

Disconnect! Changing expectations around information communication technology products and services in Western Switzerland

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1. Introduction

This paper is part of a broader research project (2015-2017) focused on household electricity consumption in Western Switzerland, based on relating energy consumption to social practices and norms. Here, we explore notions of expectations, entitlement and excesses around the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT), focusing on both products (e.g., phones, computers, screens, video games, televisions, etc.), and services (e.g., access to music, films, social networks, information, etc.). We reveal how expectations can change over space and time, in relation to inter-generational dynamics, life courses, or changes in geographic settings, and how some of these expectations will no doubt evolve into feelings of entitlement. We also consider how people experience mandatory or voluntary ICT restrictions in connectivity. We uncover tensions around ICT usage, and discuss what this means in terms of opportunities to reduce or restrict energy consumption. While we recognize that the use of certain electronic devices, such as smart phones, may not be significant in and of themselves in terms of energy usage per unit, we see their active and standby usage as part of a growing trend worldwide (OECD/IEA 2014). ICTs are on the one hand touted as promoting greater sustainability, but also noted for direct and indirect energy consumption (Hilty and Aebischer 2015; Grant, Seager et al. 2010). ICTs are also relevant in relation to their “pervasive integration” across everyday practices (Røpke, Christensen et al. 2010), as our research also demonstrates. We consider ICT a particularly fruitful area to explore as social norms around (dis)connecting seem to be far from static: what is deemed acceptable or not in terms of ICT access *and* restrictions is an ongoing field of inquiry.

2. Methodology

In the overall research project on which this paper draws, we aim to understand social norms and representations (including beliefs and emotions) in relation to everyday practices that use electricity services (lighting-systems, refrigerator-freezing, washing-machines, and so on). Our main approach is based on ethnographic methods: through in-depth interviews and observations in households in the Geneva and Lausanne area, we aim towards a deeper understanding of existing practices and opportunities for change. We consider different socio economic groups (from an elite, “expatriate” population, to low-income housing inhabitants). We began with more of a deductive approach in our research design, raising key themes from the literature that we seek to further explore, but remain reflexive throughout this process. In a second phase and through a more inductive approach, we plan to refine our interview and observation guides, while also substantiating some (not all) qualitative research findings through a national survey. We are currently midway in our qualitative research and

have transcribed, coded and analysed 26 interviews for this paper. Interviews were conducted in French and English; all French citations were translated to English by the authors, for this paper. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

3. Conceptual framework

We engage with social practice theories to inform our approach to research, and our understanding of consumption as an object of study. Early developments in practice theory (Bourdieu 1979; Giddens 1984) grappled with the dichotomy between human subjectivity and social structure without forgoing human agency – concepts which would be further developed by Schatzki (1996) and Reckwitz (2002). Rather than focus solely on the material dimension of consumption or on individual actions, we enter in discussions with people around their everyday practices. We place an emphasis on the role of collective conventions, or shared ways of doing (Warde 2005; Shove and Pantzar 2005), which relate to what we term social norms. Social norms are converging around the world, creating expectations in relation to keeping clean (Shove 2003) or being comfortable indoors (Hitchings and Lee 2008; Shove, Chappells et al. 2008; Sahakian 2014), for example. In our interviews, we elicit emotive responses to certain topics and themes, using vignettes and scenarios (Flam and Kleres 2015), as we see a link between emotions and tensions that might arise around how social norms are interpreted in daily life (Collins 2004, Spaargaren 2011).

4. Research findings

In the sections that follow, we have analysed our data in relation to expectations, entitlement, and excess, in relation to the workshop theme, and introduce the notion of compulsory or voluntary restrictions, which we explored in our interviews.

4a. Expectations

Expectations around owning ICT devices and accessing ICT services are negotiated in relation to a variety of factors. ***Expectations within a family unit and between generations*** can shift over life courses and shared lives (*le vivre ensemble*)(Le Douarin 2014). Fabienne M once lived alone with her young child and always kept her WiFi connection off when not in use; when they moved in with Dan, she described a “battle” over the WiFi, as his expectation is to be continuously connected. “Even in bed, right before going to sleep”, she explains. She explains that turning off the WiFi is too much of a burden for him, he does not see the necessity to do so, although he regularly makes sure light bulbs are turned off when not in use. In other couples, similar statements arose in our interviews, with one person feeling that the partner was using his or her smartphone excessively. Similar tensions exist between parents and children: Christine wanted to turn off the WiFi when not in use, but her teenage sons constantly challenged her authority and eventually she “gave up”, as she put it. In another example, it’s the daughter who pesters her mother to be more careful about turning off devices: “she’s very bothered, even by the smallest light left on the television set”, Fabienne L explains.

Most parents expressed frustration around negotiating “screen time” with children: Sonia allows her teenage children to use their smartphones while they are watching a family movie. She refers to this as a “relaxing moment” and went on to justify this connectivity: “So, when your phone goes Ping, we are human beings after all, so we can relate, it’s all the same. Simply, we believe that our messages

are more important than theirs". For some, the smartphone has given their children more responsibility and a greater sense of autonomy. As Sonia explains: "Yes of course! I believe it has given them a certain maturity, more than our generation, or Claire's (the older sister) (...) there's quite a gap there". In the case of Christine, this mother of two adolescent boys has very few appliances in her home: she prides herself on a tiny refrigerator, gas stove and keeps her television set hidden behind a curtain in the living room. But in visiting the rooms of her two boys, each child had his own large flat screen television, game console, computer with multiple screens, in addition to the ubiquitous smartphone. But her children are also quite different: one son has many appliances in his room, including a small refrigerator and microwave oven (for making popcorn when watching films with his friends, he explains). He is rarely on his smartphone, however, as he has concerns over what he termed WiFi waves (perhaps electromagnetic radiation). His brother has fewer appliances in his room, other than those mentioned above, but is constantly connected to his smartphone. There can be differences in ICT usage between two siblings in the same family.

Peer groups also create expectations around ICT usage. As Sonia explains, "For her 14th birthday, Alix asked for an iPhone. I ended up saying, OK for an iPhone because your whole class has one so.... And Claire (the older daughter) says, "But mom, it's not fair, I only got my iPhone when I was 17!" And I said, darling, times have changed!" There are differences as to when each of her three children were allowed access to smartphones, which is not unusual among sibling in relation to a variety of rites of passage. A woman in her late forties also commented on her own peer group: "Now I find it even quite amazing how my friends, of my age, my generation, that we will sit at a table and they'll be on their iPhone, iPad, etc." It seems that what raises eyebrows, when it comes to using ICT in social settings, applies to different generations – not just young people.

We also found that **expectations can change across different spaces**. For example, most people interviewed attest to the fact that smartphone usage around family meals at home is not acceptable. But this changes when you step out of the home, into leisure spaces such as restaurants. The parents want to enjoy their time, so they allow children screen time. As Isabelle explains, in relation to the usage of what she calls the "family iPad":

It's great, the Internet, it's opens up all these opportunities for communication and information. It's great, but you need to know how to manage it. And sometimes, we don't manage it very well.... We would sometimes go to the restaurant to eat a pizza all together and well, the children eat fast, in about 10 minutes they are done and are fed up, and they are in the restaurant, so they start going off in all directions. They can draw a bit on the paper table cloth, but after a moment, Julien and I, we look at each other and we say: let's have 10 minutes just the two of us, to drink our wine. So we give a screen to one, and the other screams, me too I want! So we get out the second screen (..) so we're in the middle of the restaurant and each has their own cartoon... But we're not the only parents this has ever happened to!

Expectations around access to information, through ICT devices, can vary greatly among different people. For some, there is currently an "information overload" that is deemed unmanageable. For others, access to information is becoming expected. In the case of Christine, a mother of two teenage boys, she explains that she detests emails but tries "to remain somewhat connected to the world, but really don't digest all the information all too well". For others, information is a way of

getting immediate answers to questions, including questions around energy efficiency. It can also mean continuously switching from one source of information to another, as Nicola explains: “I’ll be watching a video but I will stop the video after five minutes, go onto something else and (...) As I said I’m observing myself when I’m on my computer now. Where I would normally have spent a lot more time just on one thing, one!”

Getting information is a one-way form of connecting to the Internet; social connectivity involves a back-and-forth through social media sites and applications, text messages and calls, connecting you to groups that go beyond geographic boundaries. People use smartphones for a whole host of reasons, from coordinating the preparation of meals within a family, to corresponding with other school parents or association members. **Expectations around social connectivity** are not obvious to some: for Natacha, her Mexican husband is grateful to the various applications, such as Whatsapp and Skype, that allow him to be easily connected to his family in Mexico. And yet Natacha explains that he is sometimes frustrated by this form of connectivity: he is accessible, but not always available. For example, he will sometimes receive messages late at night that he’s not able to manage in a way that he would find satisfactory, because he’s in a different time zone and not able to be there physically. A mother explains that her husband has unlimited internet access and they were therefore about to use an application that turns two smartphones into baby monitors; they were able to dine at a neighbour’s, giving them some leisure time while remaining accessible to the baby (and available within a short amount of time, should she start crying).

People have different understandings of what makes for social connectivity. Daniel, for example, is an environmental activist and very aware of energy issues: he consumes a minimal amount of energy and lives alone. He aspires to live in a cooperative building that is currently under construction and is involved in cooperative organization. In that context, he wanted to create a common television screening area on one of the floors of the new building, but others were not so keen. He remembers watching television on Sunday with his family, growing up, and missing this social connectivity. As shared in the earlier example of Christine, each teenage boy has his own flat screen television in his room – albeit, for watching films with their friends (if not with family members). For a couple living in Lausanne, their television consumption was reduced when they moved back into the city and regained what they called a “social life”. Watching television as a couple together is not considered “social” to them. For others, ICT is a way of sharing many experiences, with friends and family and through social networks online, but also person-to-person. Sonia, a mother of three girls, talks about sharing funny videos with her children as a way to start a conversation. As Fabienne L explained, leisure activities are now being “directed through” electronic devices, including reading, music, travel, and film. In her family, this creates opportunities for sharing experiences between generations:

My daughter the other day said to me that she listened to Freddy Mercury, you know she’s 14 years old [laughs] (...) so I had to listen to Freddy Mercury [laughs]. You know like okay Queen, here we go! (...) I mean when my son comes home, we like music enough uh (...) my daughter and my, my son and myself, that we are like, okay what are you listening to?

Expectations around ownership are also changing with ICT. People are sharing more experiences and less things, and also acquire less books, CDs, and DVDs, as all of these forms of entertainment are now available digitally. From an elite socio-economic group, Fabienne L explains that a precious

book collection has very little value these days; she has her book collection on an iPad and would like to find ways of sharing this with others, for example with house guests.

4b. Entitlement

When people and particularly children are entitled to their own phone or smartphone is a theme that came up in several interviews. ***Entitlement can be placed in relation to family relations***, and particularly recomposed families where one parent requests direct access to his or her child. For example, the father of Alicia's children (13 and 16 years old) lives in France and gave his children smartphones in order to be in touch with him more directly. Isabelle's son got his first telephone at 9 years old, so he could be reachable by his father. She didn't agree with him having a phone at such a young age, but agrees that the father should have a direct relationship with his child. In relation to this, certain parents felt entitled to be able to reach their children at any time for safety reasons. A mother of a 3-year old always keeps her cell phone on at work, as her daughter has life threatening allergies and she feels she must always be available; another mother says something similar, in relation to general health and safety concerns; her daughter is 14-years old.

People also feel entitled to ***access to ICT products and services for educational and professional reasons***. A cleaning lady explained that she doesn't have enough money to pay the bills at the end of the month, but when a social worker commented on her monthly Internet fee, she felt that this was a non-negotiable expense for her family: the teenage children need to be able to do their schoolwork and Internet access is a key resource for them. Similar sentiments were echoed among more middle class families, access to WiFi for homework is now a necessity, it would seem. This creates tensions around when the WiFi and computers can be used, and whether young people are engaged in "work" or "leisure". Professionals from all age groups also explained that they use ICT for professional purposes and even engage in social media because it's their job (e.g., as a communications consultant, or political campaigner). But parents also reflect on their own use of smart phones, iPads and computers, explaining that they often give "the wrong example" as Isabelle put it, as it is not clear to their children when parents are obliged to consult ICT devices for professional reasons, or engaged in leisure activities. The boundaries are not so clear.

4c. Excess

The growing literature on excessive use of ICT recognizes its pathological nature, in some contexts (Chou, Condrón and Belland 2005). The notion of excess when it comes to ICT services comes up constantly, with people using "drug addiction" language to express their usage or that of other family members, particularly children. For Isabelle, ecology is an object of discussion and concern in her family; she often used the word "lobotomized" to describe her children's interaction with ICT. "It's truly a drug, it's just incredible. They have pure moments of pleasure (on the iPad), but when you take it away, they become like addicts." To limit "excess", parents say that have to be vigilant and oversee their children's exposure time and content. One young person told his mother (as she expressed it), "Help, I can't manage this!" because his eyes were starting to hurt in relation to his smartphone usage. She herself talks about checking her emails too often, because "sometimes you're bored, it becomes mechanical. You have to make a real effort to say no" adding that "My objective is to give up my iPhone, but I find it so very practical". Delphine, mother of two small girls, has a similar discourse: "there's an addiction around Facebook and Instagram, I'm really thinking

about completely disconnecting, emptying them all out, and think about other things, use my time for other things...”

People speak with some nostalgia around what they consider “simpler” times, when you had your television show at a certain time, and that was it, or when you were only available on a landline. Everything is now “on demand”, which creates an issue for some. A mother of two small children, 2 years old and 7 years old, explains that when she plays YouTube videos for the elder daughter, there’s always a new video showing up on her stream; there are never ending opportunities, which are difficult for her and her daughter to manage. Whilst when she was young, you had your twenty-minute *Babibouchettes* show in the evening and that was it. Another woman, Fabienne M, deplors the immediacy of social relations: “It can be a bit annoying that immediacy. It’s super useful but also annoying”, going on to explain, “Of course it’s useful to say, you’re here, we’re here, let’s meet up. But it also forces you to always be consulting your agenda, throwing you into situations you may not want to participate in”.

People generally said, in interviews, they have more leisure time today, compared to previous generations. Time to read a book, for example, or grow a vegetable garden for pleasure rather than out of necessity. While ICT saves time and can help with so many tasks in every life, such as buying a train ticket or car sharing, it was also described as “*chronophage*”, the French term for time consuming. Television, Facebook and the Internet more generally are seen as “time eaters”. People feel that they can go offline for an evening, for example, and enjoy reading a book, but must go back online the next day to “catch up” on all the information that they lost out on. This leads us to a theme we would like to introduce in this workshop, that of restrictions.

4d. Restrictions

How do people disconnect, in a voluntary or involuntary manner, from ICT services? We already mentioned how people disconnect around meal times at home, for example. Young people seem to be continuously connected, but this is not restricted to youth. For Thandy, 18 years old, her iPhone is on airplane mode when she sleeps but when she wakes up: « Well, the first thing I do is, I look at WhatsApp, Snapchat. » Christine has two sons: one is connected all the time, but the other is often on airplane mode because he is concerned about what he terms “WiFi contamination”. Emeric is 20-years old and tries to be balanced in his use of smartphones, getting his device much later than some of his friends.

Some people ***feel comfortable with restrictions in a special setting, such as on holiday***. As Emeric put in, “The moment you know that you don’t have access to Wifi, it’s no longer an issue”:

But when you’re in a space where you expect to have WiFi, like at home, in Lausanne, in your city, and finally you don’t have a connection, it’s a bit annoying because you know that you’re not supposed to be un-reachable, you know. But if you leave and you don’t have Wifi, people who are trying to contact you know this (that you are on holiday), you see? ... And so you’re not missing out on anything.

Emeric goes on to explain the different activities he engages in when on holidays: “I don’t know, I go for walks, I read, I eat, I go out, I see friends, all the basic things. There’s no need to... It’s holiday time, you see. It’s nice to get out of the everyday routine”. Other people, with secondary homes in

France of Spain, explained that they appreciate not having access to Swisscom and not necessarily having WiFi in those contexts. Being comfortable with limited or no access to the Internet is also something **people are willing to experience for a limited amount of time**. When asked what happens when a smartphone is left at home accidentally, several people expressed an initial frustration followed by “a real feeling of freedom (...) letting chance back into our lives” (Fabienne M), or a pleasurable feeling from loosening our control over our agendas and lives. Esther experienced a power outage in her home in the Geneva area, and posted a picture of herself enjoying a candle-lit dinner with her partner on Facebook. When asked about this experience, she explained that it was enjoyable because she knew it was not permanent. When asked how she might manage further restrictions, she explained that being offline for one week would be annoying, but if she had to be permanently offline, she would manage, she would organize herself accordingly. Several people reacted positively to the notion that there could be WiFi free zones or cafés, or hours of the day when WiFi access might be reduced. Thandy, a teenager who frequents a popular night club in Geneva, explained there is almost no Internet access possible from the basement location of the night club. Not having access spontaneously means that she must wait before sharing messages or images over social media applications, selecting what she wants to share in a more careful manner the next morning. “Yes, it’s cool. Thank goodness for that!” she exclaims.

One woman explained that **being on vacation made her rethink her connectivity** (but also her habits around tidiness) significantly. She says that she and her husband completely disconnected on a trip to the Southern tip of Italy, and that over that period she realized that she could “let go” of certain hang ups, like cleaning her home so regularly or always checking her phone. She realized on vacation that she needed to spend more time appreciating their two small daughters, a practice she then took back to their daily life in Geneva (we plan a follow up interview in a few months to gauge whether this lasted).

Some people, however, **really do mind being disconnected for whatever period of time**. One woman described two days in the French countryside: “Fifteen days ago in Normandy, we had no Wifi, no TV, nothing (...) It was a little nerve wrecking, to start with.” She goes on to explain another holiday period in the Basque region of Spain:

The kids were at their wit’s end. And we had to deal with the kids. Bad weather, plus no smart phone and no Wifi, that’s just not possible (...) How pathetic was this, we would go to this big shopping mall, Carrefour, and we would stand in front of Orange (cell phone service provider) to get Wifi. Well, no, no, it’s dumb but we were looking for information. “Hey! Do you remember the name of this actor? Ah well no, well no. We won’t remember.” So too bad. These are really habits.

When asked whether she would appreciate a moment of not being connected she replied: “No! No! I really don’t see the need (...) What need is there, to feel relieved? No, not at all.”

For another woman, restrictions would only be welcomed if they came from trusted sources – like family or friends. A government or electric utility company placing restrictions on access to energy would not be deemed acceptable, for this woman. But if her peers were engaged in a voluntary restriction, she claims she would also go along (albeit, for how long?). For another couple, Nicolas and Sabrina, restrictions at the level of households would not make sense unless the public sector also did their part:

Yes, if I don't have a choice, and I know that it's best for the planet and best for us, best for everyone, well yeah, I would do it. But I don't think that's the issue (...) we can improve public lighting, for example, where my father lives, the street lights adapt to people's presence.

A final comment on restricting not only a service but access to things: Arthur (22 years old student) explained that, growing up, one of his best friends and neighbour had a game console. "Our parents were not big fans of video games so as a result we were not either. So from time to time, we would go play at the neighbour's place, it was good fun, but that's it. After that, well, we didn't necessarily want to play." Not having access to the game in his home reduced his usage. Arthur goes to explain that his friend is different from him in that, "He plays video games all the time, but he's not at all connected, you see?", stating that you can leave him a message on his phone, but he would only answer two days later. He may be connected to the world of gaming, but not to neighbourhood friends through text messaging. Notions of what connectivity means are up for interpretation.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

A main finding of this initial phase of qualitative data analysis is that there seem to be no fixed norms, set over time, around what is considered normal or excessive ownership and usage – in relation to ICT products and services. Unlike collective conventions around hygiene and cleanliness (i.e., washing and bathing practice), practices that relate to social connectivity, work and leisure that make use of Internet connectivity and ICT are new and constantly evolving. People don't have references in their own family (e.g., replicating what they learned from their own parents) and some are actively seeking benchmarks or guidelines in this respect. This comes through not only in questions related to access (i.e., how much time can children use an iPad in a given week), but also in relation to products. Several interviewees stated not having so many electronic devices in the home, but through observation we found that each child had their own iPhone, iPad and laptop computer, for example – to some this is considered normal, yet who is to say what the norm is when it comes to ICT ownership and access today?

Connectivity also means different things to different people, and this changes over time and place. Using smart phones at the dinner table is not acceptable for one family, but using screens in restaurants is tolerated. One sibling is given a smartphone at the age of 15, while the third sibling gets hers at 12 years old, for example. For some, connectivity is a highly social affair; for others, it's anti-social. Connectivity through gaming is not the same as connectivity through messaging, for some. There seems to be an implicit norm, that in-person relations are somehow superior to interacting over a device, but we are not clear if people express this sentiment because it's the right thing to think and do (a "prescription" defined by their social group) or if they really experience it as such. Several people spoke about being connected, virtually, as a very positive experience – albeit, with certain limits (e.g., example of being accessible but not available).

One of the key questions that emerges from this analysis is, when does an expectation become a sense of entitlement, when it comes to ICT products and services? If we consider how other technologies evolved over time, such as air-conditioning (in warm climates), refrigerators or washing machines, we can see how people move from expecting a certain product-based service to feeling entitled to it. Entitlement is still in the process of taking shape, in relation to ICT, and people's reactions to the notion of restrictions seems to indicate that there could be some room for

manoeuvre in this respect. Notions of restrictions merit to be further explored. There could be opportunities to question expectations around ICT and create a sense of entitlement around disconnecting, to reconnect in other ways with the use of our time. We see the study of time usage in relation to leisure time and notion of the good life as a fruitful area of future study, in relation to connectivity, ICT and related electricity consumption. Restrictions are acceptable to most people, it would seem (as based on this small sample under study), but how restrictions play out is paramount – in relation to the context, who is imposing the restriction, for what period of time, and for what aim.

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