

Lecture Urs Stäheli

Contemporary societies are often described in terms of network metaphors and theories informed by an 'ethos of connectivity'. Many contemporary social theories (from Luhmann's systems theory to Deleuze/Guattari's rhizome analysis to Actor Network Theory) operate with a normative bias toward networking. In recent years, however, diagnoses of over-networking (hyperconnectivity) have increased alongside the search for, and experimentation with, practices and infrastructures of de-networking. The lecture will present some exemplary cases of these phenomena and inquire into the social and media-theoretical relevance of disconnection. What conceptual challenges might be associated with thinking in terms of de-networking? Putting problems of passivity, inactivity, and withdrawal at the centre of theoretical interest, the lecture aims to conceive de-networking not as a romanticizing exit from the network, but rather as a paradoxical operation at the boundary of networking processes.

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This lecture is part of the ICI Lecture Series 'Reduction', which explores the critical potentials of notions and practices of 'reduction', within and across different fields and approaches. One of the most devastating charges levelled against theories, analyses, and descriptions is that of being reductive or of amounting to a full-blown reductionism. Conceptual frameworks are scolded for being impoverished and descriptions for being too sparse or flat. And conversely, to call something 'irreducible' seems to confer an immediate and indisputable dignity to it. And yet the history of science and knowledge cannot be told without acknowledging the importance of reductionist programmes; reductive paradigms have periodically revitalized the arts. What lies at the root of such different attitudes towards 'reduction'? Can one embrace forms of reduction that are not in the service of production, allowing for the possibility of a 'less' that would no longer have to amount to 'more'?

Undoing Networks