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COMPLUTENSE

## Digital Technologies and Social Relations of Age, Gender and Class among Seniors. An Intersectional Approach

Hélène Bourdeloie<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** A good deal of research uses the sociology of domination to study inequalities in digital technology usage as these often stem from deep-cut social divides. Bourdieu's theory of domination has been widely employed to demonstrate that the social world is stratified according to a principle of legitimacy: the social hierarchy holds good because those who are dominated do not challenge this order. Yet, in the digital era – which is a destabilising factor for traditional hierarchies – this type of theory comes up against certain limits due to its static premises. For this reason, our study adopted an intersectional approach, as this is more able to take into account the power relations between individuals and, more specifically, the forms of resistance that drive individuals. A field study conducted with French people over the age of 60 served as the basis for this theoretical analysis. The study shows that the seniors' differentiated relationships with ICTs correlate strongly with their age group, gender and class. When these analytical categories are combined, patterns emerge – patterns that are not only specific but which also reflect a process of negotiation with the dominant norms.

**Keywords:** gender; social class; age; intersectionality; digital technology.

### [es] Tecnologías digitales y relaciones sociales de la edad, género y clase entre adultos mayores: Un enfoque interseccional

**Resumen.** Numerosos son los trabajos que se apoyan sobre la sociología de la dominación para estudiar las desigualdades de los usos de las tecnologías numéricas, ya que éstas son a menudo, la manifestación de profundas divisiones sociales. Las teorías de la dominación de Pierre Bourdieu, tienen efectivamente el interés de mostrar que el mundo social esta estructurado por estratos según un principio de legitimidad. Aquí, el sistema de la jerarquía social se mantiene porque los dominados no lo contestan. Si la era numérica confunde las jerarquías tradicionales a causa de su carácter estático, ésta sociología presenta ciertos límites. Es por ello que proponemos de privilegiar un enfoque interseccional que permite tomar en cuenta, las relaciones de poder entre los individuos, considerando también las formas de resistencia que los animan. Una encuesta de campo realizada en Francia a personas mayores de 60 años, sirve de base al análisis. La encuesta muestra, que si las relaciones diferenciadas entre los adultos mayores a las Tecnologías digitales están relacionadas considerablemente a su pertenencia a la edad, al sexo y a la clase, la combinación de éstas categorías de análisis permiten sin embargo, configuraciones específicas que dan lugar a espacios de negociación con las normas dominantes.

**Palabras clave:** Género, clase social, edad, interseccionalidad, tecnología digital.

**Contents:** Introduction. 1. The contribution of intersectionality to the theories of domination. 2. Seniors, icts, and social relations of age, gender and class. 3. Icts and gendered social relations. 4. Discussion: from the reproduction to the intersection of social relations. Conclusion.

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## Introduction

The reconfiguration of gender identity in the digital age was the subject of a French research project<sup>2</sup> involving extensive fieldwork into the usage of digital technologies.

We draw on this research and particularly the above-mentioned fieldwork, to demonstrate that while Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social domination is certainly relevant to the study of digital divides, it is only partially effective for understanding discrimination in usage of Information & Communication Technologies<sup>3</sup> (ICTs). Here, we refer to "digital divides" in the plural, as differences in age, sex and class do exist. These differences reflect profound societal divides between individuals and the sociology of domination usefully places them in a critical perspective. Yet, this type of approach also leads to a form of determinism<sup>4</sup> and reproduction: inequalities persist all the more steadfastly because the dominated classes consent to the legitimacy of domination by the dominant classes, who thus take advantage of this acquiescence.<sup>5</sup> According to the theories of domination, the accumulation of discriminating factors such as age, sex<sup>6</sup> or class produce various forms of oppression. This sociology also generally fails to conceptualize individual-level practices, such as digital technologies use as a means to greater emancipation. Neither is it inclined to view creative individual capacities as transcending considerations of class. This is why we will show that an intersectional analysis is the most appropriate approach, for although the digital technology used by the French seniors we interviewed is strongly correlated with age, gender and social class, these factors do not add up arithmetically and their conjunction does not in itself lead to plural domination (Jaunait & Chauvin, 2012). Within the limits of this article, we will not focus on the concept of intersectionality – which is in fact the subject of numerous researches (Collins & Bilge, 2016) – but rather on the complexity of power relations (Crenshaw, 2005), showing that social relations may shift and are not set in stone. The aim is to understand that if several social relations contribute to influence digital technology use, the combination of different forms of exclusion can lead to dynamic relations between power social relations (Galerand & Kergoat, 2014), and not necessarily to their reproduction.

<sup>2</sup> We are particularly grateful to the French Ministry of Culture, and especially the Statistics and Prospective Studies Department (Département des études de la prospective et des statistiques), as well as the Labex ICCA (<http://www.iccalab.fr/en>), which financially supported this project (2012-2013). We would also like to thank the following who helped improve the quality of the language of this paper: Nicola Losada-Philippis, Sofia Adan and Gill Gladstone.

<sup>3</sup> I use here indifferently notions of ICT and the one of digital technology. However, as explained in this text, the current use of the notion of "digital technology" (rather than ICT), which is now dominant in research and speeches, is significant because this notion evokes digital culture, rather than computer literacy to which the ICTs referred.

<sup>4</sup> Here, we wish to thank our colleagues, Virginie Julliard (UTC, France) and Nelly Quemener (Université Paris 3, France) for their input into discussions on the sociology of domination, which vastly helped us to identify the points on which hegemonic norms could be challenged.

<sup>5</sup> Voluntary subordination has been criticised by authors such as James Scott C. (1990), who considers that individuals oppose resistances.

<sup>6</sup> As our research project has a strong gender focus, we will give this notion particular emphasis here.

## Background & method<sup>7</sup>

We conducted our research in Paris, France from June 2012 to February 2013, using two scenarios: interviews and observations of Information and ICTs' training sessions. Firstly, we interviewed 21 Parisians over 60 years of age, comprising of 14 women and 7 men, who were mostly retired. Thirteen of these retired people were recruited through our social network, and 8<sup>8</sup> of them were recruited through the French non-profit organisation E-Seniors ([www.e-seniors.asso.fr/](http://www.e-seniors.asso.fr/)).

Secondly, we attended 16 computer and Internet training sessions in two Parisian districts (8 sessions in each district, 2 hours a week): The Social Centre of 20th district, which is considered as popular, and the City Hall of the 4th district of Paris, which is seen as an advantaged neighbourhood in terms of social privilege. These sessions were provided by the E-Seniors Association which was created in 2005 and whose aim is to fight against E-exclusion by providing training and access to ICTs for seniors and/or disabled people. Aimed at seniors, their goal is to reduce the digital divide. Usually, E-Seniors participants are socially diverse but consist mostly of women. In these sessions, women have always outnumbered men, but the instructor nonetheless explained that with the democratisation of the Internet and the boom in digital technology (like tablets, computers, smartphones and other electronic devices), the proportion of women attendees had also risen (today 4 out of 5 trainees are women, according to the director of the organisation). The social profile of the public has also changed. Initially, it mainly comprised of more socially privileged seniors, but now an increasing number of seniors with modest revenues and/or immigrant backgrounds attend.

Sessions we have observed consisted of four women and two men for the 20th district, and five women and one man for the 4th district of Paris. Contrary to expectations, training participants of the 20th district and 4th district are rather socially similar: both demonstrate a social heterogeneity as we can meet both higher social classes (professors, dentists...) and modest social categories (i.e. a caretaker, a taxi driver...). Among those attendees, five have less than a high school diploma, and six have completed a bachelor's degree or a university degree. Nevertheless, these participants are especially distinguished by their skills: the most qualified seniors, usually more privileged, are already equipped with computer equipment and have the minimum abilities to surf on the web and use social media. They attend this association to perfect certain skills. However, the least qualified seniors, with low literacy skill levels, are full of expectation towards the association, which is, as ICTs, all the more a place of "social reliance" (Jouët, 2011).

### 1. The contribution of intersectionality to the theories of domination

Many works use domination theories (see Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013; Witte, Kiss & Lynn, 2013; Granjon, 2005) to study digital divides, since these reflect asymme-

<sup>7</sup> Actually, we observed 11 attendees but 3 refused to be interviewed.

<sup>8</sup> Although the results presented here date from 2012, the argumentation remains relevant insofar as the evolution of electronic devices and rate connections do not ipso facto affect power relations.

tries among senior users. To develop this further, we could say that, on one hand, there are the dominant, who have access to ICTs and the necessary technical capital to use them, and then the dominated, who are limited to operational and less-skilled uses of computers and digital content. Although the notion of “digital divide” was originally coined with respect to the question of social difference in access to ICTs, its meaning soon changed, shifting from the question of connection and equipment to discrimination in the ways these digital technologies were used (operational skills), as well as to the “quality” of use, as it soon became clear that this varies according to individual social characteristics and hence the degree of computer literacy. In addition, while democratised access to digital technologies and their ubiquity have indeed helped to narrow the digital divide, they have nonetheless created a new divide concerning the “quality” of use and the social distribution of time. It has thus been shown that the intensive use of digital technologies, particularly among the younger generations, involves applications that amount to a “waste of time”.<sup>9</sup> This means that there is little point in studying the digital divide uniquely in terms of accessibility, given that Web users display cultural practices that – like any cultural practice – need to be analysed in light of their position within a social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1984a).

For this reason, it is useful to call on the theory of domination as this places stratification as a founding principle of societal order. Clearly, the notion of a stratified society holds a particular interest for studying the digital divide, as previous research has shown that ICTs use – especially when specific technical skills are required – relates to a distinct form of power or a desire for recognition, notably where seniors are involved (Michel et al., 2009). Bourdieu (1984a) has contributed to this area of research by seeking to demonstrate the symbolic aspects of segregation through a concept whereby capital is distributed in several forms – economic, cultural, educational and social – each independent of the others and related to different fields. Bourdieu (1984a) has even shown that economic capital varies inversely to cultural capital. Aiming to decrypt the inequalities underpinning society, Bourdieu’s sociology of domination is a priori a suitable theoretical model for studying the uses of digital technologies. As these are an extension of tastes most often inherited from family or school environments, they reflect a structured space of more or less gratifying positions in which the individual is located. However, in the age of digital culture, this sociology of domination seems to fall short, not only due to its apparent rigidity but also because it saddles the dominated classes with the incapacity to resist. For Bourdieu, the sociology of domination is also a sociology of legitimacy insofar as the social order operates on stratified model not least because the dominated believe in and submit to this order. Thus in the cultural sphere, the theory of legitimacy posits that the individual is located in a field where his/her behaviour towards culture is hierarchized (Bourdieu, 1984a). According to this model, each practice is associated with a certain cultural legitimacy. The dominant class is responsible for organising the ladder of legitimacies and thereby the principles of high culture.

This theory, while establishing a correlation between the quality of cultural works and the quality of their audiences, has nonetheless been critiqued by a number of studies (Peterson, 1992; Donnat, 1994). More recently, it has been challenged by the

<sup>9</sup> See Richtel, M. (2012). “Wasting Time Is New Divide in Digital Era”. May 29, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/30/us/new-digital-divide-seen-in-wasting-time-online.html> (last accessed 28 October 2018).

development of digital culture, and especially by websites with user-generated content, Wikipedia being a prime example. Conceptualized as a non-academic project, this on-line encyclopaedia blurs traditional cultural hierarchies and upsets the system of rules defining the field of cultural production. This field, according to Bourdieu, is structured through power relations and domination modes wherein the dominated classes seek to acquire the most valued capitals in the social hierarchy. Yet, this type of sociology does not take into account the performative aspect of an individual's expressivist<sup>10</sup> potential (Allard, 2008), which is encouraged by socio-digital media. Neither does it take on board the forms of resistance and emancipatory potential offered by digital technologies. Finally, a sociology that structures the social world in this way views the conjunction of certain characteristics as an accumulation of handicaps (e.g. being an old, immigrant woman from a poor background) leading to a state of subordination. For this reason, an intersectional approach<sup>11</sup> seems to be more appropriate for analysing the relationship between seniors and digital technologies. It allows cross-comparison of age, gender and class, which more than mere variables become analytical categories influenced by relations of power and domination. This approach sheds significant light on many combined forms of domination (Crenshaw, 1989), which all constitute specific power configurations and possibilities for resistance.

## 2. Seniors, Icts, and social relations of age, gender and class

For many years seniors were considered excluded from ICTs (Millward, 2003) since they were less equipped than other sections of the population and less computer-literate having not been immersed in the digital world. But things have changed, the elderly population has become increasingly equipped and connected (Croutte et al., 2017; Anderson & Perrin, 2017). In France, for instance, in June 2017, 75% of the over-60s owned a home computer with an Internet connection, and 83% had broadband services (mobile excluded); this being 46% for the over-70s; and 57% for broadband services, compared to a national rate of 90% and 95% respectively for 18-to-24-year-olds (Croutte et al., 2017: 48-65). However, although the rate is increasing, the older categories are still the least connected and excluded from digital life. Whether in France or in the United States for example, seniors remain relatively under-equipped (i. e. tablets, smartphones, etc.) compared to the remainder of the population, especially with regards to graduates and the highest socio-economic households which take advantage of the opportunities presented by digital technology (Croutte et al., 2017; Anderson & Perrin, 2017). In France, 81% of non-Internet

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<sup>10</sup> Stemming from the notion of « expressivism », this adjective is, as we will demonstrate, specifically employed in France by Laurence Allard who is inspired by the work of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (*Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*) devoted to the origins of contemporary individualism, and notably in the expressivist current of the romantic period.

<sup>11</sup> Developed by the American lawyer Kimberle W. Crenshaw (1989) in the late 1980s in the wake of Black feminist movement, the notion of intersectionality aimed to highlight the dilemmas encountered in the American political arena by certain categories of people subject to combined forms of domination, specifically black women. As an analytical category, race, along with social class and gender, thus formed the conceptual basis of this notion. However, for want of space, and since our study did not analyse this notion, we will not include it in our analysis.



users are aged 60 and over – mainly retired persons (72%), 59% are not highly educated and generally have lower incomes than the rest of the population (Croutte et al., 2017: 55). Similarly, 2017 data produced by the Pew Research Center on American seniors show that 67% of seniors aged 65+ are connected to the Internet (Anderson & Perrin, 2017), compared to 86% for the rest of the population (Smith, 2014). For example, in France (Croutte et al., 2017) and the United States (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012; Anderson & Perrin, 2017), in addition to age, the level of education is clearly a determining influence on both digital technology ownership and use.

The last significant factor is gender, not so much with regards to access – in France, 86% of men and 84% of women have a home internet connection (smartphones not included: Croutte et al., 2017: 48), but more with respect to use. Age, gender and social class are all determining factors but less so when taken separately than when interlinked. They also create different configurations depending on how they are combined. Class is nonetheless a strong explanatory factor. In fact, age, gender and social class are not simply factors that give rise to objective differences. They form analytic categories that should be viewed in terms of social relationships. Dealing with gender in this way, rather than as the result of a difference between two sexes, is a way of questioning power relations between the sexes. This means it is important to understand that the norms governing each gender are socially constructed on the basis of a dichotomy between two “classes” of gender (Scott, 1986) organised around a principle of hierarchy between masculine and feminine domains, which often privileges the former’s values as the dominant ones. The same goes for age: treating age as a social relationship means highlighting not only relationships of domination among age groups, but also the symbolic violence that the elderly sometimes suffer not only due to an institutionalized age stratification but also due to the paucity of research within the human and social sciences into the lives of elderly people (Paul & Stegbauer, 2005). Age-related norms influence individuals’ daily lives in many ways (Caradec, 2012): the media targets people based on age categories, organizations establish subscription cards or discounts based on age, ways of dressing and behaving in society, and one’s need to “fit” one’s age... Lastly, social class remains an important factor, given the persistence of inequality in ICTs usage according to educational levels and the degree of cultural capital (Van Dijk, 2008) as well as household income (Croutte et al., 2017; Anderson & Perrin, 2017). This factor can also be viewed as a social relationship in the sense that the position that individuals occupy in the social space reflects power relations. Here, we base our observations on the concept of “social relationships” that recognises individuals’ social constraints, while also considering that they “can construct margins of freedom and action allowing them to displace these social relations” (Pfefferkorn, 2012: 122). This perspective avoids a determinist logic that puts the social before the technical or the other way around, as well as the “static” approach that view social relations as reproducing themselves indefinitely.

Born before the digital boom, seniors rarely take the initiative to source ICT equipment and “have remained largely isolated from the equipment process” (Donnat, 2007). More often, they are encouraged by their children or by an end-of-career context. Their use of ICTs is rooted in the “generation” variable and is due to different reasons: identity-related uses linked to the self-image they wish to convey; social uses to obtain social recognition and feel part of society; relational uses enabling them to communicate with family and friends and keep intergenerational ties alive; and finally, utilitarian uses... (Le Douarin, 2014). Seniors however approach digital

technologies somewhat reluctantly (Le Douarin & Caradec, 2009; Croutte et al., 2017). This is mainly reflected in the contradictory discourses that accompany their ICT use: certainly, these technologies hold a certain fascination for older adults but seem to be out of reach due to their lack of operational, theoretical and technical skills (Millward, 2003). In fact, most seniors often say they have no confidence in their abilities to use technology and cite the question of skills as an important barrier to entry (Croutte et al., 2017; Anderson & Perrin, 2017).

Seniors often seem torn between an optimistic discourse (ICTs provide entertainment and are an unavoidable means of modern communication) and a refractory discourse, especially with regard to expressive media such as blogs or social networking sites (SNSs). Uses, technology, skills and values are in fact the source of generational conflicts and, at the same time, technology can strengthen some ties between ascendants and descendants (Le Douarin, 2014). However, although 60-and-overs are narrowing the divide with the younger generations (Paul & Stegbauer, 2005; Croutte et al., 2017; Anderson & Perrin, 2017), they will always lag behind those who have grown up immersed in “digital culture.” The values conveyed by digital technologies are often denounced by seniors as being individualistic, commercial, voyeuristic... One interviewee complained that young generations constantly communicate by way of screens; another criticised the overriding need for self-exhibition on social media... The generational factor proves to be a source of tension: seniors speak of the will to master digital technology in their own way, but they encounter endless obstacles due to ongoing technical developments. They want to be on board and create social medias accounts, but state that they will use these in line with their own values. This suggests that the age group determines use; most informants speak of their age to explain their practices. Thus, a 68-year-old widower and former police officer came for ICTs training even though he had no interest in digital technologies. He followed his life-partner, wanting to please her, and called himself “an old fogey” who was “behind the times”. Another example: a 78-year-old retired literature teacher spoke about “stuff that’s not for (her) age” when talking about Facebook comments. Others nonetheless contested this “labelling”. A 66-year-old, separated and retired female dentist (who declined our interview) expressed her refusal to be linked to an age group:

I’m reluctant about the idea of an interview about which I know nothing except that it’s for seniors and concerns this age group’s lifestyles, because I hate categories and this type of classification. I don’t really “feel” part of it even if my age says otherwise.

Others criticised the fact that their uses were catalogued on the basis of marketing criteria. Far from being a neutral criterion or a simple biological fact, through the norms associated with it, age continues to raise classification conflicts (Bourdieu, 1984b).

### 3. ICTs and Gendered Social Relations

For a long time, women were reluctant to use computers. Not only have studies shown that computers carried the seal of male domination (Turkle, 1986) but also



that, culturally, women were not socialized in a world that predisposed them to want to use computer technology. In social representations, use of computers is effectively associated with a male universe and implies that men are supposed to innately possess greater technical skills (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006) or that male behaviour must correspond to these stereotyped representations (Peterson, 2010). However, with the rise of digital technology and the internet, computers have now become communication tools (Jouët, 2011) and media. This is why ICTs have become massively popular and widely used by women, especially in social media (Anderson, 2015) both in France (Crouette et al., 2017) and internationally (Comscore, 2010). Moreover, the history of technology shows that women have not been excluded from technology: the examples of the typewriter (Gardey, 2001), telephone switchboards and office equipment all show women's uptake of these technologies, especially in the world of work. But their uses have been limited to applications that are little valued (*ibid.*), reflecting a reproduction of the sexual division of roles, in line with the naturalisation of these gender differences. The gendered division of ICTs use on the scale of values persists. On the one hand, domestic appropriation of ICTs by women does not give them a deeper technical culture – as using these technologies is now simpler and more intuitive – and on the other hand, the way women use digital technologies brings them no added-value (Bourdeloie, 2013), contrary to strictly technical IT uses that are mostly a male preserve. Men are in the majority when it comes to contributing to projects like Wikipedia (Bourdeloie & Vicente, 2014) (87% of worldwide Wikipedia contributors are men) or open source software communities (98.5% of developers are men: Nafus et al., 2006). Thus technologies uses have lost their distinctive power (Jouët, 2011), with the exception of purely computer-based applications. Finally, despite the possibilities opened up by Web 2.0, digital uses have not changed the gender-based division of interests and conform to gender stereotypes (Carstensen, 2009). Women use the Internet more for social media, communication, health, children's education and household-related activities; men use it more for information, political news and leisure activities (Fallows, 2005; Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Jones et al., 2009; Comscore, 2010; Anderson, 2015).

Although our investigation draws extensively on studies dealing with gender-based uses, we wish to go beyond a binary logic that has no heuristic value. While the uses of the Web and computers by the seniors we interviewed reveal continuums in the gender-based divide of interests, they also suggest possible reconfigurations. Continuities are visible in women's ICT use, which is strongly characterised by a relational dimension (Jouët, 2011) resulting from the social distribution of roles. Continuities also appear for some individuals who “naturally” pursue the types of activities they were responsible for during their careers. This is the case of a retired woman who uses office computer programmes in the same way as she had done for her job as a secretary; she insisted that this use was normal given her professional background, but also that she wished to keep her own affairs in order. Also relevant to social roles is the fact that women make up the majority of trainees (75-80%) at the French E-Seniors Association. As men are more confident (Enochsson, 2005) and supposedly possess “natural” technical skills, which they moreover tend to value highly (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006). The instructor at the E-Seniors Association explained that men are under-represented due to their “nature,” as they are very sure of themselves: “In general...they know everything,” he stated. Their attitudes in the workshops are interesting to observe in this respect: with the exception of one so-

cially dominated user, men tend to keep more distance from the instructor, and often seem distracted. Whatever their level of digital culture, they display more self-assurance than women, who listen carefully to the instructor's lessons. This brings to mind the distracted user who, during the interview, justified his behaviour and his non-use of ICTs by stating his lack of interest and the fact that he was only coming along for his partner's sake. Although the gender variable may be a weakness here since the man's digital capital diverges from social representations, he turns this weakness into a strength by foregrounding his devotion to his partner and thus giving himself the dominant edge.

Yet, automatically applying gender roles to ICTs use proves troublesome when individual use patterns are analysed: although roles tend to reproduce themselves, there are also shifts in social roles and different configurations depending on context. A gratifying variable, for example being a man, may be discriminating and vice versa. It is not because women have interiorised male domination (Bourdieu, 2001) that they are less critical of their position. Domination is not *de facto* consensual, and women may show the desire to depart their "statutory assignation" (naturally incumbent role). The retired women that we spoke with often mentioned the traditional role model that was drummed into them, in which a woman is heteronomous and assumes the responsibilities that are supposedly hers in the natural order of things (notably household and family chores). Conscious of this gender-based division of roles, some women try to escape it, not always aware that they are negotiating the norms of masculine hegemony.

Tensions between an assimilation of dominant codes (i.e. traditional gender norms) and a challenge to this sometimes disavowed male supremacy, are then visible. Such is the case of the 62-year-old concierge who recounted the experience of being abandoned by her husband. She nonetheless concluded with a disapproval of her husband's initially domineering position. Brought up in the traditional model where women are no more than wives and mothers, this woman spoke about the violence she had suffered at the hands of a husband who left her for her younger cousin, even though she had "fed him and given him a roof for forty years". There are thus signs that gender-based roles are shifting through digital practices. Women in particular are putting strategies in place to resist the gendered identity they have been given. There is a perceivable tension playing out between the reproduction of assigned roles and a strong desire for emancipation. Seniors are using digital technologies to rebuild their lives and integrate new experiences such as widowhood, marital breakdown or interruption of professional life, etc., which leads them to reallocate their time, adopt new rhythms of life and enjoy the entertainment they prefer. This is particularly the case for women. Several seniors, for example, decided to purchase internet equipment and subscriptions during a period of unemployment or after the death of their companion. Some, on the other hand, use ICTs to create their own space outside of their spouse's control, a space of enjoyment and leisure outside of the couple – as if, in modern individual-centric society, couples needed to find a balance between time for oneself and time together (de Singly, 2000). For example, one 68-year-old retired woman living in a couple asked her daughter to sign her up to a French dating website for seniors (<http://www.quintonic.fr/>) without informing her partner, whom she suspected of "hiding things." She never actually used this website, but also asked her daughter to create a separate email account for her, unbeknown to her partner (she had not created her other address herself), as if to place herself on equal footing with him.

Beyond a gender-based differentiation of activities and technical skills, the relation to ICTs and their uses are symptomatic of gendered social relationships in which many different issues are at stake. One retiree with minimal knowledge of computers and the Web, and who said had little interest in the technical side of computers, always gets her companion to fix the slightest technical glitch since, as she said, he is a “pro”. As a result, the technical know-how she confers upon her companion – in line with a naturalist ideology that assigns the mastery of things technical to men – ultimately gives him the power to hide certain activities that she suspects are not very respectable. Likewise, a 68-year-old janitor, separated from her husband and new to computers and the internet, was never interested in his computer usage, even though he had been at home for ten years. Today, she regrets it, convinced that knowing about computers would have changed her relationship with him and avoided physical and digital adultery. In such cases, technical skills not only reflect the issue of conjugal power and levelling gender-based relations, but also that of identity in the sense that it is a question of preserving one’s own domain, while also extending it so as to assert oneself vis-à-vis one’s spouse. This is also one of the reasons women go to the E-Seniors Association: they want to master ICTs so as not to depend on men. Forms of resistance to masculine hegemony thus exist: gendered identity is questioned here. The women wanting to learn about digital technology find spaces of emancipation. Those who do not follow the training come to enjoy moments of leisure, without their partners. Some, however, find it hard to break out of the gender role they have internalised and are reluctant to move away from the traditional role model; notably those women at the bottom of the social ladder.

#### **4. Discussion: From the Reproduction to the Intersection of Social Relations**

Be it education, digital and cultural activities, sociability, distribution of time... age, gender and class constitute powerful explanatory variables. Class, however, is the determining vector of power, since age and gender effects decrease sharply when individuals belong to a privileged class. The first example involves time distribution for cultural, social and domestic activities. As most seniors have no professional time constraints and thus more free time, they generally face a new experience of time in the social space. Yet, the way this time is organised is unequally distributed depending on social class and gender. In terms of social class, the sociology of time has clearly shown the link conjoining lack of time and wealth in the social and cultural realms (Pronovost, 1994). In terms of gender, it has revealed inequalities between the sexes. Retired women are much more involved in family, domestic and educative matters than men (Ricroch & Roumier, 2011; Treas & Drobnič, 2010). The lower the individual on the social ladder, the greater the degree of gender segregation. This means that a gendered division of roles and a gender-based relationship to ICTs are more accentuated in the lower classes (Granjon, 2009). Likewise, the way socialising is managed is not only gendered but also socially hierarchized and distributed in line with how much cultural capital one possesses (Héran, 1988). For the most vulnerable members of society, age and gender are aggravating factors. Seen in this light, an elderly woman from an underprivileged social background would most likely have little opportunity to acquire the basic digital technologies knowledge enabling her to escape from a so-

cial background and stereotyped role linked to her social class, her gender and age. In our investigation, for instance, the internet use of two female janitors was very limited: one of them, whose existence depended entirely on her husband's, had not managed to make the digital world her own, except for the occasional viewing of online news or spying on her husband's Facebook activity. The other woman limited her use to communicating with her family and friends via Skype and playing games on Facebook. In the case of these two women, social class – which explains the over-investment in their role of wife – strongly influenced their sociability as well as their cultural activities and limited use of Internet. Age, gender and social class form a triad that a priori produce a mathematical pattern of domination. However, if a domination model alone is used to analyse the above cases, we deprive ourselves of an interpretation in which socio-digital technologies may carry an emancipatory logic and help to bring about change, particularly regarding identity. Focusing again on the 62-year-old woman janitor, who was separated from her partner and complied with hegemonic gender norms, as she had always lived in her husband's shadow and had renounced all leisure activities of her own: the spouse's departure allowed her to renegotiate her gendered identity. She said that she had been doing things for herself for some time, such as signing up for training at E-Seniors in order to use a computer and the internet. These activities lifted her out of her traditional cultural sphere as well as her exclusive role of spouse, which she had fulfilled "body and soul". More importantly, the changes she experienced after the break-up with her husband affected not only her social and cultural worlds but also her physique; according to her, she had improved her weight. Thus, although her life-course still bears the marks of statutory assignation, her practices – especially since her husband left her – translate the desire for self-expression. This means that she has taken a distance from the conventional conjugal model in which she was steeped, a resistance breakthrough of sorts that encompasses an emancipatory dimension.

The other case of interest for an intersectional approach is that of a man (aged 63, single, retired government employee) with several discriminating social attributes and a difficult past: from a poor background, single, with no higher education, illiterate and formerly alcoholic, etc. His isolation renders him socially fragile. Aware of his illiteracy and his difficulties in understanding the use of computers and keyboards, his use of the web and email is extremely limited. In fact, as he is socially dominated, his male gender is a handicap here: he does not conform to representations of men as tech-savvy and, during his E-Seniors training, finds himself dominated by women with much more social, cultural and digital capital than his own. As a result, the gender-age-class nexus seems to place this user in a social relation of subordination, in which he is ill-served by his gender. Yet, even though his use of ICTs is elementary, it is nonetheless a form of resistance, particularly to relapsing into the alcoholism he had given up eight years before, which was quite a feat for him. Using ICTs at a social community centre – he does not have his own computer – helps him to steer clear from his dependency on alcohol, which represents his liberation from a form of domination. His use of digital technology also affords him leisure time in which he can reconstruct his social identity.

## Conclusion

These results suggest that we must not allow inequalities in digital technology access and use, to obscure the expressivist potential that these technologies hold, and the

margins of freedom that they offer to women who are seemingly dominated, but who do not automatically acquiesce to male domination. Research on socio-digital divides certainly partly corroborate the model of reproduction, given that inequality in terms of age, gender and class persists and social class remains a determining analytic category. Yet, this does not mean that, on the individual level, men and women do not develop strategies to shift power relations and negotiate with dominant norms. Concerning gendered social relations, for example, ICTs give seniors the opportunity to confront hierarchical relations between the sexes, reconfigure relationships within their couple and perform or not their gendered identity. By applying an intersectional analysis, it is possible to identify reconfigurations of power relations according to context, which determines a variable's degree of discrimination.

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