Session 10 : Is the Digital Divide the New Social Divide ?

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The expression "digital divide" dates back to the 90s with a growing fear in the United States of disparities of access amongst the rising "information society". The poorest and certain social groups risk being excluded from access to "ICTS" ("INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES"), and in particular from access to the Internet, analyzed as a vector of knowledge and democracy. In terms of public policy, the first answers revolved around "infrastructures". The universal service of telecommunications and access to microcomputers were seen as responses to be brought to these mechanisms of exclusion. The debate on the digital divide gradually widened, encompassing its uses and contents.

Today, technology is everywhere: in companies, at the workplace, during job search, in leisure activities, culture, journeys, reports to the administration, trade, social relationships... Activities where the use of internet is not recommended – or even compulsory – are rare.

Yet not everyone has access to the Internet and the digital divide can exclude part of the population of the economic and social organization. Hence the importance taken by the subject everywhere and the implementation of digital inclusion policies: access and technical skills are obviously necessary, but not sufficient.

- Connectivity takes varied forms: access is more or less easy and frequent, fixed or mobile, of varying speed, from a computer, a smartphone or a tablet. The price of this access is also more or less affordable. Access to infrastructures, the disappearance of so-called "white zones" for fixed or mobile networks has come to be a political priority everywhere. The number of users increase even if significant gaps remain between countries. The amounts invested, in France for example for the broadband reaches dozens of billion Euros. In Europe, the figure is several hundreds. Public investment policies are complementary of private investments to cover zones with the lowest density which are also the most costly to equip. Possible uses will first and foremost depend on all those variables.

- The development of skills is the pillar of digital inclusion policies. From training to using, the technical control of tools, the field of training policies is vast.

- Finally, other pre-conditions to digital inclusion such as the trust, the quality and design of offered interfaces, motivation, personal environments emerge as factors to be considered.

Estimates made in various countries reveal that the eldest, disabled women, graduates, low income people, inhabitants of the poorest regions or least densely populated are the more structurally affected by digital exclusion. One could quote several examples:

In France in 2018, 11 % of the population never connected to the internet, although graduates (46 %), 70 years and more (40 %), and people living alone (25 %) are overrepresented. The criteria of income and address are much less significant to characterize access. A sociological study shows that low income families are not excluded from the digital revolution and have made the Internet an instrument of their daily life, with specificities in the use of mail for example. It would also appear that 19% of

French called by a recent study "abandonists" (because they gave up doing something more than once due to having to use the Internet) are present in all categories of the population.

An Australian study calculated a digital inclusion index that takes into account connectivity, prices and digital ability. In Australia, findings lead to income followed by age, diploma and disability being the most discriminating criteria.

The digital divide thus refers to plural realities. And we should add the very large differences in terms of speed and mobility access.

One of the objectives of the roundtable will be to mobilise talents and experiences of the speakers gathered to highlight the different dimensions of the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion through the lense of public policy.