

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

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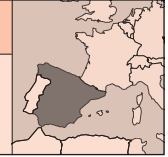
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SPAIN

FOR BETTER OR WORSE? THE IMPACT OF AN ACCELERATED TRANSITION TO ONLINE WORK AND LIFE



Pangea and the eReuse.org initiative

Lorena Merino, Mireia Roura and Leandro Navarro
<https://pangea.org> and <https://www.ereuse.org>

Introduction

The beginning of 2020 was the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the first lockdowns took place, which were the strictest during the first half of the year. The limitations to mobility and contact, which impacted work, education, social contact and businesses, and shifted our daily schedules and routines, led to a boom in teleworking and the “digital world” that has changed the lives of people for better and worse simultaneously. When the Spanish government declared the first state of alarm, citizens moved from public spaces into their homes, and from their homes to their screens.

For Pangea, the first year of the pandemic meant an increase in the workload, with our services mainly focused on helping our members to be able to continue working from home during times of confinement.

But about 15% of households in Catalonia were unable to do so, as they did not have a computer at home with which they could remain connected to the world, or exercise fundamental rights such as accessing education or public services. In our eReuse project,¹ we witnessed how precarious the situation of many families was, and how resources impacted the possibilities of accessing information and communications technologies (ICTs) – from the most basic things like having a computer, to connecting to the internet or having the necessary software to interact properly or do work at home.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the school enrolment ratio due to the digital divide fell worldwide in the first months of the pandemic to levels seen in 1985.² While it was difficult and costly for families with school children to engage in remote learning, those who had lost their jobs struggled to stay online. Older people

were affected too. The digital world is not easily accessible and sometimes is difficult to understand and manage.

Two years later, for those who could get online, much of their work and activities have shifted to the digital world, with many businesses and universities now considering hybrid models of work, teaching and interaction. We are getting used to it. But will it be good for people and the planet?

The rapid transition to a new digital normal

In Pangea’s day-to-day work, the first queries we received and our main workload were in the area of our email service. Many of our partners had their email accounts configured with POP3 on their office and work PCs. In the first weeks and months we received many requests for help to reconfigure their email accounts on their PCs at home in order to be able to continue working. These queries were for help in setting up email accounts in different email programs (Thunderbird, Outlook, Gmail, etc.) and to access and copy messages saved by POP3 on office PCs. There was also a significant number of queries from members who switched directly to Roundcube, a webmail manager that we have available for Pangea members.

The other large bulk of enquiries was for help in using the Nextcloud³ service. The use of this service skyrocketed in 2020. The number of Pangea members who started using it or extended its use in order to have their organisation’s files in the cloud for teleworking grew significantly. We went from just over a hundred accounts in Nextcloud in 2019 to 500 accounts by the end of 2021. The amount of space occupied has also grown significantly, exceeding 1.6 TB in Nextcloud. Apart from Pangea’s Nextcloud service, some partners also used Google Drive and Dropbox, and sometimes they asked us for support in using these services even though we do not offer them.

In addition to help with email and using Nextcloud, there were also many enquiries and demands for videoconferencing services and services for seminars and online training. Pangea does not offer any of these services, but they are offered by the Guifi.

¹ <https://ereuse.org>

² UNDP. (2020). *COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery*. <https://hdr.undp.org/en/hdp-covid>

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nextcloud>

net Foundation with whom we collaborate closely, so we advised and recommended to members that they use Jitsi and BigBlueButton and approach the Guifi.net Foundation for help. Advice and recommendations were also given on other available platforms, such as Zoom. Despite the demand, the fact that the Guifi.net Foundation offers the services, and the limited capacity of our infrastructure and the work of our staff, we decided against the possibility of offering the services directly to our members, preferring instead to continue the collaboration with the Guifi.net Foundation.

Other services about which we have been consulted were remote desktops (we do not offer the service and unfortunately, we have not found a free software alternative that we could recommend, falling back on commercial and paid options such as TeamViewer or Google tools), and virtual private networks (VPNs). We have offered advice to some member organisations about setting up their VPNs and accessing their local server to be able to telework, but this has been limited advice.

We do not have precise data on the increase in the workload that COVID-19 has meant for our activities, but as a qualitative assessment we can say that the number of email messages received or answered at suport@pangea.org went from 2,412 in 2019 to 3,827 in 2020, exceeding 900 support tickets in 2021. So far the level of this workload has stayed the same in 2022 – suggesting that the solutions members explored are still being used, and were not a once-off fix for the lockdowns.

We do not have data on the number of calls received, but qualitatively we can see that the number of calls tripled in the first quarter of 2020, taking up many days of the support person's half-day work time, as well as extra time answering messages left on our answering machine. The telephone workload decreased a lot during 2021, returning to what was usual in pre-pandemic times. We associate this mainly with the fact that many people have already organised themselves for telework and do not need the extra help needed at the start of the pandemic.

The tech “side effects” of the pandemic

In the light of all this information, it should not be forgotten that this landing of the “digital world” in our daily lives, from work to our personal lives, which COVID-19 has accelerated exponentially, has brought with it side effects that are sometimes not as wonderful as we might think.

For example, having to telework and become more active socially online in order to adapt to the new situation, together with the uncertainty and insecurity derived from the restrictions and their

effects on employment, economics, etc., has led to “digital burnout” for many people. In part this is a result of not being able to manage teleworking well, working longer hours than required or than usual, with no real disconnection between work and family life, with everything being done in the same space at home. This may not be the case for everyone, but in the case of Pangea's staff, and certainly in terms of work hours, the extra effort that was needed was very noticeable during 2020 – we had to help all the members who needed it and not leave anyone behind. For the members, it was critical and urgent to be able to telework, and for us this urgency meant a work overload, with not enough time to properly disconnect or to be able to rest.

Digital inequality became a blatant inequity that the government was forced to address. And it did so through the old familiar linear economy model, with the government of Catalonia putting out a tender for the acquisition of more than 300,000 laptops for some 82 million euros. The number was insufficient for the existing needs and the solution turned out to not be so effective: in January 2021, eight months later, only 5% of the laptops had reached their destination. The shortages of devices and components and stockouts highlighted the underlying lack of resilience of the capitalist system globally, and of the linear economy, in particular.

Indeed, while demand for new PCs has grown with the rise of teleworking and home schooling, supply has decreased due to supply chain problems (especially with respect to computer chips) and transportation problems. While analysts forecast refurbished PC sales to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11% between 2019 and 2027,⁴ reuse centres in Catalonia have seen significant increases in sales of functional equipment as consumer patterns are slowly changing.

The pandemic brought out the worst and the best in society. Hundreds of initiatives began to emerge in the territory with the aim of alleviating the digital divide. Citizen activities to donate and repair computers followed one after the other in the best possible way – the situation did not allow for an assessment of which devices were useful, or which beneficiaries needed additional skills to use them properly. However, while citizen mobilisation helped to narrow the digital divide as much as it could, it also awakened the old trauma of the level of inequality in society, which remains unresolved.

The eReuse project manages the donation of computers from public and private entities to social

⁴ <https://www.transparencymarketresearch.com/refurbished-computers-laptops-market.html>

entities, sending them to companies that refurbish them for reuse or recycle them when they are not reusable. During the first two years of the pandemic, our eReuse software recorded a significant increase in the number of devices donated, refurbished and traced for subsequent recirculation. Thousands of devices were recirculated to the most disadvantaged population at an average price of about 40 euros of refurbishment cost per tower – a cost which was taken up by crowdfunding campaigns, local cooperation projects and public institutions or paid by the end-users themselves. This is a much more advantageous price for the public coffers than the 300-400 euros per laptop that was tendered for the purchase of new devices.

These numbers were made possible thanks to the cooperation between about 20 social and solidarity economy organisations, which collect, refurbish and distribute equipment, even in a chaotic context where demand was soaring during the peaks of the pandemic.

During the first two years of the pandemic, headlines highlighting the “digital divide” had their moments in the media and on social networks. This marketing of inequality has contributed to making the inequalities more visible and to deepening our understanding of its multiple facets, while encouraging the involvement of citizens, businesses, non-profits and public administrations. In general, there has also been a shift from emergency or welfare action by citizens or corporate social responsibility campaigns to political action and solutions based on public-community partnerships. In this framework, working groups, networks, public funds and facilities to ensure access to devices and the internet, as well as to alleviate skills and knowledge gaps, have increased considerably.

However, there are still more questions than answers, and new challenges emerge. For example, while connectivity exists, it sometimes is available at unfair prices and under unfair conditions. We find families spending around and beyond 10% of their disposable income to pay for the internet and devices for their digital life and work. This situation has prompted the Spanish government to reform the Telecommunications Law to ensure that retail prices are accessible to citizens with low incomes or social support needs.

Conclusion

The pandemic has forced us to rethink the way we work and relate to each other and has created new needs. This has presented us with choices among different options which entail different economic costs, individual and collective costs, as well as side

effects (e.g. exploitation of our data and conditioning of our choices through advertising).

It has left a more skilled population accustomed to online activities. It has also left a more isolated and precarious population – those who have not been able to “go digital”. It has changed and advanced the way we relate digitally with public and private organisations. It has also made us aware of the risks and limitations of the online world compared to the offline world.

These changes, and the normalisation of the digital, have helped those with sufficient resources and training more, and have therefore widened the gap between those who do and do not have them. Access to the offline world begins with walking into the public space. In contrast, access to the digital world requires a digital device and a connection, which come at an economic, educational, privacy and environmental cost. We need to buy digital media on the market and pay with money and our data to be present in an increasingly privatised and extractive digital world.

Our digital “life” requires a sustainable digital world for people and nature, as a global public good. We must ensure that we have the freedom to participate – that this participation is not a barrier for anyone. We need to have a device and a connection, be able to share or publish our ideas, satisfy our needs, and be able to interact with companies or public entities without being forced to use or contract commercial services that limit, exploit or exclude us. We need to have the autonomy to decide (what hardware to have, what software to use, how to connect to the digital world), with the confidence of understanding clearly what is being done with our data and how things work, so that we are not deceived and manipulated through self-interest and the use of biased data. We need the peace of mind of knowing that this digital world does not contribute to destroying the planet, but rather to protecting it in a way that supports us and supports future generations.

Action steps

Given that more people are online now, and that hybrid ways of socialising, working and learning are becoming the norm, we need to rapidly upscale the public debate on exactly what the sustainable and ethical use of technology means. The following key issues need to be taken into consideration:

- What are the ethical choices that we need to make when contracting internet and online service providers? Key flashpoints include whether or not the services use open source or proprietary systems, whether they are extractive or

non-extractive business models (e.g. do they rely on data extraction and manipulation for profit?), and how their activities impact on digital rights.

- With regard to economic models, choices need to be made between diversity or uniformity of products and services, local or global services or products, the use of private companies or cooperatives working for social inclusion or promoting a solidarity economy, and a privatised versus commons governance model for digital infrastructures.
- The production and use of devices need to be considered: How does a linear versus circular economy contribute to or detract from local development, the economy, people, and the natural environment? What are the impacts of our devices on sustainability?
- The need for training and support in technological decision making and the sustainable use of technology should be considered. How to prevent data capture by public and private actors that limit our rights needs to be thought through, and how best to exercise and expand human rights online. Related to this, there is a need for open data and flexible and free digital tools for community awareness and action.
- Biased, unreliable information is free and easy to find on the internet. Verified information – which is properly referenced, argued and reliable – requires ways to fund its development, and is a requirement for digital sovereignty, more citizen freedom, and less manipulation of public discourse.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2021-2022 Report
www.GISWatch.org