

# **Unrelating: Infrastructures, imaginaries and politics of disconnection**

Research conference, Dec 8–10, 2021, Warburg-Haus Hamburg

Hosted by the German Research Council (DFG) funded project “Dis/connectivity. Imaginaries, Media Technologies, Politics” and Leuphana University Lüneburg’s Centre for Digital Cultures and the Chair of Sociological Theory, Department of Social Science, University of Hamburg. Convened by Timon Beyes (timon.beyes@leuphana.de), Urs Stäheli (Urs.Staeheli@uni-hamburg.de), Clara Wieghorst (clara.wieghorst@leuphana.de) and Lea Zierott (lea.paula.zierott@uni-hamburg.de)

Confirmed keynote speaker: Marilyn Strathern, Cambridge

## **Call for papers**

From offline cafés to unplugged classrooms, from digital detox camps to anti-tracking-apps and the “right to disconnect” from work: spaces, devices, practices and political struggles around the possibilities of cutting and disconnecting from networks are beginning to shape digital cultures. Self-help literature focuses on ‘digital minimalism’ and in novels, a world without the Internet is imagined.

While different forms of disconnecting are gaining critical or celebratory attention in popular discourse, little attention has been given to these phenomena in the fields of sociological, culture-theoretical and media-theoretical research. Yet such ‘disconnectivity’ takes the form of a discrete social and media-technological praxis which should not be reduced to an individualized ethics of ‘opting out’. It neither implies an absolute state (as a complete opt-out of networks) nor a mere restriction of the reach of digital media, but rather a temporary and situational practice that reduces connectivity, produces indifference and/or cuts relations.

These practices, infrastructures and imaginaries of disconnecting challenge mostly unquestioned assumptions about the primacy of connectivity, network expansion and relationality. The phenomena of disconnection problematize the analytical and ontological reach of relational theories and call for the development of ‘arelational’ concepts and analytical strategies.

The aim of this conference is to map and reflect on phenomena of disconnection, to develop an understanding of digital cultures as marked by cuts, gaps, absences and pauses, and to consider the implications for a relational, or perhaps arelational, theorizing.

The conference’s rationale is based on pioneering studies in anthropology, media studies and social theory. Anthropological research has pointed to the practice of “cutting the network” and the need to rethink relationality beyond its focus on the making of connections (Strathern 1996; Candea et al 2015), even to move beyond

'relationism' (Piette 2015). In the field of organization studies, there is long-standing (if at technological) interest in organization as an arena of disconnecting (Munro 1997). Closer to the impact of digital technologies, media theorists have approached the emergence and critical potential of disconnection in the context of social media platforms (Portwood-Stacer 2013; Light 2014; Karppi 2018), in relation to media infrastructures (Galloway 2011) and the limits of networks (Meijas 2013), or by studying disconnection as practices of non-use, resistance and disruption (Hesselberth 2017), as voluntarily limited and self-governed "ambient commons" (McCullough 2015) and as the return of secret societies (Lovink and Rossiter 2018; Beyes and Pias 2019). Such political aspects of disconnectivity have become matters of concern in artistic thought and experiments with materials and infrastructures of disconnecting (Stäheli 2013, 2016; Harvey 2010, 2013; Steyerl 2013).

Based on and going beyond these trajectories, we invite contributions that empirically and theoretically engage with the expanded field of disconnectivity, its infrastructures, imaginaries and practices, its organization and politics. Submissions from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, and using different methodological approaches, are welcome.

## **How to participate**

To participate, please submit an abstract by October 1, 2020, through the conference's website. Abstracts should be of no more than 1,000 words. Authors will be notified of acceptance or otherwise by November 2, 2020. We can offer support for travel and accommodation for PhD students who wish to participate. For further information and clarification contact one of the conveners.

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