a start-up paradise in only 30 years?

— Chloe :

The New Yorker went to meet Taavi Kotka in his robot-filled house by the Baltic Sea. Between 2012 and 2017 he was Estonia's "Chief Information Officer". And the founder of the "e-Estonia" project. It's a little thanks to him that people can become an Estonian "e-citizen." And also around this time Estonians started to be able to do all their administration online- like voting. Just about everything anyway- they still

couldn't get a digital marriage. And for Kotka, services weren't just being digitised. According to him, his country had "radically rethought the meaning of society."

— Joe :

How does it work, technically speaking?

— Chloe :

The invention that allowed it all to happen is the unique identification solution. Users essentially never have to enter information more than once. For example, if someone wants to take out a mortgage, there's no need to enter their financial details, it's all already in the system. At the doctor, their medical file is directly accessible. There's no need to fill out a form before an appointment. In short, they've come up with a simple hyper-intuitive experience. Everyone can log onto the system using their identity card with an electronic chip. According to the Estonian government this has pushed up GDP by 2%.

— Joe :

So right now we're talking about Estonia, which is a special case. Are there any other examples out there where this kind of digital transformation has been rolled out, in less developed countries maybe?

— Chloe :

Yes, every two years the United Nations conducts a survey on the state of digital transformation in countries. This has found that going paperless makes a state's public services more resilient. But most importantly, they've realised that digital can sometimes fill in for a lack of infrastructure or existing services.

— Joe :

For example?

— Chloe :

For example, in Mexico, there is an SMS-sending programme to track the progress of pregnant and postpartum women. They receive advice and appointment reminders. In Rwanda, drones are used for medical deliveries to isolated areas. Blood, for example. It used to take 4 hours to make a delivery- now it only takes 15 minutes.

— Joe :

But are these services easily accessible to everyone? What's it like for those with no digital access?

— Chloe :

Two Australian researchers have studied this question, according to The Conversation, a website aimed at giving academics a voice. What they explain is that in their countries, like in lots of developed nations, residents are increasingly being forced to use these services because there's simply no alternative.

— Joe :

So good luck to those who aren't connected then!

— Chloe :

Well yes- they risk being almost completely socially excluded. This includes people over 65 with modest incomes, indigenous people, those with disabilities, those without a certain level of education, etc. On top of that, some concepts in online services can be exclusionary. For example- security questions, which are widely used; "what was the name of your first pet?" Or, the street you grew up on. Those two questions may not make any sense to indigenous people.

— Joe :

Does that happen in France? Digital exclusion?

— Chloe :

Yes, it does but the interesting thing is that the digital divide isn't always where we might think it is. That's the result of the Capacity project. A team of researchers from the University of Rennes 2, the MIT Atlantique School of Engineering and the Next Generation Internet Foundation have looked into it. What they found was that roughly 1 in 10 people are uncomfortable with digital services- among them, 12% were young people. That's what I read anyway in an internetactu article. The conclusion is that the design of applications often leaves much to be desired. Signing up to training programs or unemployment services can be complicated. And it could be greatly improved if we thought more about the user when they are conceived.

— Joe :

So User Experience is the answer?

— Chloe :

Yes, UX combines disciplines to focus on creating services that do not need complicated instructions for use. The UK appears to be one step ahead on this issue. The government has had its own dedicated digital service since 2010, which has produced guidelines for the creation of public service applications. There are 7 of them, among them that 1) the needs of the user come first, 2) the imperative to simplify and 3) regularly-offered improvements.

— Joe :

What does it actually mean when we talk about the user experience?

— Chloe :

Let's take for example a website for a department that distributes unemployment benefits. Originally, these sites were made up of pages and pages of information which the user had to read to find out if they were eligible- without really ever being sure they hadn't missed anything. Now, on the homepage, all they have to do is fill out a form- say to declare their sources of income, their tax-rate, their family status-

and they get a direct answer to their query. We're going from sites that provide information to sites that offer a service.

— Joe :

And this method has been copied elsewhere..

— Chloe :

Yes, they have been included in the Digital Services Playbook in the US- and France just launched a programme called "Designers of General Interest."

— Joe :

So, finally, do we really want to wipe out all human interaction?

— Chloe :

Well, I read something to that effect in a New York Times article, with a rather alarming title- which is "Human Contact is Now a Luxury Good".

In one American hospital, robots now visit the patients. In California, the doctor for 78 year old patient Ernest Quintata told him that he was going to die by video. In Wichita, Kansas, most childrens' school days are spent in front of a screen, in silence. Digital tools used to be reserved for the elite, now.. it's the elites who are trying to keep them at arm's length.

— Joe :

Thank you Chloe! And thank you to all our listeners. We'll be back soon with another episode of the Memo- in the meantime you can find links to all the articles mentioned in the description.

Sources :

- [Start-up-Paradies Estland](#) (Frankfurter Allgemeine)
- [Estonia, the Digital Republic](#) (The New Yorker)
- [E-government Survey 2018](#) (United Nations)
- [Digitising social services could further exclude people already on the margins](#) (The Conversation)
- [Médiation numérique : le point aveugle de la conception ?](#) (InternetActu)
- la chaîne vidéo [Government Digital Services](#) (YouTube)
- [Human Contact Is Now a Luxury Good](#) (New York Times)