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DISCONNECTING FROM COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Francis JAURÉGUIBERRY

In less than 25 years, there has been a shift from the brand-new joys of connection to a latent longing for disconnection. When mobile phones first appeared, along with the first personal computers and then the Internet, "connection" became the buzz-word. Presented as synonymous with progress, with bringing down barriers, with unprecedented creative experiences and new forms of citizens' participation, ICTs were so full of promise that not being connected was soon perceived as an injustice: on the one hand were those able to participate fully in the networked society because they had access to equipment and connections, and on the other hand were those who were socially excluded because they had neither. The "digital divide", an idea that mainly came to the fore in the 1990s, relates to this kind of inequality, and therefore to the purely technical problem of accessibility, with the information-rich, those with material access to networks and to the necessary terminals, on the one hand and the information-poor, who were deprived of them, on the other.

With the adoption of ICTs, in the first decade of this century, by a growing percentage of the population (the figures are eloquent: in 1997, 4% of the French population had mobile phones; just 10 years later, the figure had risen to 96%, while the percentage of Internet users more than 11 years of age leapt from 22% in 2001 to 69% in 2010), interest in overcoming the digital divide seemed to wane. A number of researchers (such as Selwyn, Van Dijk, DiMaggio, Hargittai, Lenhart, Helsper or Dutton) began to delve beyond the initial mechanical view of the digital divide, by analysing patterns of use and their associated inequalities, which, instead of being solely a matter of having access to ICTs or not, came to encompass multiple inequalities in terms of know-how and benefits. Ester Hargittai in 2002, seems to have been the first to refer to inequalities in terms of use and appropriation as the "the second-level digital divide". The general idea is that the capacity of individuals to take ICTs fully on board is very unequally distributed and depends greatly not only on their economic capital, but also on their cultural and cognitive capital. According to these studies, what measurements of discriminatory disparities bring to the fore are cultural and educational

capital, know-how and technical ability, social background and sociability networks [1].

We have therefore come a long way from the sole issue of access that dominated the last 20 years of the 20th century and which, in the main, rested on two assumptions. The first was technicist: access to ICTs would equate with rational uses of ICTs. The second was ideological: the greater the amount of communication (quantity), the better communication would be (quality). These studies, which were nearly always empirical, effectively clarified the confusion between access, use and appropriation. Access did not equate with usage, and usage did not equate with equally beneficial appropriation. The assumptions about the first digital divide were that inequalities would disappear with access to the technology. The new approach demonstrates exactly the opposite: not only does access to ICTs not reduce inequality, but also, in the words of Van Dijk (2005, p. 2), "the more [these technologies] permeate society and daily life, the more closely they are bound up with existing social divisions".

But even the second digital divide does not account for another phenomenon that, meanwhile, seems to have taken hold of the "information-rich" segment of the population: a kind of technological fatigue and a nauseated rejection of telecommunications reflected in a longing for disconnection. When it is possible to test this, complete rejection is rare (abandoning the technology for good); rather, disconnection is segmented (in certain situations, and at certain times) and partial (only some uses are abandoned). Those concerned are not people with economic difficulties (quite the reverse, as they mainly belong to the middle and upper classes); they are not culturally marginalised (they all have qualifications, a job and engage in some kind of sport or cultural activity, and they are not cognitively deficient with regard to digital technologies (they have been handling them for months or years). They cannot therefore be classified among those that Everett Rogers (1983), following the logic of diffusion theory, would have referred to as "stragglers", or among those who abandon these technologies after a breakdown or a major change in their lives. In fact the reverse is true, as most of these people are very well integrated, highly

1. Périne Broccorne and Gérard Valenduc (2009) have produced a useful synthesis of these studies. Distinguishing between instrumental competences (i.e. relative capacities for handling hardware and software), informational competences (i.e. capacities for searching, selecting, understanding, assessing and processing information) and strategic competences (which relate to people's aptitude for using information proactively and meaningfully in the context of their own lives and for making decisions to act upon their professional and personal environment).

connected and fully capable of using digital technologies[2]. Moreover, people who start to go off-line have often been heavy users for a long time.

The first studies (Jauréguiberry, 2003, 2005) on these moves to go off-line accounted for this apparent contradiction by postulating information overload as the reason. A longing for disconnection emerges *because* there is too much connection: too many connections, too many demands for attention, too much simultaneity, too much noise and too much information. Disconnection is therefore the outcome of not wanting to be sucked into an unmanageable vortex of information and communication. This hypothesis has been largely confirmed and will be discussed, especially in view of the fact that patterns of partial disconnection all tend towards an ideal of manageable connection. However, as people's stories about going off-line from time to time began to accumulate, a new point emerged that we had completely underestimated. Voluntary disconnection is not only a form of escape prompted by a longing for breathing space, a need to get back to one's own pace or to have some time to oneself. There is also a desire to withdraw, to step back from the world, if only for a few hours, to "take stock" and "get back to who I am". As a time for asking oneself questions, for reflection, for thinking about the meaning of one's life, disconnection is experienced as getting back in touch with one's inner self and relates directly, as we will postulate at the end of this article, to the idea of the subject in a hypermodern society.

THE TWO DRIVERS OF CONNECTEDNESS

There are two constant drivers of the urge to stay connected[3]. The first is integration and belonging. Awareness of a need to be part of the system of telecommunication networks in order to exist socially is a fundamental given in our hypermodern societies. Obviously, it is still possible to do without, but only, like the Amish, the Mennonites and other technophobic societies

2. These are redundant characteristics noted during the DEVOTIC research project (on voluntary disconnection from information and communication technologies), financed by the French National Research Agency, coordinated by the author and which involved some 20 researchers for 4 years: http://anr.devotic.univ-pau.fr. All of the accounts (translated here from the verbatim in the French) are from field interviews conducted for the project.

3. In this section, we deal only with the drivers of individual connectedness decisions. The economic and organisational drivers will be discussed in the other sections. Commercial pressure, especially from telecoms operators, equipment manufacturers and software distributors, is obviously strong as well.

that rejected certain inventions during the 20th century, by remaining outside the environment (networks, means of physical transport and telecommunications) that gives our societies their nervous energy, their agility and vitality. The desire to be recognised in society, not to exist outside it, not to be excluded from it, is fundamental to individual and non-professional reasons for being digitally connected. This compulsion towards integration, the desire to "belong" and not to "lose touch" is understandable only if we do not lose sight of the all-pervading tendency that emerged in the second half of the 20th century, to extend our web of relationships and accelerate exchanges. Everyone wanted the "tremendous new openness", which was synonymous with "choosing identities" and "opportunities for meeting others", that our communication society had brought within their reach. Everyone therefore experimented with belonging to whatever seemed to bring the most benefit in terms of what they perceived about their needs and their tastes at a given moment. The social circle, which until recently had defined individuals quite well, melted away, replaced by a series of more or less ephemeral identity-defining and occupational bubbles that barely intersected. This is a classic theme in contemporary sociology: the contemporary individual is plural, fragmented, polyvalent and even kaleidoscopic [4].

To handle this identity-defining and occupational heterogeneity, the advent of ICTs was certainly timely. They enabled people to move directly from one "tribe" to another, made travel more sure and more profitable, greatly increased possibilities for meeting others and became essential to coordinate every move as and when the need arose. By activating the right network at the right time, it became possible to share things with others at a distance and to be recognised even when absent: integration became increasingly dependent on connection. The persistent contrast drawn in the early days of the Internet between "virtual reality" and "real life" became not only a contradiction in terms (since life off-line involves as much virtuality as life online, which itself is just as real as life off-line), but also meant completely missing out on the experience of a contemporary world that constantly combines the two [5].

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4. See for example, in French, Dubet (1994), Lahire (1998), Martuccelli (2010), Kaufmann (2004).

5. To many people, the most important things that happen in their lives now happen on the Internet. The Internet is not virtual reality, but part of reality itself. Postulating, as does Sherry Turkle in her book entitled *Alone Together* (2011), that the Internet takes people away from "real life" is, in our opinion, a fallacy. The question is, more simply, to understand the place that the Internet occupies in the life of each individual.

At the same time, ICTs also strengthened the strong ties that already existed between people, despite their geographical distance and the flow of time. When mobile phones first appeared, I had shown how useful they were in maintaining interpersonal bonds despite the distance and separation forced on people by daily life[6]. Since then, this possibility has developed continuously: mobile phone calls when we have nothing particular to say but a lot to communicate have increased exponentially (much to the despair of those who understand communication purely as what is contained in the messages exchanged). The reason for the success of ICTs as a means of integration therefore needs to be sought in the possibilities they offer for making a synthesis between opening out and closing in, between zapping and continuity. They reify the lost unity of ties that no longer intersect, either in space or time. As mediating objects, they appear to condense what is scattered and thus help individuals to manage their fragmented existence, their multiple affiliations, to draw together what is here and what is elsewhere. They also make people feel they are not cut off from what Georg Simmel referred to, nearly a century ago, as the "multiple possibles" that people glimpsed in the excitement of modern life in big cities without actually having to engage in those possibilities, which they subsequently hankered for[7]. With smartphones, people can store contacts, telephone numbers and email addresses in the expectation of their possible reactivation. Our Facebook friends, our professional contacts on LinkedIn, traces of the past on Instagram, people we have forgotten, can probably all be found through search engines: everything is not lost, everything is not so far away, everything is within reach.

The second driver of connectedness is efficiency and performance. In this case, motivations are not primarily expressed in terms of emotional or relational connections, but rather in terms of efficiency, usefulness, intensity, gain and profitability. The many Internet services on offer clearly illustrate this and it has become hard to imagine how we can possibly do without. Do we realise how much easier our daily lives have become thanks to emails, online databases, online booking, Webcams and dedicated geo-location apps, and how much more efficient we are in terms of time spent and results obtained? Smartphones have given us access to these services and data wherever we might be, making them even more effective in the conduct of our activities. Where is the nearest tube station? How do I translate these instructions written

6. Jauréguiberry, 1997.
7. Simmel, 2013 [1903].

in a language I don't understand? What will the weather be like tomorrow? Are there any self-service bikes for hire within 200 metres from where I am? All this information is there at the touch of a button, wherever we might be, and the ever-increasing number of electronic sensors in our physical environment and RFID chips attached to objects will produce an even more hybrid world, with even more chatter to prompt other uses, different kinds of travel, different things to buy [8]. By providing us with information on the reality around us and by giving us immediate access to worldwide databanks, smartphones have become the quintessence of technology not only for communication, but also for information and... action - because they can also be used as cameras, videocams, torches, alarm clocks and calculators and even to play games. [9]

When we add to all this the reassurance that connectedness can provide for those who worry ("if I have a problem or sense a threat, I can call a specialist or call for help"), it is hard to see why anybody would want to disconnect, since the advantages seem to outweigh the possible disadvantages from the word go. And this is indeed the case as long as we are only talking about the individual freedom to choose whether to be on-line or not. Connectedness is an open door onto the world and it seems absurd to want to close it to so many possibilities, opportunities and promises. But when part of the world starts to jam its foot into the same door to monitor what you are doing, to bury you under an avalanche of information you have no interest in or to sell you things you do not want, then a longing will emerge to close the door or even slam it on the foot.

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8. This raises the question of who allows what to be voiced and to say what? Do the political authorities still have anything to say about the informational hybridisation of public goods when they have turned over their informational practice to the private sphere? Will they hand over the task to specialists who do not always obey the same logic as users and who are not particularly open to citizens' participation? Or will services be set up collaboratively, drawing on user expectations and experiences? This would require an enormous effort based on reciprocal attentiveness, participation and designing ways of catering for the reflexivity of citizens. If this were to happen, debates - and perhaps even battles - would undoubtedly emerge to determine who would decide what objects and places should be talking about, thus introducing new patterns of hybridisation as a real social, political and cultural challenge.

9. We will make an initial distinction here that will be useful when we come to our discussion of disconnection tactics: people can decide to disconnect from communication possibilities (telephone and emails), but stay connected to information (press, databanks, online services) and vice versa, or to disconnect completely, but still use their smartphones as alarm clocks, dictaphones or cameras.

THE DANGERS OF UNCONTROLLABLE OR IMPOSED CONNECTION

In just a few years, and almost unnoticeably, not picking up a mobile phone call immediately has become something we have to justify. We have to explain, find an excuse or even apologise for not having answered. If we now have to justify not being connected, it is because meanwhile, being connected has become the norm. Normality means picking up a call at once, especially on a mobile; normality means responding to emails within half a day and sometimes within the hour, and it is likely that, very soon, geo-locating every individual will also become the norm.

This new imperative of telecommunicational immediacy first appeared in the spheres of economic and professional activity. Market adaptability, optimisation of the functions and organisation of networked businesses - at each strategic level, telecommunications play a crucial role and all of the innovations introduced in the last two decades have been mobilised immediately towards a single goal: shorter deadlines, faster turnaround and simultaneity in every area of operations. Communications have become weapons in the economic battle waged by all those to whom "time is money". But speeding up time is not just happening in the economic sphere: it is affecting every aspect of life, and especially people's private lives. Firstly, because whether we like it or not, working time still unavoidably sets the pace of our lives. Secondly, because work is increasingly invading the personal time of entire categories of employees. Physical distance and workplace divisions and schedules no longer protect them: every day, and increasingly, urgent professional demands, standby duties and phone calls punch holes into people's private space [10]. Finally, another less obvious but equally deep-seated phenomenon is also driving the contagion of urgency into people's private space: the encroachment of professional working patterns into private life. Patterns that can be identified in the spheres of economic activity (pragmatism, utilitarianism, competitiveness, profitability, efficiency, the desire for power and gain) are spreading into the "management" of private occupations and relationships: life has become a kind of capital that is expected to bear fruit as quickly as possible [11].

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10. The reverse is also true: more and more phone calls, emails and text messages are being handled during working time.
11. This paragraph returns to a discussion in a previous study (Jauréguiberry 2005).

Hunting down wasted time, the cult of potential, ever-increasing urgency, the pressure of immediacy and the proliferation of information are flooding people with demands for faster and faster responses. This can be experienced as a positive development, as a way of multiplying activities and opportunities, of realising unused organisational potential, of simplifying life or even of restoring the role of intuition in managing one's affairs. It can also be a source of satisfaction, especially for some freelancers who experience the race against time as a constantly renewed challenge they find exciting and even gratifying. But it can also cause giddiness to the point of collapse. A world where everything is speeding up and jostling for attention raises two different perils for people in a constant state of tension and urgency.

The first danger is reacting impulsively to avoid what might be called the "log-jam effect", where an uncontrollable accumulation of information prevents it from being effectively processed. When faced with a pile of memos, a series of urgent emails and an avalanche of phone calls, you have to act fast. Not only do you have to be connected all the time, you also have to respond as fast as possible. As everything speeds up, with a corresponding loss of time for reflection, priorities can be overwhelmed by inessentials. Besides the stress arising from the feverish activity induced, there is a risk of reflection and imagination being taken over by a kind of emergency reflex. People in a hurry are like firemen rushing around to put out fires as soon as they appear: phone calls take priority over people who are actually present, emails take priority over what we are supposed to be working on and a beep announcing a text message stops everything in its tracks, as if everyone were running to obey the watchword of urgency, as if what might be had taken over from what is.

Obviously, there are situations dictated by necessity. But as this pattern of immediate reaction spreads, it is liable to become an established mode of operation with all its attendant risks. When the focus is on reacting to immediate demands, people and organisations run the risk of forfeiting their strategic capacities to purely tactical responses to adapt to an environment they no longer control. In this case, information becomes noise, speed becomes haste and action becomes a substitute for decisions. This kind of behaviour is liable to make the very idea of planning obsolete. Planning relies on a certain amount of confidence in the future, it means taking a gamble on the future in the belief that the action planned can actually be deployed at some point. Obviously there is no certainty: confidence alone allows us to plan or to postpone, and to imagine what will be as against what is. But if the present itself seems

undetermined and is no longer experienced as anything but ephemeral immediacy, how can anything be planned for the longer term? In a world where people have to adapt fast, how can we adapt our world in the longer term?

The second danger is hesitation in urgent situations. In these conditions, decision-making becomes tantamount to self-inflicted violence in a situation over which we have no control. Tension, stress and anxiety are then likely to emerge. People who are stressed no longer feel needed, they feel harassed. A whole series of well-known psychosomatic disorders are associated with the contradictory situation in which people suffering from occupational burn-out put themselves: their awareness of urgency on the one hand, and of not being able to handle it on the other hand only increases the pressure. There are even cases of people literally reeling from the pressure of too many demands: the only way for them to avoid complete nonexistence at work is to "crack up". They become literally cataleptic and give up, as a result of a communication overdose. Burn-out, apathetic emptiness or depression are always a form of withdrawal from unbearable pressure or overload when ways of coping suddenly seem useless. People who have been exhausted, worn out, and ground to a powder by such stressful situations will eventually give up [12].

Obviously, not every situation that demands real-time or emergency management will have such dramatic effects. Not only because responses to emergencies may have been planned beforehand (through established procedures or as a result of forward thinking), but also, and more fundamentally, because these responses can be the outcome of rational thinking that, although limited by time, is consistent with a meaningful pattern of strategic continuity. But as this type of response spreads to increasingly varied aspects of daily life, it is likely to become the normal mode of operation. Focusing on responses to immediate demands puts people in a hurry at risk of being affected by what I call the "zapper syndrome", by which I mean all of the symptoms of a latent malaise that threatens anyone who experiences media-driven instantaneity purely in terms of cost efficiency, to the point where it submerges them completely in a soup of anxiety over lost time and last-minute stress, an impossible desire to be everywhere at once, of fear of missing out on something important, frustration over overhasty decisions, dread of not being connected to the right network at the right time and confusion caused by overdosing on ephemeral information.

12. On this topic, see Nicole Aubert (2003).

The zapper syndrome is the telecommunications disease that affects hyper-connected people when they become carried away by what a number of our interviewees refer to as a "vortex". As if they were caught up in the centrifugal force of uncontrolled acceleration, people become dispossessed of the meaning of their actions and sucked into occupational inflation. Forced into emergency response mode to tackle a growing mass of information and increasingly frequent unknowns, they can only grab at whatever comes to hand to save themselves from drowning and come up with quick fixes and opportunistic tactics. Rather than obeying a strategy to adopt the means most suited to the desired ends, they become driven by tactical attempts to adapt to situations they no longer control.

This is the conclusion, drawn from previous fieldwork and observations of the malaise - and sometimes the suffering it can cause - that underlies the hypothesis we made prior to the DEVOTIC research programme, that disconnection strategies are mainly motivated by a desire to escape from the "vortex".

DISCONNECTION AS A FORM OF ESCAPE

The most spectacular cases of disconnection, those reported in the press and most widely recounted in the media, are of this type. For example, the much commented disconnection experiences of Thierry Crouzet (*J'ai débranché,* 2011) or Susan Maushart (*The Winter of our Disconnect*, 2010) are attempts to escape from a connection overdose. Crouzet talks about "rehab" and "withdrawal symptoms", and Maushart about "being sick of it" and "needing a break" [13]. These are escape or crisis strategies, adopted when people have had enough of the incessant demands made upon them. A longing for disconnection appears in situations where people feel subjected to an information and cognitive overload, to harassment or surveillance, and can no longer cope. Because the pressure is conveyed by ICTs, there are vague hopes that curbing ICTs might reduce the pressure. In extreme cases of burn-out, rejection of ICTs is integral to the defensive strategies of last resort that enable individuals

13. Over three years, 312 press articles and blogs on the subject of disconnection were listed on the DEVOTIC website (when comments posted on the blogs are included, the corpus contains about 500 accounts). The semantic analysis of these articles and blogs made by Nicole Lompré shows that in the vast majority, disconnection is correlated with the theme of hyper-connection and information overload (with some asserting disconnection as a form of resistance to cyber-surveillance and tracking).

to survive when they can no longer fight. These cases are fortunately rare and are less a matter of voluntary disconnection in the hope of regaining control over flows of communication than of disconnecting mechanically to avoid being swept away completely. Disconnection in this case is purely reactive, as when a circuit breaker trips when too much current flows through it. The accounts from people who have experienced burn-out all show that disconnection is not voluntary but automatic, in the same way as immediately stopping work.

Burn-out is often represented as a kind of collapse under the weight of overwork or the pressure of too many demands. But clinical cases show that they mainly ensue from an accumulating sense of not being able to cope or of having no reason to cope. "Not being able to cope" means not having the time, the cognitive resources, the cultural capital or the energy to process a number of emails or text messages that is manifestly too large to be managed properly, or to answer phone calls that are too numerous not to be disruptive, or to keep up with social networks satisfactorily, in other words, without continually feeling we cannot keep pace. "Not having any good reason to do it" means that with the constant demands to drop everything and deal immediately with urgent and important matters that subsequently prove to be insignificant, with the constant pressure to obey paradoxical injunctions to engage fully and for the long term in plans for the future in a world dominated by flexibility and adaptation, reasons for belief begin to crumble and reasons for hope fade away. This is the kind of depressive state in which burn-out appears. Burn-out is not caused by ICTs, but by their indiscriminate - i.e. constant - use in a race against time that makes it impossible to sit back and think.

VOLUNTARY DISCONNECTION

None of the voluntary disconnection strategies we observed were such extreme reactions, because they were adopted precisely to avoid the burn-out danger zone and situations where information overload was likely to become unbearable. Voluntary disconnection occurs when the longing for disconnection becomes more than a matter of fatigue or complaint ("I've got so much to do!", "I can't handle any more", "I'm flooded with emails") and results in real action, behaviour and tactics. These might involve turning off one's mobile phone in certain circumstances or at certain times, switching off an email application and deciding to check emails only from time to time, deciding not

to be permanently connected to social networks or refusing to be geo-located wherever one might be. In all these cases, the decision comes after a person realises, either by accumulation (the situation has become unmanageable) or following a critical incident (an event that abruptly shifts their point of view) that something has to change [14].

> "I have to deal with them [emails] as and when they come (Claude, 34, purchasing manager for a furniture store). I just get too many of them [about 80 a day]. I realised that it had got out of hand, because that was all I was doing (…). I paid more attention and realised that none of them couldn't actually wait for two hours, not one! So I made an important new rule for myself: I would only check them every hour, and I'm trying for every two hours… It's more difficult, but I'm trying (…). It's changed everything, because for a whole hour, or an hour and a half, I'm not being distracted. And dealing with them later is actually quicker. There's only one interruption. Before, I was being interrupted 10 times an hour."

> "I quit Facebook at the same time as I stopped using my iPad in bed… I was on my iPad every night, it had become a ritual, for an hour and maybe more (…). [160 friends] that's a lot of stuff to read and with all the links, etc.. There was always a little voice saying: "haven't you got anything better to do?" Well, actually no, I didn't have anything better to do. But still, I was spending a lot of time on nothing much (…). It was like watching television. One night, I fell asleep with my iPad still open (...). I stopped the very next day, I wasn't feeling right with myself." (Liliane, 50, technician).

> "I'd set up a method that involved handling everything as it came. That way, I could delete about three quarters of my emails without reading them. I marked the others "to be answered" and did it later. But then I realised I was saving dozens of emails into the draft folder to deal with later and that I was seriously tending to put off answering them to the next day and piling up more and more (…). I'd shifted the problem, but it was still there. And the problem is there are too many demands and I haven't got enough time to respond, or enough energy." (Régis, university lecturer, 58)

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14. Cindy Felio (2013) devoted part of her thesis on "Communication practices among executives: psychosocial issues raised by intensive ICT use" [*Pratiques communicationnelles des cadres. Usage intensif des TIC et enjeux psychosociaux*], undertaken under the DEVOTIC project, to a study of these "critical incidents" among executives who had decided to disconnect, at least partially. It is a remarkable fact that, for some of them, the interview on this topic was precisely what triggered their decision to disconnect …

Disconnection is never final but always happens at a particular time, partially and in contexts where "too much" is really too much, where "again" becomes meaningless and where "more" becomes unbearable... The point is not to abandon ICTs, but to try to control their use by introducing breaks or buffer zones in time, and ways of creating a distance from them. These cases of disconnection are not spectacular, as in burn-out cases; they are modest, part of daily life, and sometimes carefully managed. One frequently mentioned way of disconnecting is to switch one's mobile phone to silent mode (and, as underlined by some, leaving it in one's bag so as not to see the screen light up when a call comes in); another is to leave one's laptop in the office. Going out to do the shopping, have a coffee or do some jogging without a mobile phone are other ways of disconnecting, as is deciding not to check for emails over the weekend. These brief and unspectacular disconnections are not mentioned in the media, but they make up the vast majority of all disconnections.

The transcripts of the many hours of interviews conducted with people who go off line show the importance of time in their reasons for doing so. ICTs offer outstanding tools to manage time. They can help to coordinate activities more effectively and to make schedules much more flexible and accurate. The fact that instant information is available on last-minute snags, public transport timetables, changed appointments, etc. is synonymous with saving time and saving energy, and often reduces stress. Smartphones can be used as smart planners: a time or date entered in an email comes up automatically to avoid missed appointments or tedious searching. When our data is stored on a cloud, it circulates across each terminal we use. All in all, ICTs should therefore help us to save time, and yet, people who disconnect complain of the exact opposite!

Because, by constantly "pushing" information and demands on us when we do not anticipate them, ICTs force us to deal with them. The obligation can be imposed by people's bosses, spouses or friends, and it may be professional, statutory or relational. ICTs do not create these dependencies, but they increase their density to the point where they can become too much to bear. Too many pressing emails and text messages from superiors or colleagues, too many phone calls from a worried spouse or mother or repeated or too many notifications from social networks eventually wear people down, causing a kind of fatigue expressed in moments of exasperation, irritability and a feeling of saturation. This is the context where people start to think about disconnecting for a while, to make some time for themselves to get back to living at their own pace and to rediscover a sense of duration and expectation, reflection and attentiveness.

DISCONNECTION AT WORK

There are some jobs where it is quite simply impossible to disconnect during working hours. This is the case with all jobs that involve being on standby for calls from potential customers or for information and booking requests, or to respond to emergencies. But in just a few years, ICTs have become the vector that has added information overload to other kinds of work that normally demands a certain amount of concentration, requires continuity in its execution and in no way requires continuous connection. Demands for virtually continuous reporting on the progress of work in hand, repeated checks even as tasks are in the process of execution, and the corporate cult of information from every direction, all distract and often destabilise employees to the point where a new issue has emerged: the right to disconnect.

This right, or rather demands for it, emerged as a reaction as soon as communication technologies opened up new "zones of uncertainty" in business[15]. These "zones" were very quickly taken over by managers as a way of increasing employee productivity even more, to check up on effectiveness and increase intensity. These demands first appeared as a reaction to too much monitoring, too many transparency requirements and altogether too much pressure. Contrary to what a panoptical view of business organisation might suggest, opaque zones are actually necessary for operations to run smoothly, because it is in these zones that employee responsibility develops. To take just one example investigated by Luc Bonneville and Sylvie Grosjean (2012), the nursing staff in two health centres in Montréal went on strike several times to demand the reversal of a decision that required them to report continuously on their tasks on tablets they had to take with them everywhere. From the point of view of health monitoring and the rationalisation of health services, the new system was theoretically useful. But in practice, the nurses felt they were not only under surveillance, but also under constant threat of having to leave their patients to carry out tasks considered to be more urgent from the panoptical

15. Michel Crozier defined "zones of uncertainty" as situations where the needs of the actions deployed within them engender unpredictability. In particular, he shows (1971) that power relations in the workplace are constantly being negotiated, directly or by indirect means, with each party seeking to increase the margin of unpredictability around their behaviour towards their opponent. The greater the zone of uncertainty, to the hierarchy, over an employee's actions, the greater the power of the employee (power of initiative and to act as they please). Conversely, the better the hierarchy is able to reduce the unpredictability of an employee's behaviour, the less power the employee will have.

viewpoint. In the new remotely controlled organisation of their work, the very short waiting times between two patients and overlaps between shifts were superfluous. And yet, the nurses felt that these short periods were essential, to fill in patient charts, for example, but also to meet up with the other nurses, which allowed them to share knowledge and exchange information they considered to be essential to their tasks, but also to give each other moral support in handling the many problems they encountered. As soon as everything was (supposed to be) handled electronically, these exchanges were officially no longer necessary and therefore considered as a waste of time. This shows how the ideal of transparency and zero downtime, which seems to be reachable thanks to technologies that provide permanent connection and simultaneity, in fact comes up against the realities of a profession whose very existence depends on zones of autonomy. And getting these zones of autonomy back is the reason why some decide to disconnect.

> "What with answering all those emails, I'd lost the sense of what my work was about. I was answering emails that had nothing to do with what I was doing (…). And every day, I was spending more and more time answering emails and wondering what was the point (…). The worst thing was that I had the impression that although I was busy, that something was robbing me of my time, my real working time (…) I couldn't go on like that." (Claire, secretary, 41)

> "The very fact of disconnecting made me sort out my priorities. I realised several times that [if I hadn't gone off line], I wouldn't have decided to do such and such first. When I was on line again, that was what I did first. It had become a priority because I hadn't thought about it in the meantime. Otherwise, it would have got lost in the middle of all the other things connected with my list of emails. And in a list of emails, you don't handle the most important ones as a priority, that's not how it works, you just go with the flow …" (Jean, 42, project designer with a consulting firm)

> "When I'm working on a case (solicitor, 35, with a legal firm employing about fifty people), I can't do much else. But I kept answering [the phone] and then it always took five minutes to get back to what I was doing... Not to mention the calls that forced me to do other things in the meantime. In the last year (maybe moving into a different office helped), I've been ignoring the phone most of the time … **** off, I'm working … Two times out of three there's no message [on voicemail] and the rest is never that urgent, I get back to them (…) I've rediscovered a kind of continuity when I work on my cases, I get on faster and concentrate better."

> "I'm not the concierge, or the receptionist or the HRM. But [because I've got an email address and a mobile phone], I have to read emails that don't concern me, answer phone calls that aren't urgent at all, sort out problems about who's using meeting rooms, rescheduled appointments, and so on… Since [I set up my disconnection timetable] [16], I feel I'm really doing something again. After two hours, I think, great, I've done this, and this, and this. I know what I've done." (44, line manager for a department with 30 staff in an institution employing over 800 people).

Clearly, people work out their own ways of making their professional use of ICTs bearable, which involve times when they disconnect… The dangers of continuous tele-availability, which is increasingly blurring the boundaries between work and private life, seem to have been noted quite soon. For example, the European Community, in its "Recommendation 6c" on the information society (1997, p. 51), was recommending back in the late 1990s that the issues of "the consequences of continuous connection, the need disconnect at times and the right to restrict access to certain times" and "restricting and negotiating intrusions" required attention and investigation. Similarly, the highest Court of Appeal in France [*Cour de Cassation*] has since issued several orders that clearly point to an established right to disconnect [17]. This is one of the key proposals made by the CFDT Cadres [management trade union]: "negotiations must be started with the trade unions, in both private companies and public administration, to address the new realities of working life (introduced by communication technologies) and to recognise the right of every worker to disconnect, in particular to avoid insidiously encroaching standby duties". Some timid attempts are emerging in this direction, for example at Volkswagen in Germany where professional emailing is banned after 6 p.m. and at weekends or, just recently in France, with an industrial agreement in the engineering and consultancy sector specifying a "disconnection obligation". It seems that after 20 years of communication technology as an ideology (they

16. This interviewee set himself two hours of disconnection (phone and email) every morning (and has the authority to require others to do likewise).

17. For example, the Order of 10 July 2002 specifying that rest periods "require employees to be entirely exempted, directly or indirectly, and except in exceptional circumstances, from any requirement to undertake any task for their employer, however exceptional or sporadic", or the Order of 17 February 2004 that clearly states that "the fact that an employee could not be reached on their mobile phone outside working hours can in no way be construed as a professional fault and therefore cannot justify a disciplinary dismissal on the grounds of serious professional misconduct".

are inherently a good thing, what is bad is silence, a blank screen and disconnection), of demands for ever more communication and ever more pressure to stay connected 24/7, the time has come for a reckoning on what is sustainable in terms of psychological capacities and what is desirable from the social and organisational point of view [18].

It was more the second point (the risk of underachievement) than the first (the psychosocial risk) that motivated the first management studies on disconnection. Cases of dysfunction were starting to cause considerable concern because of their cost, so that managers began to raise the question of disconnection purely for reasons of management efficiency [19]. A 2003 survey among company managers in France showed that they very soon became aware of the potentially negative effects (in terms of lack of perspective and strategic thinking) of communication technologies and of the sense they produced of continual urgency [20]. Their concerns were in line with the conclusions of management science studies on information overload [21]. However, most of these studies are cited in the more general context of decision-making theory and from a utilitarian perspective: how much information overload can workers take before it produces negative effects? Information and cognitive overload is considered as having an impact on the rationality of organisational decisions and overall business strategies, whose negative effects have to be measured [22]. Some soon grasped the opportunities that arose for risk prevention advice: books on the subject [23], courses

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18. In his thesis (*Techniques de l'Information et de la Communication et risques psychosociaux sur le poste de travail tertiaire,* undertaken as part of the DEVOTIC project), Thierry Venin (2013) gives an excellent demonstration of the damage caused by applying this ideology to workplace organisation in the tertiary sector: entire categories of workers are caught up in kind of technological frenzy, spending most of their time adapting their work to different kinds of hardware and to the latest versions of rapidly obsolete software.
19. Relevant articles in English include "Digital Overload : Too Much Technology Takes a Toll" (*Business News*, 8 November 2010) and "Digital Overload : Is Your Computer Frying Your Brain ?" (*Livescience*, 9 November 2010).
20. Adecco survey for Microsoft. 81 % thought that "communication technologies have created a new sense of urgency due to the speed with which information circulates and the resulting expectations" and 73 % thought that this triggers "a lack of perspective that can result in inappropriate and over-hasty decisions".
21. Martin J. Eppler and Jeanne Mengis (2004).
22. Henri Issac, Michel Kalika, Eric Campoy (2007).
23. One example is the bestseller by Joanne Cantor, *Conquer Cyber Overlooad* (2010), which describes a great many different ways of avoiding burnout.

on disconnection, disconnection coaching and many other disconnection spin-offs flourished [24]. But very little attention was given to the question of organisational relationships and to the changing modes of communication that motivated employee engagement or disengagement, or to the stress that these can produce.

In the vast majority of cases, therefore, disconnection is still an individual matter. But obviously, employees and managers do not all have equal possibilities or capacities for doing so. At a pinch, we could say that on the one hand are those who have the power to disconnect, and therefore to impose their own unavailability on others (relatively speaking, if they have voicemail), and on the other hand, those who do not have that power; on the one hand, those who have the power to require permanent availability from others, and on the other hand, those who have to submit to this requirement; in other words, there are those who have the power to disconnect, and those who have a duty to stay connected. As we had already noted in 2003 [25], the new "telecommunications-poor" are no longer those who do not have access to a web connection, but those whose lives are governed by an obligation to respond immediately, and who therefore cannot escape situations where they have to respond continual to the demands made on them. The new "telecommunications-rich" are those in a position to filter such demands, and therefore to keep them at a distance.

Obviously, this is not a new kind of inequality that ICTs have created from scratch. It is a product of hierarchy, power relations, status and, ultimately, of the forms of power that already exist within companies, organisations and networks. The question is therefore not to consider communication technologies as producers of new forms of exploitation *per se*, but to ask whether the telecommunicational simultaneity they make possible tends to reinforce existing inequalities (created by the control/dependency relationship), or to weaken them (by allowing people to experiment with new forms of organisation, bringing greater individual autonomy and responsibility).

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24. Such as Ommwriter, designed by Rafa Soto and Marzban Cooper, initially to "resolve an internal problem in the company: the difficulty of concentrating when writing with a computer. Email, SMS, Twitter and Facebook notifications were a constant distraction that was undermining our lucidity and attentiveness without anybody realising". (*El Pais*, 21 April 2011, p. 50). The application they developed, which stores "distractions" with no possibility of instant retrieval, was downloaded hundreds of thousands of times in a just few months …
25. Jauréguiberry (2003), p. 104.

DISCONNECTION IN PRIVATE LIFE

It was in the area of disconnection in private life that the field surveys for the DEVOTIC project produced the most surprising findings. When investigating disconnection practices, we did not expect such profound and serious reflection. Disconnection brings in existential questions on the very meaning of life and the power of commitment. We did not at all expect these themes to appear, or at least not so compellingly and with such constancy. Obviously, they do not appear when people first start telling their stories. The first reason for disconnection described by almost all the respondents was (to use their own vocabulary) a longing "for some breathing space", "to step back", "to clear my head", "to get away from the hassle", and even "to stop feeling in a daze". What is sought obeys the same need for distance, temporary respite, rest and silence that we observed in professional life.

When it is not dictated by defensive or withdrawal behaviour in response to too much pressure and too many unwanted demands on their attention, these respondents always described going off line as the result of a choice. In this case, it is always voluntary and proactive, and often explained by a need to preserve some time of one's own in a context where everything happens at once or to keep to one's own pace in an environment where everything has to happen faster, by the right not to be disturbed in a world of intrusive telecommunications and the right to concentrate fully on a task when our surroundings urge compulsive zapping and dispersion. Isolation, silence and waiting, which have been fought against for years as synonymous with poverty, inwardness and solitude, reappear in this context as something no longer endured, but chosen.

> An example is Julie (36), a teacher, who does gardening several times a week and "refuses, under any circumstances, to be disturbed by a phone call": "these are moments of peace when I don't think about anything. It's what I need. I'm just there, looking after my plants, it calms me down". Or Léon (57), a pharmacist who goes for long walks whenever he can and never takes his phone with him, or another teacher (Philippe, 46), who makes sure of having his morning coffee every day without bringing his phone, which he deliberately leaves in the office: "I'm like Philippe Delerme with his first sip of beer: I take the time to enjoy it. I'm just there, with my coffee, no emails, no text messages, nothing at all, I'm just there, and that's what I want".

Other comments are about "being completely attentive to the person I'm talking to", or "being completely there in the place where I am", or "giving my full attention to the show I'm watching", suggesting that disconnection adds a new and different value to the moment, the place or the conversation: attentiveness and sharing.

> The fact that everybody takes out their mobile to turn it off at a concert or at the theatre "magnifies the event" and creates a kind of "communal attentiveness", a feeling that "we're all here together, we're all here for the same reason, nothing else matters", and this can be very educational: "yes we can disconnect!" The same thing happens in some conversations or meetings where disconnecting clearly signifies to those present that nothing is more important [26]. Not answering a phone call in the middle of a face-to-face conversation is another example of attentive disconnection.

Disconnection in private life can be short-lived and is usually partial and situated (deciding not to check for emails, but to keep the phone on, switching it to silent mode but sometimes checking for calls, connecting to a geolocation service to find an address but switching it off right away). It seems that as ICTs become more complex, our contemporaries are developing increasingly original know-how to cope with them. People refer to their daily experiences to establish patterns of disconnection that suit different situations. All have to do with an economy of attention and draw at once on a set of quasi-technical rules (knowledge of the potential of one's smartphone and its applications), on the art of assessment (in terms of strategy or propriety) and on a capacity for action (choice). The idea is to combine different types of engagement, either in succession (connection-disconnection) or by modulation (switching off email but not the phone, complete disconnection except for three incoming numbers, visual filtering, etc.), where the whole becomes a matter of choice and priority.

When disconnection is not experienced purely as a pause, a breathing space or an escape from too many demands, and when it is not primarily motivated by wanting to be "completely focused" on a task, a person or a concert or play, it is described as "a break", "stepping back", "a retreat" to "find myself again" or "take stock". It opens up a time for asking oneself questions, for reflection,

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26. It would seem that this was not entirely true for all the ministers attending the April 2014 Cabinet meeting, when François Hollande was forced to ban the use of mobile phones …

for thinking about the meaning of one's life, for getting back in touch with one's inner self.

Introspection is never simple. It introduces tension with the logic of recognition and gain that motivates connectedness. With disconnection of this type, there are no more emails, phone calls or social networks to prove that we exist in the eyes of others, no more tweets or Internet to tell us about is happening in the world. No more outside stimulation, no more notifications, no more distractions or things that have to be seen to immediately. We are left with nothing but the traces of all these things, which are precisely what need to be sorted out to give them meaning. Choosing to disconnect, as our interviewees admit, is always tricky and difficult, because, and especially, it means giving up - if only for five minutes - everything that could potentially reach them through the very channels they have decided to close off for a time.

What they find difficult to give up is exactly the same as what pushes them to keep checking their emails, voicemail or social networks. At this point, many start to talk about addictive behaviour, which is what their vocabulary ("I can't give up", "it's an addiction", "I can't do without it") tends to suggest. However, in most cases, "addiction" is a misnomer, and the facile use of the word in the media probably largely accounts for this[27]. It is more a matter of curiosity and a compelling desire for what might be just round the corner, and which produces an impression of surprise and constant renewal at once. There is a vague but constant expectation of being surprised by something new and unexpected, by a phone call or text message that will change the entire course of the day or the evening by bringing greater density or diversity and, ultimately, will make life more interesting or more intense. As when people harvest novelty on the Internet, some will use completely random search methods hoping for serendipity, in the best of cases or, in the worst case, expecting only to waste their time (zapping can exclude unfortunate cases and therefore, from this point of view, boredom). Therefore, it is not the problem of addiction that makes disconnection difficult, but rather the fear of missing out on something. There is actually an American acronym to refer to this:

27. Addictive phenomena are all linked to distress, which, when the substance or object on which an addict is dependent is withdrawn, points to a serious pathological condition. The erroneous use of the word addiction to describe any regular (and sometimes unreasonable) practice was recently denounced by the French Academy of Sciences (2013) when a report was presented on children using screens (*l'Enfance et les écrans*), in which a distinction was made, and emphasised, between "regular viewing" and addiction.

FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). FOMO also applies to people wanting to disconnect from their workstation for a while.

> "Switching off the beeps and [email] notifications didn't help, because I kept checking them every five minutes anyway (…). It was messing up what I was doing, but I couldn't help [reading the emails]… I had to keep checking them, it was like an automatic reflex." (Christian, 33, accountant)

> "When I'm online, it's almost like an addiction. Going off-line for a few days is a bit like going into detox, like giving up cigarettes. It's a battle against addiction." (Gérard, 57, trainer)

> During his research, Thierry Venin (2013) asked respondents whether, when they weren't getting any email notifications, they sometimes pressed the button to check if they might have missed a new email, and found that virtually all those taking part in his focus groups (about 10 groups of 12 persons) said they did! Nobody was forced to do it, but everybody did it. Venin reports how one of them, who for once had not received any emails for 20 minutes, actually phoned his IT department to find out if there were any problems on the network…

But the same expectation is found in private life, whatever the situation.

> "The first evening, I couldn't help it: I booted up my laptop to see if I had any text messages, so that I could tell [my wife] that everything was OK. But the next day I went to check my emails. Several times in a row. I was missing it, I couldn't help it. It was stopping me from taking stock, from praying, but I needed to do it" [it was only after three days that he managed not to check for emails and to check for text messages "only twice a day"]. (Claude, 46, a banker, on a week's retreat in a monastery).

> "It's not very likely someone's going to call me to tell me I've had a legacy from a distant cousin. That's not why I keep checking my emails and messages, no point in wishful thinking… But I still keep doing it and I keep hoping (...) something good will happen, yes... Something good, something nice, some good news... I'm always checking, it's a reflex, especially when there's nothing else going on." (Elise, 36, specialist educator)

Disconnecting always means taking a risk. The very fact of taking the risk is experienced as a victory - as a victory over the fear of missing out, of boredom, of relying on oneself alone.

> The victory can be very modest, as for Catherine (employee, 52), who describes how managing not to check her mobile while at the chemist's just 200 metres from her home felt like a major feat: "I thought, yes, I can do it! In fact, you have to be sure of yourself to do without. You're never sure that nothing will happen. But, well, you manage (…). Maybe it's managing without that makes you feel more sure of yourself". It was a bigger victory for Jean (37, a primary school teacher), who is now "capable of spending half a day without making any calls" and accepts "that no one will call me for half a day as well. And it makes me feel great! It's amazing... Being able to say no again. No, stop, right there... I just need to have nothing to do, get back in touch with myself, or just think". It could also involve a lot more risk, as for the dozens of mountain climbers we interviewed who had decided to go on a climb without taking their mobiles.

Finally, disconnecting also means taking a risk with oneself: the risk of finding oneself alone, in a void, with no resources or goals. These are difficult moments because (except perhaps for those who believe in God) being confronted with the meaning of one's existence is always perilous and the potential outcome is implacably terrifying. It is not only curiosity or hopes in what might be round the corner that motivate those who start tapping on their keyboards as soon as they have a minute. And it is not only boredom. They are also escaping from existential angst. If we agree with Heidegger that it is because people "engage with time" (*Zeitigung*) that they are aware of "being there" (*Dasein*), and because this is above all an awareness of one's own finiteness (being resides in the awareness of time, which is awareness of one's death), it may be thought that the crushing weight of the present over the immediate is a way of escaping from the anxiety that stems from this awareness. ICTs are a phenomenally effective machine for eliminating downtime and filling up time with stimulation, information, learning or entertainment. But if we take Pascal's perspective, it is also possible to say that ICTs are commensurate with people's hunger for distraction from existential questions, or simply from wondering about the meaning of life.

Disconnecting therefore also means distancing oneself from the world. In his plea for disconnection, Rémy Oudghiri (2013) shows the universal nature of this longing to withdraw from the world, through introspection, meditation, contemplation or prayer, depending on each case, and how it has endured over the centuries. To the author, disconnecting from ICTs is also a form of inner retreat, which is "the surest way of not drowning in the incessant flow of the vanities of contemporary life" and "the place in which to seek the meaning of

one's life". We found this position among some of our interviewees. Claude (46, a banker who had spent a week's retreat in a monastery) said for example:

> "The first thing I did when I got here (before, actually) was to switch off my mobile, leaving a message to call (…) if there was an absolute emergency. I left the same message on my email. From one minute to the next, there were no more emails, no phone calls, no Internet, nothing… I was completely on my own. In search of God, but completely on my own."

But those who had experienced going off-line for a few days did not so much tell us about this kind of fundamental introspection about the human condition, but rather about more ordinary but much more pressing reflexivity dictated by an inner urge to "sort out my life", "see things more clearly" or "take stock".

> "I wanted to get my life together again, things were getting out of control. I was doing things all over the place … But I wasn't happy with it (…). And the more I felt I wasn't happy, the more hyper I got. Yes, I was hyper connected ! I didn't have a minute to myself. I had what's called a really full life. But I was empty inside (…)." (Jean, 52, director of a consular chamber, on the Compostela pilgrimage)

> "In the evenings, while I was spending all that time on Facebook and then mooching around on the Internet, I knew I was looking for something as much as trying to get away. And what I was trying to get away from was my life, my real life, which wasn't right." (Pierre, 30, engineer)

> "When I'm online, I don't relate to myself. My mind's always taken up with something else, I'm distracted. So now, I've decided to think about my life and I've really got the time." (Martin, 34, a computer programmer)

> "Everything about being online is about escaping, you're not dealing with reality and instead of dealing with your problems, you're looking at your screen and time goes by, time goes by (...) and you're not thinking. And when you go off-line, then yes, you do think. You make decisions. You're capable of making decisions. Yeah!" (Patricia, 49, support to tourism promotion services)

> "I had all these questions that I knew about but didn't want to ask myself." "All of a sudden you've got time to ask yourself important questions and you think, of course, that's what's important!" "[When you're off-line] you've got to face up to them, there aren't any excuses to think about other things: there's just you and yourself." "Once you've got rid of the noise, what's left to be heard? What's the music of life?"

Going off-line can be startling: as soon as being connected virtually all the time becomes the normal pattern of daily life, disconnection (if it lasts more than a few hours, and even more so a few days) is such a profound change that it almost automatically triggers fundamental questions, like a sudden breath of fresh air sweeping away the agitation, distraction and dispersion in people's lives and leaving them alone with themselves. The contrast is such that boredom is no longer an issue: the sudden confrontation with the meaning of life takes up all the space. Silence becomes compelling, distance opens up space for questions, the past resurfaces. The search for coherence and continuity in one's life, the ceaseless inner quest for meaningfulness and the defence of one's personal autonomy become imperative.

CONCLUSION: DISCONNECTION AS A CHALLENGE FOR THE HYPERMODERN AGE

Caught up in the maelstrom of hyper-solicitation, in the ceaseless flow of information, swept away by unimaginable possibilities for knowledge and distraction, we become submerged in the mainstream conveyed by ICTs to the point of becoming, as David Riesman (1964) put it more than 60 years ago, "other-directed". He observed at the time how the American middle class was (in his view, at least) moving from a society characterised by normative acculturation that produced "inner-directed" individuals (i.e. who had integrated social norms of behaviour, moral principles and ethical foundations enabling them to develop personal beliefs) to a society that Zigmun Bauman (2004) had meanwhile described as "liquid", in which individuals are "other-directed" (i.e., tending to adapt their behaviour tactically to situations encountered and solely to the perceptions of others). We have never had such close and immediate ties with so many people, never had so much information about so many different things, and never been as likely to react to them wherever we might be. To use Riesman's distinction, we could say that disconnecting tends to reintroduce what is "inner-directed" into our lives when being "other-directed" no longer works.

But, unlike the kind of society that the American middle class was moving away from in the 1950s, our own has few points of reference to offer apart from the paradoxical injunction to be at once authentic and successful. Whereas, up to the 1970s, the ideologies of emancipation could still hold out glimpses of a hopeful future, today's disillusion with utopian ideas holds out a present that people have to conquer individually by relying on their own resources. There is no longer any collective hope in the future: we have to succeed all by ourselves in the present. Each of us has to answer individually for what we do.

As demigods to ourselves, we are no longer the objects of fate, we appear to be masters of our own. Whereas, until recently, we were disciplined by social norms that prompted us to accept our condition (thus producing either conformity or rebellion), today's social norms commit us to "being ourselves", with no points of reference other than our own will. This is where disconnecting, for the contemporary individual, becomes a test: while our social environment and its connectedness force us to find our own way and accept the consequences, disconnecting confronts us with an imperative need to make it meaningful.

In our relationships with the world, the instrumental capacity for acting rationally upon reality that modernity introduced a century ago has increased tenfold, thanks to ICTs in particular, and the resulting occupational frenzy is mounting all the time. Thinking on hyper-modernity has essentially focused on this aspect, as a deepening, broadening and radicalisation of what modernity was based on: reason, movement, choice, novelty and efficiency. Authors who use the concept of hypermodernity to account for the most innovative features of contemporary societies, even if they often do so to denounce extremes or excesses, all stress how instrumental action is radicalised by a desire for efficiency [28]. But hypermodernity is more than this. The flipside of modernity - reflexivity, inwardness, and individual subjectivity - has likewise deepened and broadened. The difference lies in that the former is happening out in the open and the latter in silence, in that the former is easy, simple and immediate, while the latter demands time and effort, and raises more questions than it answers.

Creating a distance from the world, which goes together with its objectivation and rationalisation, makes it more manageable and controllable. As underlined by Giddens (1994), technological and organisational development has freed the individual from the situational dangers and fears of the past. But deepening the objective nature of life by defusing the "magic" social responses to essential questions offered by myths and traditions has also deepened our ontological insecurity. This is forcing individuals to construct their existence in such a way as to give it meaning in their own eyes. In effect, for lack of social treatment, individuals have to find the meaning of their existence on their own and, especially, test its effectiveness in bringing them contentment and a sense of truth. For individuals, the instrumental radicalisation of reality translates into a need to preserve their own subjectivity as a kind of authenticity towards themselves and towards others. Disconnection has to do with this need for preservation, and it is because it is not easy that it can be considered as a test.

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28. Cf., in French, the collective work entitled *L'individu hypermoderne* (ed. Nicole Aubert, 2004).

There is no reason why connection and disconnection should automatically be mutually exclusive: it seems that the one cannot exist without the other. To be more exact, keeping connectedness under control (or at least trying to) implies patterns of disconnection, in the same way as disconnection is meaningful only because of being connected the rest of the time. Because extremes tend to meet, uncontrolled connectedness can disintegrate the individual either through dislocating hyperconnection or through implosive disconnection (burn-out). This is why we should not exclude the hypothesis of a kind of post-modernity: the distractedness and effervescence of a consumerist relationship to reality and to others overwhelms the reflexive distance of modernity, and the self fragments into multiple ephemeral identities in response to chance encounters that multiply with ever more random zapping across the networks. In terms of media consumption, this post-modern acquiescence could, as Edgar Morin remarked (1981, p. 26), become dangerous, because "too much information destroys information when it becomes a constant flood on which we cannot reflect because every event is immediately overwhelmed by others (…) Information gives a shape to things, but too much information drowns us in a shapeless mass." To "give a shape" to information, we need distance. If we want to stop feeling dazed by the ceaseless flow of information, confused by its changing colours and dazzled by constant novelty, we have to step back, we have to be capable of stopping the flow. Only then can we relate all that information to a system of representations and meanings that allows us, by comparing, contrasting and verifying, to formulate some kind of interpretation[29].

La Boétie described voluntary servitude as the portion of our freedom we give up to be able to exist in a world that functions for the majority. Voluntary disconnection, here, relates to what we are prepared to give up in terms of security, information or distraction in order to stand aloof, protect our private space and our anonymity, maintain the reflexive distance we need to perceive ourselves as subjects. In the field of ICTs, it is the actor who communicates on the networks, but it is the subject who makes that communication meaningful. But to do so, we have to be able to disconnect from time to time. And this is why the pattern of switching from connection to disconnection and back is an ideal indicator of hypermodernism and of the uncertainty it constantly produces.

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29. On this subject, Gérard Claisse's analysis (1997, pp. 123-124) is pessimistic indeed: "In response to the real-time interconnection of our informational prostheses, we disconnect from our capacities for understanding, for putting things in perspective and in context, and for interpreting the information that reaches us. The flow of information comes in, goes out, circulates, but never pauses. The proliferation of information is making us blind."

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