Digital Disqualification, Digital Suffering, Digital Reliance

The Case of French Retired People over Sixty Years Old

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Abstract— **Occidental society tends to be increasingly dependent on digital technologies, even for basic activities (socialization, work, administrative tasks, etc.). For instance, since 2016 in France, the tax return must be submitted online. However, does this evolution consider those who lack the required capacity? How to measure the digital divide? To explore this issue, we study the case of older adults with low technological knowledge and skills. This population presents more difficulties in using digital devices than the young generation because of the effect of digital divides and the lack of digital literacy. This situation has the potential to produce some (digital) suffering, making this population feel outdated and excluded from the social entity.**

Keywords: Elderly; retired people; digital technologies; suffering; emotional behaviour; social challenges; loneliness; reliance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Older people have to suffer from a denial of recognition from the rest of society. They do not meet the standards currently required by contemporary society. The phenomenon of ageism, a kind of stereotypes attached to older people [1], reflects a negative image of the retired population and emphasizes the discourses encompassed the value of eternal youth. This population suffers from common negative representations, referring to a certain contempt and denial of recognition from the rest of society [2].

In parallel to this denial, we observe the evolution of the digital sphere and its related capacities, with the impetus of thousands of users who define social codes that use technologies. The digital sphere tends to become a community space with its own rules, obligations and social recognition systems, enabling users to join in a system of social relationships [3]. To gain recognition and full social identity, web surfers must match their use of technology with the technical use of the online community.

The effect of this standardised uses goes beyond the digital sphere itself. Since the 1990s, we have entered an area dominated by the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which are understood as a necessary requirement for a renewed exercise of democracy, making possible to break free from old hierarchies [4]. This "necessary requirement" reveals the phenomenon we want to talk about. The use of digital technologies is nowadays an implicit or explicit requirement for continuous development within society. The conventional approaches are punctuated by the obligation to use these technologies, such as taxes returns, although the French State does not provide resources to help people make a successful digital transition. Even more worryingly, public services are gradually phased out, though they could help people with low, or non-existent, digital skills. The digital teaching tasks are mainly devoted to associations, family, or friends.

It seems that retired people show different digital uses, influenced by historical and social contexts that may or may not encourage the expansion of their digital skills [5]. How can you consider yourself as a citizen, in a society whose norms do not correspond to yours? Speaking of digital norms, can not we talk about a kind of suffering, feeling experienced by those who are not embedded in the actual digital mould? By learning how to absorb social requirements, particularly in digital terms, older people would be able to (re)integrate the society. Incorporating the norms would be a solution for them not to suffer from social and digital disqualification.

To answer the questions listed above, we propose a study case. We conducted an exploratory qualitative research, interviewing thirty-one elders over sixty years old, living in the south-west of France, where the digital divide is stronger than in other parts of this country. The region was selected for its social, digital and economic features (repartition between countryside and cities, the proportion of older people, territorial digital equipment, etc.), highlighting the low level of technological knowledge and skills of older adults, resulting on issues related to social and digital disqualification.

This article will be divided into four parts. In section II, we will explain the methodology used for our investigation. In section III, we will present the actual social and technological background in western societies, related to the elderly social disqualification resulting from the massive implementation of ICTs. In section IV, we will develop the concept of digital imperative and its effects on collective and individual norms. Then, in section V, we will present the consequences of these social and digital disqualifications, namely the feelings of loneliness, suffering, and digital reliance.

II. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In this section, we would like to specify the methodological approach we followed, both in terms of sampling and interviews analysis.

A. Epistemological choices

First of all, we would like to point out the results of this investigation do not tend to be excessively generalized. Indeed, if we seek to take some theoretical distance, from the corpus and model concepts, we also aware of the limited impact of our results.

The study is based on an exploratory approach of older people digital skills. Our purpose is to grasp the consequences of those skills on well-being, social integration and self-esteem. To this end, we choose to develop a qualitative survey. It seemed to be the most relevant way to investigate digital skills and practices, as close as possible to the realities of elderlies. Indeed, this kind of methodology is in line with our research goals, as "confrontation with the corpus is a necessary condition for the perception of social practices" [26]. The objective is to understand the symbolic appropriation of digital technology by respondents, by placing them in specific contexts, applied in particular to social cohesion and wellbeing.

We did the survey according to a comprehensive epistemological point of view. We sought to understand the meaning of elderlies' digital uses. Thus, our study aims to grasp uses as they are perceived by the interviewed people, as well as to grasp the meaning they are given in an everyday life context. The comprehensive paradigm tends to place the researcher in a position to understand his interviewed sample as closely as possible to reality [27]. This paradigm implies a work of empathy about one of the authors who, intends, during an interview or analysis by putting himself in the place of the respondent and tries to understand the world from his own point of view.

B. Construction and justification of the sample

The choice of the interview sample was based on two criteria. First, we investigated territories that share the same public policies, involving aging, health, institutional accesses and technological mediation management. The comparative study of public policies in different counties, while potentially interesting, is not the subject of our research. It seemed more coherent to focus on users with the same social, health and political frameworks, starting from the postulate that can be influenced by these same frameworks. We chose to consider all Aquitaine counties to vary the profile of the users we interviewed. This region offers a wide variety of living places and social aspects that allow us to diversify the profiles of respondents. Although they are all affected by the same public policy, we still considered the influence of their living environment: urban, semi-urban, rural; married, living alone, in cohabitation; from a high, medium, low social background, etc.

The selection of a retirement sample was based on socio-professional categories, limiting the disparity in lifestyles, by having only people who are no longer working.

Hereafter, we propose a summarizing table about the criteria we used to make up the corpus.

TABLE I. DISTRIBUTION OF THE INTERVIEWED ELDERLIES

Criteria	Distribution	Number	%
Gender	Male	13	41,93
	Female	18	58,07
Age	60-64	11	35,48
	65-69	10	32,26
	70-74	5	16,13
	74-78	5	16,13
Living situation	Married	21	63,63
	Alone	7	21,21
	With one children	3	9,09
	Cohabitation with other elderlies	1	3,03
Living places	0 > 2 000 inhabitants	5	15,15
	2 001 > 10 000 inhab.	5	15,15
	10 001 > 30 000 inhab.	6	18,18
	30 001 > 60 000 inhab.	6	18,18
	60 001 > 100 000 inhab.	5	15,15
	> 100 001 inhab.	4	12,12
Counties	Dordogne	4	12,9
	Gironde	14	45,17
	Landes	4	12,9
	Lot-et-Garonne	3	9,68
	Pyrénées-Atlantiques	7	19,35
Socio-professional background	Wealthy class	10	32,27
	Middle class	10	32,27
	Working class	11	35,48

C. Interview chart and analysis

In order to provide some details about our investigation without losing the reader in too many information, we recommend explaining three of the themes we explored, which related to our article. First, we examined the impact of generational belonging on the evolution of digital uses, questioning the time when respondents started using digital technologies and the role of relatives in digital learning. Then, we explore the ability of the Internet to respond to social expectations, such as biographical break or projection and daily-life restructuring. The third theme is devoted to understanding the subject of social recognition through

online uses and digital skills. The goal of these themes, questions and topics, was to investigate the ability of digital technologies to support the social inclusion of retired people and to verify converging / diverging phenomena, according to the criteria we chose for the survey. To keep it concise and consistent, we will focus, in this article, on the most relevant results.

To analyze these results, we assume that speeches are performative, that speeches build meaning. It induces actions and implies consequences in the real world. Analyzing a discourse is trying to grasp and to identify the actions it involves. The enunciation, through its elaboration, influences and transforms the world. We so analyzed the interviews, considering that everyone, during the production of a speech, develops some special meaning [28]. This perspective corresponds to a discourse design that is appropriate for this survey. The idea that speech is an act is at the heart of our study, as we will see in the analysis chapters.

III. SOCIAL EXCLUSION: SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES FOR ELDERLY

Digital technologies are seen as a potential for innovation to transform communities' lifestyle by influencing the way people live together. It seems that technology improves people's ability to act by expanding the panel of information resources and networked communication [6]. Not being a user of digital technologies, or more broadly of ICTs, is now a factor of exclusion and disqualification. Indeed, in a continually increasing digital civilization, the individual who is not equipped, or who does not know how to use these platforms, sees his capacity for action, knowledge and integration significantly reduced.

Connectivity appears to be a hot issue for those who want to take full advantage of their social abilities, concerning, particularly, intergenerational relations or institutional changes. The requirement to file the tax return on the Internet, for example, is representative of a numerical disqualification factor. In 2016, in France, it became mandatory, for the first tranche of taxpayers, to file their returns online. However, the institutional tends, by 2019, to get each taxpayer to do the online tax return, under penalty of having to pay a lump sum fine. This revision of declaration completion is less vital than what it implies: people who are not connected to the Internet or who do not have sufficient knowledge will be, in a few years, illegal.

A. Elders and digital dependency

The evolution of French social context towards an increasingly digital dependency appears to be a factor of social disqualification. This is reflected in the development of e-inclusion policies, such as in Switzerland or through projects, proposed by certain several clusters specializing in digital technology, such as Cluster *Health ICTs* in Aquitaine, in France. The "e-" brings back to electronic literacy and, more broadly, to digital culture. The term "inclusion" highlights the fracture lines, due to the digital divide, both on the technical and uses aspects. This institutional evolution is linked with the recognition of the right, developed by Axel Honneth. "If some people rights [...] are denied, this implicitly means that they are not recognized to the same degree of moral respectability as other members of society" [2]. However, with the current digital transition, institutions are changing the notion of "right".

As the digitalization of administrative procedures increases, the right to take measures without digital technology tends to decrease. This evolution means the full spread of technologies within society. However, despite the massification of ICT's in society, some digital divides remain, based, for instance, on income, education level, cultural and social capital, or even age [7]. Indeed, as shown by the Research Centre for Study and Observation of Living Conditions' (from now on called CREDOC) statistical studies and the scientific literature, there are many fault lines, as much due to lack of equipment (first-degree divide), as for the lack of digital skills (second-degree divide). The standard of living has a substantial impact on household equipment, with the purchasing power of the wealthiest making it easier for them to purchase equipment than people with low incomes. Moreover, a user must have a certain level of digital literacy to be able to develop serene and relevant digital practices [5]. However, as Charmakeh notes, some segments of the population (retired, for example) do not have such knowledge [7]. They do not have sufficient expertise and are not able to consider the opportunities offered by technologies. As a result, despite the increasing rate of the equipment, reaching almost 97% among teenagers (12-25 years old) and young adults [8]–[11], there are still social groups on the margins. The older we get, to harder it is to perform changes. Any change creates a "small crisis" and requires real personal work to change individual habits. So, making a transition from habit to a new model is difficult, sometimes impossible for adults or elderlies, by joint persistence, tenacity, comprehensibility, often reinforced by common sense, experiences or values [12].

Institutional change tends, through the firmness of these reforms, to influence the diffusion of ICTs, at the societal level. As Claude Dubar explains, it is tough, perhaps impossible, for some people to follow this evolution. This can be all the more applied to the populations that had missed the digital revolution of recent decades, as well as to some of the older generations, especially those over 80 years old [5]. Thus, the change desired by institutions tends not to take root among these groups, in which digital culture and uses remain alien. They find themselves out of step with the values and practices of the other social groups.

B. Disruption and disempowerment: consequences of social disqualification

Some older people can have some difficulties to feel in accordance with today's society. This feeling leads them to experience ever-increasing concern in understanding the world they live in, which no longer recognizes them [13]. However, the loss of meaning and the loss of common points, of complicity, imply phenomena of disruption (physically, psychologically and healthily speaking). This concept may be defined as the abandonment of activities or habits, by someone who is no longer able to perform them, whether for physical, cognitive or cultural reasons, as it is the

case with elders of our study context. To keep in touch with the world, people must find some matching points with the environment they live in. Most of the time, it is the contradictions between people's skills or needs and the world they are surrounded by that lead them to disruption [13]. The lack of correlation leads the individual to be no longer attached to his life or the world he lives in.

Existentially speaking, it therefore seems necessary to offer meaningful activities to individuals to help them (re)connect with their environment. In today's institutional context, it appears difficult very old people to find commonalities, opportunities of commitment within the digital sphere, that tends to isolate them, generating, in this way, exclusion and social disqualification. As Vincent Caradec says, anyone should expect from a culture that it supports him, from the beginning of existence until death. This support can have many variations, from living models, stimulating policies, help to improve their abilities, etc. [14]

IV. DIGITAL IMPERATIVE: COLLECTIVE NORMS AND INDIVIDUALITY

The example of the tax return mentioned above does not concern only social exclusion. It also highlights, in a more or less subtle way, what we consider as a numerical imperative, using Fabien Granjon's terminology. It concerns a feeling of obligation, linked to the use of digital technologies. The subject, through institutional, media and social pressure, tends to develop uses to preserve social integration. For the people we interviewed, the imperative is reflected by the desire to gain recognition from the social body. Stop working and enter retirement are sometimes equated with the idea of social and identity break-up. The term "retirement" is, itself, often associated with a social withdrawal [15]. Integrating digital sphere is, then, a way to regain social esteem, as we will see later in this article, through the development of knowledge and skills in this field and an acclaimed development through media and social discourse.

A. The intergenerational implication in the elders' uses of ICTs

Digital imperative is also expressed through intergenerational relationships, particularly with descendants, whether children or grandchildren. These generations are predisposed to use online communication platforms because of their appropriation of digital technologies during their youth or working life. Their digital literacy level and the incorporation of communication habits lead them to favour this type of medium. In this way, in order to keep in touch, elderlies are encouraged to develop online communicative practices, in line with the attitudes and preferences of the person they wish to contact. Younger generations enrol the old ones in the digital sphere. The more they are equipped, the more they will propose opportunities to elderlies to join the movement of digital communication by, for instance, training them to use social platforms or offering technological gifts [16]. The term "enlisting" corresponds to the idea we want to develop here. Since the desire to maintain social bonds is stronger than traditional communication formats, elders develop new uses, by

copying the uses already embedded among younger generations, who are, in turn, closely involved in the development of the digital sphere. This sphere tends to impose itself as an imperative in maintaining communication with family and close social circle. The family's use of digital technologies tends to create an incentive effect that retired people, who respond to a normative desire, in connection with a desire to maintain their socialization and their belonging to the social sphere.

B. The construction and the effects of collective and normative expectations on people

Through political, media and institutional discourses, representations or behaviours, society establishes rules of conformity, moral, technical and ethical, which individuals are required to respect from an early age and throughout their lives, to become an integral part of the social body [17]. This process of socialization results in the internalization of norms. Those norms are established from the generalization of all society members' expectations [2].

As Alex Honneth says, an individual has to understand, to learn to respect and, above all, internalize the normative social rules imposed on him. By doing so, he earns the capacity to evolve in interactions and in his environment, he lives in, to be accepted by his group or society. The norms he learns allow him to identify his rights and duties concerning the other member of the group. So, he learns to understand himself from a generalized view of others [2].

The training of someone as a member of the collective social group, therefore, implies a reflexive posture, where someone queries his habits, behaviours and values, in order to integrate collective norms and rules that he must respect to be socially accepted, both by institutions and peers.

C. Collective norms and individual construction

Individual construction is partly based on the relationship with people, primarily through other's eyes. The image that interlocutors sends back influences how we perceive ourselves. This exchange, particularly in the normative framework we are talking about, allows knowing whether or not if someone is recognized as an equal by his interaction partner. Therefore, being in interaction with someone else means being in interaction with oneself and (re)building oneself, through the perception that the interaction partner sends back.

Being oneself, within a normative framework, is like being like the other, by sharing some morality, rules and common standards. By accepting or rejecting the speaker, the speaking partner or the institution defines the condition in which the told speaker is perceived. In other terms, "the normative idea that everyone has of oneself [...] depends on the possibility that he always has of being confirmed in the other […]. The feeling of contempt can be perceived as a threatening attack and can ruin someone's identity as a whole" [2]. Being outside a normative framework or of a society tends to place people in a position of social disqualification. In this way, social groups use this framework to develop normatively expectations, social

pressure to conformity [18] to which people must submit to, in order to (still) be considered as a full citizen.

We note ambivalence in surveyed elders' speeches. On the one hand, the opportunities they discover through technology lead them to perfect their knowledge of these tools. Online practices multiply the number of communication and information channels. It offers more ways to communicate and help elders to enhance their daily life and complete the connexions they have with their environment. The entire sample we interviewed says that ICT's have developed and improve their digital literacy, as well as their lifestyle. On the other hand, this very same discourse is tinged with bitterness [5], which reminds us of the notion of digital imperative. Social pressure for compliance and the need to respond to normative frameworks are particularly intense when it comes to connecting elders with the digital sphere. There is a kind of double pressure: the first is due to the prevailing social representation attached to retirement age, the second due to the digital imperative.

D. Constraint and call of duty: when elders have no other choice than "get started"

The social and digital pressure made "digital path" unavoidable. It explains that almost twenty people of our survey feel like they had to force themselves to get "digitally started" [5]. They link this to the hope of catching up with a backlog they have accumulated in this area and which, in a way, gives them a marginal position [18]. This constraint is firmly rooted in our interviews, to the point of becoming a model statement, such as: "you have to get started", "you have to live with today's trend", "in any case, today, you can no longer do anything without ICT's", "it has become essential", etc. [29]. This social pressure does not differentiate by age or social background within our sample. The notion of imperative and pressure that underlies the interviews seems to be experienced uniformly throughout our corpus.

As we said in the beginning of this article, we currently live in a strongly ageist societal context. Thus, for the people who have accumulated many years, it seems necessary for them to develop digital practices, in order to encourage collective social recognition and, so, emancipating themselves from the cult of eternal youth. They also mark their distance from their chronological age [16], as well as from collective representations related to it. Therefore, developing digital and technological skills appears to be a way for elders to counteract negative stereotypes and to encourage their social valorisation.

It seems getting closer to the aesthetic reference model makes life simpler and easier [19] and gives full meaning to digital imperative. Being accepted by others and by society is a fundamental element of well-being. That is why accepting and complying with standards is a way of being well integrated and valued, with an absolute peace of mind. However, in the context of an actively and favourably ICT's society, becoming a digital user seems to be a way to live in peace, to be accepted and recognized as a full citizen.

V. SUFFERING AND LONELINESS: CONSEQUENCES OF DISQUALIFICATION

Sociologists, such as Vincent Caradec [20] or Serge Guérin [21], have studied the loss of meaning of life and activities at retirement age, which leads people to social withdrawal and disruption. Replying to an email, playing on a virtual farm, enjoying a replayed TV show represent many emotional investment opportunities for people suffering from loneliness. New uses for new habits allow the development of automatic processes, the anchoring of changes, offering, in this way, a meaningful restructured daily life.

As we said previously, older adults tend to be even more put aside from social and digital evolutions. We now would like to develop on some of their consequences on elderlies' everyday life, based on the results of our exploratory qualitative survey [5] [29].

A. Loneliness and suffering: social or digital issues?

We first would like to talk about the feeling of loneliness. We attribute to this notion to the feeling of not being integrated into a social community and suffering from it. Thus, an "isolated" person does not feel necessarily "alone" if it does not experience it as an annoyance [5]. This is a spread sentiment, common to twenty-two people we interviewed: "My two sons live abroad, my daughter lives hundreds kilometres from me. I have other family members here, but it's not the same. I miss them and I feel a bit alone" [29]. This seventy years old woman has a computer, but do not use it for her social activities, nor to develop her intergenerational relationships. When she is asked about this opportunity, she answers: "Yes, I know I could. My children don't stop asking me the same question. But I don't feel comfortable with it. I don't understand how it works, I don't know how to call someone, what I can publish or not. I'm afraid of doing something wrong and to break the computer. I feel alone, but I don't feel capable of using something like Facebook" [29].

This feeling of loneliness is even more paradoxical, compared to the society we live in. A society is characterized by the diversity of its technological possibilities of communication [22]. In the previous case, we note that the woman has everything she needs, from a technological point of view, to keep communicating with her children. The problem seems to be related to her capacity to use it and to understand how to use it.

In the cases we studied during our survey, the feeling of loneliness seems to be even stronger since the massive diffusion of ICTs technology, related to a need for emotional stability and a lack of recognition [22]. Indeed, having a computer, without knowing how to use it, seems to spawn feelings of worry and loneliness, more significantly in everyday life activities. As they do not share the current social ways to get in touch with distant relatives, elderlies seem to feel even lonelier. They can not talk as frequently as they want to with their family They also feel socially depreciated and rejected, with some lack of recognition [5]. This is confirmed by Cécile Tréton and Christian Bourret, according to whom "the infrastructure that offers many

opportunities for communication and security can not resolve the appearance of a feeling of loneliness for a growing part of the population" [22].

What our survey also highlights is the lack of digital teaching. Even when family members know the faint abilities of elderlies, very few of them try to help. "I asked my sons, but they don't have time, with the kids and their work. They tried to teach me some things, like going on Facebook, but I need a lot of time to learn, and they were quite upset of keep repeating the same things", says a seventy-two-year-old man [29]. So, increasing technology accessibility does not involve technological adoption. It is difficult, for most elderlies, to adopt new habits, especially technological ones, as we said previously. Furthermore, they also develop some distress concerning computers and digital technologies [23]. It results in everyday difficulties and negative self-judgment, regarding their abilities to learn and use digital technologies, bringing elderlies back to a kind of social failure [5].

In our survey, loneliness seems to be related to suffering. Interviewed people seem to suffer from the digital evolution of the society and of the digital communication habits of their family. Despite e-inclusion policies, suffering keeps being a fundamental issue concerning elderlies. Suffering appears to be a consequence of the lack of recognition, both from society, family members and even from institutions' digitalization. The feeling of suffering seems to be a significant setback of the current consideration accorded to social elderlies problems, which push them to doubt of their technological self-efficacy [23] and of their adequacy with the world they live in. However, as we said previously in this article, feeling useless and disconnected from the world is one of the most severe causes of disruption among retired people. In this context, we could conclude that digitalization seems to reinforce the feelings of loneliness and suffering among elders, increasing the risks of social or cognitive disruptions.

B. Digital reliance: consequences on self-consideration and everyday life activities

It seems older adults are unaware of many existing digital technologies and might lack necessary digital literacy (knowledge and skills) [23]. The lack of acculturation is one of the hottest issues concerning the elderly. Indeed, acculturation is influenced by the relationship to technologies during working life [5]. However, most of the current older people were already retired when ICTs were massively spread in working places. So, they have never been acculturated to them during their professional life and still ignore most of the advantages offered by them. "I fill the taxes returns for my mother. She's ninety-five years old; she doesn't want to hear about technologies. What she doesn't want to hear is that I also need to be helped by my own daughter to fill my own taxes return", says a seventy-five years old man [29].

What we observe here is the concept of digital reliance. The man we just talked about is dependent on his daughter to fill his taxes returns and those of his mother. His lack of digital literacy unable him to be autonomous. How, in this context, can some scientists still talk about empowerment?

Our observations are confirmed by Heo and Yoon, who write that asking for help is counter-intuitive with the feeling of autonomy [23]. Digital use is becoming a common standard for online administrative and everyday life tasks (buying, searching for information, etc.). However, it raises the question of the digital dependence of unconnected or unaccustomed elderly.

This digital reliance seems to be all the more problematical as it echoes to the concepts of digital vulnerability and digital suffering. Such cases of reliance seem to worsen the negative feelings and self-judgments, as they show elderlies in a position of relational vulnerability [22].

VI. CONCLUSION

The limits of our study is linked the number of investigated people and on the particular contexts they live in, in the south-west of France. A broader study and some comparative point of view could confirm our observations, give more detailed and find some other phenomenon.

According to French national statistics [24], people over sixty years old would currently represent more than 25% of the total French population. This number, still according to the same source, would keep on increasing in the coming years. Digital suffering or social digital disqualification, would be even more problematical, considering the growing number of elderlies and other social groups that can not follow the current digital path (living standard, incomes, social failure, digital divide, etc.). However, French society does not seem to take into account the number of people made disadvantaged by its digitalization and the consequences it has on well-being, by imposing new technical, technological and social norms, without paying attention to the crucial need of supporting digital transition, from a social, financial and technical point of view. A country can not encourage such an evolution, without giving its people the support the need to follow it.

This path could be considered as quite solutionist [25]. Digital public policies mean to resolve all the problems, health failure among others, by implementing technologies, without paying attention to the importance of social, technological (also considering digital practices levels) and human surroundings. Moreover, talking about elderlies' digital reliance, can not we consider these solutions as fundamentally paradoxical, as they propose to solve dependence issues by creating another form of dependence through digital reliance?

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