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Invention Helps Seniors Get Plugged In

Device Caters to Interests, Needs and Tastes

By [Fredrick Kunkle](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
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Two young inventors have created a device, with the help of hands-on testing at a Fairfax County retirement community, that they say might change the way older Americans get news and entertainment.

Using modified MP3 players, computers and large touch-screen monitors in high-contrast colors for people with impaired vision, Charles De Vilmorin and Herve Roussel have created a digital kiosk that serves as a sort of iPod for older people.

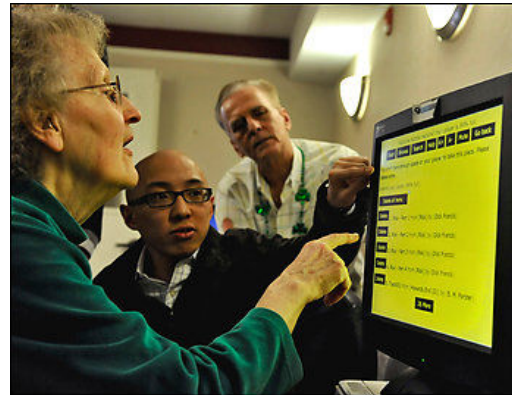
De Vilmorin, who came to the United States from France as part of a study program, said the kiosk allows people to download music, news or audio entertainment from a menu tailored to their interests. The system, produced by their start-up company, Linked Senior, has been in use for about a year and a half by residents at Vinson Hall Retirement Community in McLean.

At the kiosk near the cafeteria in Vinson Hall, residents can download big-band music, spoken books, audio news taken from print media such as the Economist, cooking lessons with Julia Child and on-air dramas such as "Dragnet" that played in an era when "wireless" referred generally to AM radio. Users do not have to log in, remember passwords or strain to read and type in text on a tiny screen, De Vilmorin said.

Instead, residents receive a small MP3 player that can be plugged into the kiosk. It allows them to choose material from a menu on a large touch-screen. Even the language has been modified for a generation that did not grow up with computers: Instead of "download," the computer program asks users whether they would like to "take" a selection. The system can search or browse selections and make suggestions based on users' tastes. Other content can tie in with activities in the retirement community: A user might download an audio guide to a museum that members are planning to visit, for instance.

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Marta Harkins, 80, of Vinson Hall Retirement Community gets help using a digital kiosk co-created by Herve Roussel, center. In the background is Fred Johnson. (Photos By Tracy A. Woodward - The Washington Post)

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"The system is wonderful," said Marta Harkins, 80, a former Arlington resident



who was demonstrating the kiosk at Vinson Hall on Tuesday. Harkins said she has trouble reading books in large print, so she relies mostly on recorded books to satisfy her love of reading. Her grandson had once given her an iPod to use on a long trip, filling it with the audio books she loves, but Harkins found the device too cumbersome because of its tiny buttons and tiny text.

"Believe me, when you reach this stage, you can't see anymore," she said.

That's less true of the Linked Senior device, she said, with its plug-and-play features and its high-contrast, flat screen lighted in yellow and black or black and white to help visually impaired users such as herself. About once a week, she downloads a novel, such as E.M. Forster's "Howards End," and drops the loaded device in her purse.

Fred Johnson, director of programs and special events at Vinson Hall, said residents helped the inventors tweak their product to deliver what they wanted. "The residents basically dictated what this is," Johnson said.

The device has been tested at four locations: Vinson Hall, which is an independent-living community that serves military retirees and their families; Arleigh Burke Pavilion, an assisted-living community that is part of the Vinson Hall community; Brighton Gardens at Friendship Heights, which is operated by [Sunrise Senior Living](#); and Caton Merchant House, a retirement community that is part of Prince William County's health system, in Manassas. De Vilmorin said the cost of the system runs about \$15 to \$20 per bed per month.

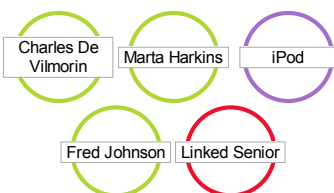
De Vilmorin, 29, went to American University as part of a program with Dauphine University in Paris six years ago. After working as a consultant, De Vilmorin began working on a master's degree at Georgetown University in the field of communication culture and technology. Influenced by French philosopher Michel Foucault's critical studies of closed communities, De Vilmorin became interested in retirement communities, especially after his grandmother entered one outside Paris.

"Residents of retirement homes tend to be very secluded and cut off from the world, and the quality of entertainment is not too great," De Vilmorin said. He and Roussel, 27, aimed to correct that and started searching for a way to allow older people to easily tap into the digital world. They discovered that few high-tech devices are designed for people with impairments, so they wanted to explore making something with universal design features that make it easier to use for people with disabilities.

They also found that although many Web sites cater to young people, few exist for older people. To satisfy an older audience, De Vilmorin tapped the Library of Congress's collections of old radio recordings and other content and made it accessible through the Linked Senior machines.

"A lot of our users are afraid of computers. What it does is it helps older people who are not tech-savvy," De Vilmorin said.

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