

Constant Connectivity Practices: Enduring Interruptions or Attending to Urgency?

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

An explosive growth of smartphones and an increased dependence on smartphones to perform one's work are observed in organizations. This research focuses on work practices and aims to explore how connectivity is appropriated within practices. By bringing in the notion of urgency to connectivity research, we aim to investigate the relationship between urgency and materiality in the negotiation of constant connectivity in an attempt to identify whether respondents endure interruptions due to connectivity or whether their work practices have shifted to embrace connectivity and attend to urgency. We consider urgency as a window to explore how constant connectivity is appropriated within practices. We define constant connectivity as a de-spatialized and de-temporalized connectivity to a network.

Using a case study in a leading American academic institution, this study highlights that respondents have re-thought urgency and aim for an immediate awareness of what is going on in their context; this is underpinned by the anywhere anytime smartphone affordances.

By exploring the socio-material aspects of connectivity, we aim to:

- Describe the negotiation of urgency among practices
- Understand the inter-relationship among practices
- Describe how respondents switch seamlessly among practices

The following vignettes are provided as samples of the data:

Some respondents have rules to attend to their communications: "I put my phone away when I am working on my research"; "I attend to my email in the afternoon, after I stop working on my research". However, the following quotes illustrate this process further: "Although my rule is not to use my phone when doing my research, I still look at my screen to see who sent me the message and what it is about and then I decide if I want to open it or not... Last week I was trying to organize a meeting for an interview, and I was eager to agree with my informant, so I was systematically looking at my inbox for bold messages and at the name of the sender for every new message". This quote illustrates that respondents are aware of the inconsistency between the practice as they abstract and describe it, and the practice as they enact it. The enactment in this case refers to the urgency of attending such email.

"If I am in a research presentation and I get bored, I activate my screen to see if I have any notification... If it is for an email, I open my inbox and see the senders and subjects of my new emails, these are bolded, I read them by priority and respond immediately if the answer is straightforward. It is relatively easy to identify the high priority messages. I read the name in the 'from' column, the subject and the beginning of the message and based on my relationship with this person and the context, I know if this is urgent or not". This quote illustrates how urgency is integrated in work practices. Respondents are pragmatic with regards to their communicative practice.

De-black-boxing this negotiation allows to reveal the various social and material elements as well as the timespace of the mediated communication and the ongoing practice, and their interplay in the assessment of urgency.

During the TREO talk we would like to get feedback on the articulation of the urgency construct and the interpretation of the urgency negotiation process and its impact on the ongoing research practice.