

Call for papers

Voluntary disconnection from ICT

International conference

Pau, 13-14 February 2014

Over the last twenty years, the development of ICT has in general received a very positive welcome. Outside the economic and professional sectors, where it has become an essential time-saving resource and beyond the increasingly fast pace of life and the need for simultaneous communications in an environment of generalized chrono-competition, ICT has been a huge success with the general public. It realizes (only partially of course) the age-old dream of being in two places at once and fulfils a fantasy which has been with the human race from the earliest development of the individual, which is to be in permanent contact with one's loved ones. Ubiquity, immediacy and permanence are principles which transcend the reality of this world, which separates, sets apart and isolates. Thus, ICT has been an almost magical resource for the generation which discovered it. But this brave new world of generalized communication is only meaningful if the people involved, at the other end of the air waves, are ready to answer: hence the pressure to remain increasingly connected. This state of connectedness is synonymous with immediacy, safety, openness and entertainment, but it also goes hand in hand with unwanted information, unwelcome calls, overwork, a confusion between urgency and importance and new unauthorized forms of dependence and control. This relationship with ICT is one of the characteristic features of the hypermodern context in which we live.

The hyperconnected are the first to experience the disadvantages which go with intensive use of ICT. They have been the first to adopt a new and unexpected practice: voluntary disconnection. Screen-free days, internet-free days or even telephone-free days, which are now annual events in several Western countries, bear witness to this strategy. Some hotels are now offering wi-fi free holidays and promote the impossibility of remaining connected as an advantage, or even as a luxury to be sought after. In the business world major companies are blocking their executives' smartphones during the night. In the United States some of these companies are even offering their workforce ICT detox programmes. In families, there has been the recent appearance of a "digital sabbath": parents and children agree to temporary disconnection for an evening, a day or a weekend. Some have taken this even further and are experimenting life without internet or phone for several weeks. There has even been a very recent growth in the number of publications devoted to experiences of disconnection.

This conference focuses on ways of refusing, not so much the technologies themselves, as some of their uses, in particular those which lead to excesses, to continuous connection or even to processes of dependence or control. While the theme of non-use or technological refusal has been widely studied, the issue of highly active users of ICT attempting to control the flow of information and communication which affects them by strategies of partial and voluntary disconnection has remained marginal. Although the expansion in phenomena linked to voluntary disconnection has been acknowledged, it has attracted little scientific analysis among the avalanche of newspaper articles, personal testimonies and essays on the question. The result of this has been a boom in comment on these phenomena despite the fact that there

is little qualitative or quantitative research data, or at least a very limited awareness of such data as there is in the public space.

The goal of this conference is to review current scientific investigation of voluntary disconnection. The trend towards disconnection can be observed in a number of forms, both at the level of society and at the individual level. It raises the question of the limits of the experience of hyperconnection and also the ability of the people involved to find ways to deal with the multiple uses made possible by a hyperconnected world. Voluntary disconnection is almost never total and permanent. It would appear rather as partial, limited and therefore temporary. Consequently voluntary disconnection cannot be explained or understood without looking at the meaning of connection and the place it occupies in people's lives.

Papers will analyse the motives and challenges of disconnection in a connected world. They will reveal strategies of disconnection and the inherent tensions that are introduced in the interplay between temporary connections and disconnections as well as the consequences of the experience of disconnection on the way individuals relate to time, space, other people and themselves, looking in particular at the following areas:

1) *Disconnection in professional environments* – for many people, the use of ICT is closely connected to their work. Internet has become the most widely used way to communicate between workers and employers, between colleagues and between companies and their customers. The result of this is an avalanche of emails that need to be filtered, processed and answered. The mobile phone, which made it possible to contact workers at any time and in any place, is being replaced by smartphones which companies provide free of charge to their work force. The consequence is that working time increasingly spills over into personal time and vice-versa. Starting out from an analysis of disconnection in a given professional environment, papers will seek to grasp the specific nature of this disconnection in a context which redefines the challenges that it raises and the meanings that it takes on.

2) *Disconnection in a family context* – the use of ICT within families is part of a growing process of individualisation of the activities of each member of the family, particularly through individualised access to tablets, smartphones and computers, whether laptops or desktops. Now, while there is no longer any necessary correspondence between time physically shared and time actually shared, the members of the family can be contacted, at any time, whatever the distance between them. In this particular context, disconnection may reflect the desire on the part of some or all of the members of the family to “recover” a shared domestic life. It may also be the result of a decision on the part of some members of the family who are trying to temporarily sever the links which keep them close to their spouses, their parents or their children. The goal here will be to attempt to understand the meaning of voluntary disconnection within the context of a renegotiation of the relationships within the family.

3) *Disconnection in a leisure context* – The uses of ICT are also linked to leisure time. While these technologies make it easier to organise leisure activities and facilitate exchanges and meetings, they sometimes make it difficult to take time out, which some people see as necessary in order to stand back and take a break. For example, voluntary disconnection during holidays is a powerful symbol of a desire to temporarily modify one's relationship with other people and to live in a context different from that of day-to-day life. Here, voluntary disconnection can be analysed as a necessity in order to fully experience time for oneself or as an experience of standing back from the technologies themselves.

4) *Events around voluntary disconnection* – voluntary disconnection is sometimes celebrated and promoted by events which have been organised in several western countries. These events reflect both the enthusiasm of some people for this trend of disconnection as well as the fact that the organisers may be activists attempting to make people aware of the benefits of disconnection. Encouraged by people who have already experienced disconnection, these events become tremendous opportunities to disseminate an “ideology” of disconnection, foregrounding the arguments of better quality of life. Analysing these events will give a better insight into the social and political dimensions of disconnection on a macro-social scale.

Proposals (maximum 3000 characters) should include a title, a short exposition of the question addressed, a brief outline of the methodology and the main results. They should give the names (first names and family names) of the participants and the institution to which they belong. They should be sent by e-mail to Jocelyn Lachance (jocelyn.lachance@univ-pau.fr) before 15 October 2013.

Scientific Council:

- Nicole Aubert
- Luc Bonneville
- Dominique Boullier
- Valérie Carayol
- Patrice Flichy
- Francis Jauréguiberry
- Christian Licoppe
- Serge Proulx
- Jean-Pierre Rouch