

# Cyber Incivilities and the Creation of Vulnerabilities at Work

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*In this article, we fall back to four years of field research to show the links between cyber incivilities in the context of professional relations and the creation of vulnerabilities at work.*

*Our different analyses show that the interactions between the two phenomena can be considered in two ways: on the one hand, uncivil digital communication practices make individuals and groups at work vulnerable, on the other hand, the vulnerability of individuals and groups at work opens the way to the generation of cyber incivilities. These incivilities can then appear as signs of adaptation to new work contexts or of disengagement from the company, the work group or work in general.*

*In the end, we show that uncivil work environments and the process of developing vulnerabilities at work can appear as two phenomena that participate in the same negative work spiral, one leading to the other and vice versa.*

*Keywords: vulnerability at work, cyber incivility at work, communication at work, psychosocial risks, organizational communication*

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of cyber incivilities at work has, for several years now, caught the interest of researchers and companies. In France, this interest is demonstrated through a research program<sup>1</sup> on this issue (Carayol, Laborde, 2021) and a close collaboration with companies, which has resulted in the production of a book for professionals on this subject matter (Laborde, 2019). The topic is of course more relevant than ever in this current health crisis, which is forcing many employees to communicate from home exclusively via digital tools.

The continuous evolution of digital technologies dedicated to professional communications, associated with the current models of work organization, are leading to profound changes in our modes of communication and our forms of relationships and cooperation at work. The current situation of “forced teleworking” shows both the strength of the tools, the adaptability of employees and teams, and the numerous limitations of “remote” communication, via multiple digital platforms, not always mastered, and whose uses are rarely supervised.

If today, in many professions, “working is synonymous to communicating” (Zarifian, 1998), it becomes clear that it is not only the form but also the quality of communication that is changing. The frequently observed deterioration in work relations can therefore be associated with the increasing isolation of individuals within the organization and their competition within the group. It may also be due to difficulties

in appropriating and using the new tools that “mediate” our professional relationships. Or it may be due to a lack of organizational “framing” regarding the collective use of these tools.

In this article, we fall back to four years of field research to show the existing links between cyber incivilities in the context of professional relations and the creation of vulnerabilities at work.

Our different analyzes show that the interactions between the two phenomena can be considered in two ways: on the one hand, uncivil digital communication practices make individuals and groups at work vulnerable, on the other hand, the vulnerability of individuals and groups at work opens the way to the generation of cyber incivilities.

We will first look at the theoretical framework of this research through an exploration of the concepts of cyber incivility and vulnerability at work. We will follow up by detailing the methodological framework of our study. Before finally discussing the two forms of interrelations between the phenomena that emerge from our field investigations. The conclusion will allow us to look back at the contributions of this research and the reflections in progress.

## **CYBER INCIVILITIES AND VULNERABILITIES AT WORK**

### **Cyber Incivilities at Work**

Social science research on incivilities at work has shown their great importance in terms of malaise at work for employees, as well as in the economic terms for organizations, whether in terms of reduced productivity, increased turnover, risks of all kinds, degraded quality, or reputational risk (Cortina et al., 2001). The interest in this theme, which relates to collective malaise in organizations, shows that apparently minor relational and communicational difficulties, shocks, and micro-toxic interactions, which transgress “the fundamental rule of consideration of others as persons” (Robert-Demontrond, 2003), can durably alter work collectives, but also be the symptom of a weakening of the social body of work organizations.

Incivilities can be defined, at first glance, as “acts which disturb or are morally hurtful but are not punishable by law” (Sebastian Roché & Schlegel, 2009, p. 15). They fall under the heading of ordinary violence (Herreros, 2012), they are “the thousand little daily attacks that ruin our lives” (Sébastien Roché, 1996, p. 254).

They also look into the issue of transgression of the norms and implicit rules in community life (Felonneau & Lannegrand-Willems, 2005). Incivility is generally considered to be opposed to civility, which is associated with respect for others, the maintenance of their safety, the existence of “a strong sense of solidarity and equity, (and) the protection of the weakest. (Robert-Demontrond, 2003).

In Anglo-Saxon psychology- and management studies, incivilities at work are considered the most frequent deviant manifestations in organizations (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Cortina et al., 2001; Porath & Pearson, 2013).

In the professional setting, incivilities are low-intensity behaviors that break the norms of mutual respect specific to the workplace (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). They are not always intentional, and their perception is subjective and depends on the individuals and the context of the interaction (Dupré, 2017; Laborde, 2016).

In psychology and management studies, incivilities at work are considered as being the most frequent deviant manifestations in organizations (organizational misbehavior). Studies show that they have been on the rise for the last 20 years and are harmful to both individuals and organizations (Cortina et al., 2001; Porath & Pearson, 2013). For these authors, these (incivilities) have been increasing over the last 20 years and are harmful to both individuals and organizations. Incivility behaviors are thus perceived as “chronic stressors” (accumulation of small daily frustrations) likely to create “harmful social environments” more than as full-fledged traumatic events.

Digital incivilities can be defined, in an overly broad way, as “Computer-mediated communication behaviors that violate the norms of mutual respect at work. They can be committed with or without the

intent to harm” (Lim & Teo, 2009, p. 419) and as “impolite and discourteous behaviors conveyed through information and communication technologies such as email and texting” (Giumetti et al, 2012, p. 148).

In the context of this article, we are interested in the cyber incivilities that can occur in internal relations within the organization, between peers or in a managerial relationship. We will not deal with incivilities related to relations with audiences outside the organization, since customer/user relations have their own manifestations of cyber incivilities and violence, which are often different from the phenomena observed between employees of the same organization.

In the context of internal relations, it can be a question of incivilities in the form (emails without polite formulas, words in capital letters or in red), under the context (inappropriate terms, cynicism, misunderstood humor), in the uses (abuse of copying or hidden copying, “like” or commenting on posts, failure to respect working hours) or directly integrated into the technical design (automatic formulas, automated workflows)<sup>2</sup>.

This categorization of cyber incivilities facilitates understanding but should not make us forget the above all subjective aspect of their perception and potentially unintentional aspect of their production. The perception of an interaction as uncivil is measured above all by the existing relationship between individuals and the norms of exchange established in the groups.

The digital devices that accompany work can be viewed as new channels for the development and dissemination of uncivil interactions and, in general terms, conflicts within organizations. Moreover, digital devices have unprecedented potentials which are likely to produce or reinforce professional incivilities through the dematerialization of exchanges and the new capacities of dissemination and exposure of messages (Laborde, 2020).

Thus, the lack of contextual clues specific to disembodied distant exchanges can encourage the production of incivilities or at least misunderstandings. The inability to react and to express one’s possible disagreement in an informal way, also generates frustrations and lack of emotional regulation which end up becoming potentially prejudicial for the interactions. An uncivil interaction mediated by digital tools is also likely to spread in time and space well beyond the initial exchange (through the possibilities of copying, transferring, virality, recording, etc.) and to take on an unexpected scope.

In the framework of the CIVILINUM research program, we see digital incivilities at work, not as deviant behaviors that need to be “corrected” or “transformed”, but as symptoms of work “backlogs” and of a deterioration of communications at work.

- Our main results to date show: that cyber incivilities are largely trivialized in organizations: they are most often accepted as necessary “ordinary violence” (Herrerros, 2012) and passed over in silence (Laborde, 2020; Laborde & Carayol, 2021),
- that these practices, both in their production and in their perception, are inseparable from the organizational contexts in which they are produced (Dupré, 2020).
- that cyber incivilities are a symptom of broader organizational dysfunctions, or even of pre-existing conflicts in organizations (Dupré, 2020; Laborde & Carayol, 2021).

### **Vulnerability and the Creation of Vulnerabilities at Work**

Interest in “vulnerability” has been growing in the French academic sphere since the 1980s (Brodiez-Dolino, 2013). The term is also immensely popular in the media. The approach in terms of vulnerabilities then makes it possible to unify a series of vastly different problems: we thus speak of environmental, social, and health vulnerability, vulnerable publics, territorial vulnerability, vulnerable minorities, etc.

In the academic sphere, although vulnerability was first treated in France in physics, it was then mobilized in sociology (where it tended to replace the concept of exclusion), then in psychology (where it was associated with the notion of resilience). It is also found in computer science, economics, law, and more generally in the disciplines associated with the notion of “risk”: disaster management, development economics, environmental sciences, health and nutrition, and statistics.

Vulnerability can then be defined as “a sort of more or less generalized Achilles’ heel” (Brodiez-Dolino, 2016). It evokes both “the crack” (the fragile zone) and “the injury” to come (Thomas, 2010) and thus designates “a potentiality of being injured” (Soulet, 2005).

The semantic field of vulnerability is today essentially associated with devaluing attributes. According to Dominique Lhuilier (2017), vulnerability is thus “most often understood as a state of lesser resistance to nuisances and aggressions, it qualifies by reference to a lack, a defect, a loss, an insufficiency”.

From this point of view, vulnerability can appear as a notion used to categorize, to define an otherness, to fix an identity attribution. It then becomes “a distinctive criterion (we are vulnerable, or we are resilient) and an explanatory principle (because we are vulnerable, we have fallen ill, become dependent, inefficient, unemployable...)” (Lhuilier, 2017). Vulnerability thus appears more as a social construct.

In contrast to this approach, vulnerability can be seen as a process (a process of fragilization that can affect any of us) and not a state (a form of identity attribution that stigmatizes).

According to Marc-Henry Soulet (2005), who calls for the replacement of the category of exclusion by that of social vulnerability, vulnerability, in its non-categorical sense, has several characteristics:

- It is universal. We are all vulnerable, ontologically as human beings, but particularly in the societal context of uncertainty and the shifting of responsibility onto individuals that is characteristic of our modernity.
- It is relational and contextual. To speak of vulnerability in itself is meaningless, we are vulnerable in a given context, depending on the protections of others.
- It is potential. This leads us “to question both the conditions of the possibility of this potentiality (the structural risk of being injured) and the conditions of its realization (the fact of actually being injured)”.
- It is individual. We are unequally affected, not only according to our choices, but above all because we are unequally protected and do not all have the same resources.
- Finally, it is reversible. It is possible to act on the factors and the context to reduce it.

In this approach, vulnerability is thus inseparable from the social links, modes of organization and social relationships that make people fragile and/or keep them fragile. For Marc-Henry Soulet, “To reason in terms of vulnerability rather than exclusion is to emphasize the intrinsic link between a mode of organization and representation of social relations and the deficits it generates” (Soulet, 2005).

In this context, while refusing to confine the analysis to stereotyped categories of “disadvantaged” or “fragile” publics (Damome & Soubiale, 2019), the notion of vulnerability, to us, seems to be quite interesting to mobilize, especially in information and communication sciences, by observing vulnerabilities in their relational and contextual dimensions.

### *The Creation of Vulnerabilities at Work*

The theme of vulnerabilities is also used in the analysis of work and organizations. Depending on the discipline, authors are interested in the vulnerability of individuals, groups, or organizations. In this area too, there are several possible conceptions about vulnerability.

New managerial doctrines thus propose that we bring together under the term “vulnerable” the populations considered as “fragile” in companies (senior citizens, disabled people, parents of young children) in order to support them (define, measure, prevent risks) and reconcile vulnerability and performance. Here the explanatory principle of difficulties at work is centered on the individual: “vulnerable” individuals are more sensitive to risks, more likely to be knocked out, and unemployable. To support them and make them more “efficient”, organizations offer them individual support (from coaching to happiness officer).

In contrast to this new managerial credo, research in psychopathology and work clinic (Lhuilier, 2013, 2015, 2017) denounces this social construction of vulnerability at work with its support centered on the individual.

These approaches initially denounce the stigmatization of certain categories of the population at work, which “contribute to manufacturing a dual representation of the world of work: on the one hand, it would include the healthy, robust, fighting, efficient, high-performing, in other words, the ‘fit’; and on the other, the others, fragile, vulnerable, deficient, in other words, the ‘unfit’” (Lhuilier, 2017).

The authors also denounce an over-responsibility of individuals who are summoned to “repair” themselves individually, to the detriment of taking into consideration broader organizational dysfunctions.

According to Dominique Lhuilier, with regard to individual support programs, “In both in the design of these tools and in their methods of use, we see a repetition of the scenario of causal imputation to the “victims”: those who testify to a lack of wellbeing and who signal themselves by a high “exposure” to risks could well be responsible for these deficiencies, due to their lack of resistance, skills, and resources of their own” (Lhuilier, 2017). Vulnerability, considered as a state, then becomes a process of exclusion from the world of work.

In this article, we choose to use the expression “creation of vulnerabilities at work”. The term “creation” thus refers to the social construction risk of a new category of individuals stigmatized at work. It also makes it possible to emphasize the processual aspect of the phenomenon and all the factors (essentially the organizational forms and the socio-technical devices on which they are based) that produce, construct and manufacture vulnerability at work. The analysis of vulnerability can thus be understood as a revelation of the dysfunctions of work organization and the ideological constructions that underlie them.

The organizational and socio-technical factors that contribute to the process of vulnerability at work have been widely documented in the literature, particularly in the field of occupational medicine. Christophe Dejours thus analyzes the deleterious effects on individuals and groups of new forms of individualized performance evaluation or of the requirements linked to the quest for an impossible total quality (Dejours, 2007). For the author, the brutal aggravation of work psychopathology can be proportionately linked to these transformations in work organization. Christophe Dejours speaks of “psychopathological vulnerability at work” which he associates with the pathologies of loneliness, overload, ethical conflicts, a vague feeling of injustice, and the loss of individual and collective enthusiasm, causally linked to the new forms of work organization (Dejours, 2007).

The socio-technical devices that accompany work also participate in this process of vulnerability (Carayol & Laborde, 2019). According to Marc-Eric Bobillier-Chaumon and Yves Clot (2016), technological artifacts can, “if not trigger, at least reveal or accentuate a whole set of contemporary work issues.” In a 2007 article, Marc-Eric Bobillier-Chaumon proposed a taxonomy of ICTs that shows their effects on the transformation of activity and health at work. He mentioned the deleterious effects linked to different categories of tools: a deterioration in interpersonal relations, an increase in workload, an emotional cost (technostress), a distancing from the core business, a development of prescription and a loss of creativity, a feeling of loss of control and autonomy or, conversely, an individual left to him-/herself, subjected to an injunction of creativity (Bobillier Chaumon, 2017).

In this research, we consider vulnerability at work as a process resulting from organizations and representations of work that isolate, make individuals to compete, and are likely to affect each of us in a given context. Since this work is in the field of organizational communication, we are specifically interested in the changes in communication, cooperation, and participation at work, which are generated by these new forms of organization and which likely to “create” vulnerability at work across the organizations.

In this context, the phenomena of cyber incivilities at work share several characteristics with vulnerabilities at work as we envisage them in this article:

- They are contextual and relational: we cannot talk about cyber incivilities in themselves, independently of the contexts of exchange. The same behavior can be judged as uncivil in a given context and not in another, by one person or group and not by another.
- They are potential: our different fields show that actions can be taken and that collective exchanges on these issues, as well as the quality of internal human relations, have a definite impact on these phenomena.
- They are individual: we are unequally affected and often on our own, when faced with the experience of cyber incivilities.
- Finally, the effects of cyber incivilities on individuals and groups act as processes that unfold over time through an “accumulation of small daily frustrations” likely to create “harmful social environments” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

## METHODOLOGY

To illustrate our remarks, we fall back to three fields developed within the framework of the CIVILINUM research program:

1. An intervention research was conducted for over 7 months in a French public structure with 800 employees spread over 12 departments. It gave rise to a questionnaire filled out by 430 employees on their use of e-mail in the professional context and 4 focus groups of 2 hours and 30 minutes, in 3 departments to clarify and document the results of the questionnaire<sup>3</sup>.
2. The establishment of the “Prevention of cyber incivilities at work”<sup>4</sup> focus group, which we led for a year and a half. The group brought together about fifteen people: researchers, managers, HRDs, QWL project managers, social relations managers, customer relations managers, and security managers. Eight meetings of 2 hours 30 minutes each were held in 2017 and 2018. The group members also interviewed employees from their organizations about their experiences with cyber incivilities<sup>5</sup>. These exchanges made it possible to propose an initial definition of cyber incivilities that resonated with the practices observed in the organizations.
3. Analyses of 6 2-hour focus groups. These focus groups brought together twenty-five guests (researchers, psychologist, occupational nurse and doctor, HRD, safety officers, social dialogue manager, researchers, internal and external communication officers, customer relations manager, consultant, lawyer, and jurist) around six themes<sup>6</sup> on July 5 and 6, 2018 in Bordeaux (France). The contributions led to the production of a book for professionals (Laborde, 2019)<sup>7</sup>.

This research is part of a comprehensive and critical paradigm, which aims to study power relationships, conflicts, forms of control or domination at work in contemporary organizations. We thus distance ourselves from a liberal conception of the individual, as being free, autonomous, self-entrepreneur of his own existence, which could lead to interpreting the perception of incivility in a psychologizing manner, as a mark of “fragility”, of exacerbated sensitivity or of incapacity to adapt to the work requirements. We consider, on the contrary, that the way in which individuals perceive and represent “incivility” is a “construct” that results from professional socialization.

## UNCIVIL DIGITAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICES THAT CAN PRODUCE VULNERABILITY AT WORK

In March 2018, a study day entitled “Vulnerability and cyber incivilities” brought together a dozen speakers at the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme d’Aquitaine<sup>8</sup>. A study of the presentations shows that they were divided into three categories: most of which considered cyber incivilities as likely to produce vulnerability, others, in the minority, were interested in the organizational and socio-technical factors likely to produce cyber incivilities (these being immediately considered as linked to vulnerability), and finally the last ones were interested in the modes of reaction and adaptation (resilience?) to the phenomena of incivilities.

For over 4 years, our different fields lead us to confirm this first approach, by documenting the effects of cyber incivilities on vulnerability at work.

In this part, we are therefore interested in the way in which the generation of cyber incivilities in a context of dematerialization of professional exchanges is likely to weaken individuals, groups, and organizations.

In this respect, the quantitative survey we conducted in 2017 in a public organization on the uses of emails at work (n=434) is quite enlightening<sup>9</sup>:

- 40% of respondents say they are “often” or “all the time” overwhelmed by the number of emails received, 49% “sometimes”
- 38% say they are “rather” or “completely” stressed or put under pressure by email management
- 68% think that email use leads to work overload
- 35% think that e-mail prevents them from planning their daily activities

The focus groups lead according to this questionnaire<sup>10</sup> showed a real distress, especially among middle managers, on these issues. The information overload and the suffering linked to electronic exchanges are thus frequently associated, for the people audited, with cyber incivilities on the part of individuals, groups or even the entire organization.

We have analyzed the verbatims collected in our various fields from 2017 to 2019 and we have classified a certain number of deleterious effects associated with cyber incivilities which are likely to participate in the vulnerability process of individuals and groups.

These elements overlap with certain psychosocial risk factors that are conventionally analyzed in companies<sup>11</sup> though here, the category of vulnerability makes it possible to go even further, by integrating elements specific to communication/cooperation at work that do not necessarily have a direct impact on the mental health of individuals, but nevertheless contribute to the deterioration of the work environment.

According to the actors interviewed, cyber incivilities would thus have effects on:

- Perceived efficiency

Here, we can take several quotes from executives of a community about the overload of emails linked to a poor management of the email system by their employees (who would show themselves as being uncivil):

*“For some time now, I cannot manage it anymore... I am afraid of missing important things, but I cannot see everything anymore...”*

*“I do not feel overwhelmed but totally inefficient...things get lost...I only handle my priorities.”*

*“I am not organized at all: I am polluted, I keep looking all the time, continuously, evenings and weekends included... and then sometimes I break down, I stop everything...”*

- The feeling of control over one’s work (loss of control and autonomy)

*“Even if some people continue all night, the next morning we find several new unplanned tasks in the box; how can we organize ourselves in these conditions? “Agent, public organization*

*“While we process an email in 10 minutes, four others arrive... we have the feeling that we have spent too much time processing it... especially if the new ones modify the previous one” Executive, public organization.*

- The feeling of producing quality work

*“Faced with the number of requests by e-mail, the quality of treatment decreases, and this is what brings about stress...” Executive, banking sector.*

- Acknowledgment

*“The response of a hierarchical superior is a form of acknowledgment, but when he or she does not do it, it could be badly experienced by the agents, especially since some of them only have hierarchical relations by e-mail.” Executive, public organization*

*“If it was recurrent [about a lapidary email without any polite wording], even if I know that it is not against me, I could say to myself ‘I am nothing’” Project manager, transport company.*

- The degradation of interpersonal relationships

*“Everything becomes a problem when everything goes through email...We need to put the human back in...” Agent, public organization.*

*“Messaging does not exempt management...” Executive, public organization.*

*“It gives me the same effect as though he walked into my office and asked me a question without saying thank you...” Executive, transport company (regarding the absence of a greeting in an email)*

- Emotional and time pressure

*“We do not say anything, we take it upon yourself and then at some point it becomes a kind of pressure cooker, the email too many. And it explodes! Why it happens at this moment, rather than another, we do not know” Executive, transport company*

*“The lack of perspective which the sender has in relation to the deadline. The hot potato that is sent back to you without having considered the importance of the action that is requested, or the time limit for responding.” Agent, public organization*

- Increased workload and cognitive overload

*“The send button is always pressed, without giving explanations, and “you are on your own”. However, precisely because we are caught up in time, we should always give precise indications in the e-mails regarding the dates, the degree of urgency...” Agent, public company*

*“The mass of emails, often not essential, is a problem, especially since it wastes a lot of time because they need to be sorted.” Executive, public sector*

- The feeling of never being able to get off the hook

*“Even if you warn...you can warn...with absence messages etc.... It does not do anything. It bombards, it bombards. You are asked to do things even on your time off. That to me is the pinnacle of it all.” Agent, public sector*

*“I make it a point to read all my e-mails, even when I’m on vacation. Otherwise, when you get back, the mailbox will be saturated. When I come back to work, it should be to take care of my staff, and not to read my emails.” Executive, public sector*

These elements are not exhaustive; they reflect situations encountered in the workplace by several employees and are reported during interviews conducted with different types of people over four years. The only the effects of incivilities that appears here are those of actors who are conscious of it and who spontaneously do them. However, other research that we have conducted show that the actors are not necessarily aware of abuses that they consider as being inherent to the new forms of professional exchange and do not question them. Although we can, through these different interviews, confirm the links between the generation of cyber incivilities at work and the process of vulnerability to individuals and groups, we cannot claim here to account for all the effects of cyber incivilities on the phenomena of vulnerability at work.



However, the results obtained here confirm several existing studies in work psychology that address the issue of incivilities at work (Cortina et al., 2001; Estes & Wang, 2008; Lim et al., 2008; Pearson & Porath, 2005; Porath & Pearson, 2013). These studies generally focus on individuals and not on the organizational dimension and their results are most often derived from quantitative questionnaires. They show that professional incivilities have an impact on the health of individuals: effects on work motivation, turnover, fatigue, psychological health, and sometimes even physical health. Cyber incivilities thus act as “chronic stressors”, admittedly less intense than violent or traumatic events, but which, cumulatively, seem to have much more deleterious effects on individuals, but also on witnesses and, more broadly, on groups. This research also shows that incivilities have an impact on the quality of work and organizational life: incivilities affect efficiency, commitment to work, productivity, and performance; they affect organizational loyalty and degrade the quality of professional relations. When it comes to “digital” incivilities at work, the authors show similar effects, both on individuals and organizations (Dupré, 2017; Park et al., 2015).

## **WORK ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNICATION DEVICES THAT MAKE PEOPLE VULNERABLE AND GIVE RISE TO INCIVILITIES**

In this section, we show that vulnerable individuals and collectives are more likely to produce uncivil work environments. Digital/Cyber incivilities then appear as a symptom, a revelation, of the manufacture of vulnerabilities at work.

The critical work of *organizational Dark Side* studies invites us to observe the “obscure” or deviant behaviors in organizations, not necessarily as deviations to be corrected, but on the contrary as forms of adaptation or resistance that give us a glimpse of the limits of organizational models and their flaws (Carayol et al., 2020 ; Laborde & Carayol, 2021 ; Linstead et al., 2014).

In this sense, these phenomena seem to us to require special attention from researchers, insofar as they provide broader information about organizational norms and working conditions. Ackroyd and Thompson (2016) bemoan in this regard the “selective myopia” of the social and organizational sciences, which tend to ignore “deviant behaviors” (misbehavior) in organizations or tend to minimize their importance and treat them as marginal phenomena to be corrected and not as widespread and constitutive work behaviors.

Our field observations over the past four years have led us to view incivilities not just as phenomena that weaken individuals and work groups, but also as phenomena that result from the vulnerability of individuals and professional groups.

Our observations show that cyber incivilities can appear as the result of two types of phenomena: on the one hand, passive or active forms of adaptation to the norms and constraints specific to work, and on the other hand, signs of disengagement from one’s company or, more generally, from a work organization that no longer appears to be efficient and legitimate in the eyes of individuals or groups. We will comment on these points using examples.

### **Cyber Incivilities as an Adaptation to Professional Constraints**

It has been shown that the forms of management currently at work in many organizations increase the cognitive load (Isaac et al., 2007; Lahlou, 2002), the feeling of loneliness (Dejours, 2007; Demaegdt, Rolo, Dejours, 2013) and the temporal pressure (Aubert, 2009; Carayol et al., 2005) on individuals and groups.

In this context, individuals consciously or unconsciously implement new ways of cooperating and communicating that are relatively efficient, given the constraints and resources available. “Misbehavior” at work can then appear as “forms of unsanctioned innovation that allow people to respond to the imperatives of work and to escape control attempts” (Ackroyd & Thompson, 2016).

Our various fields have thus enabled us to document examples of the generation of cyber incivilities that are intricately linked to professional constraints.

These include, for example, what some professionals call “the hot potato syndrome” (the email we get rid of by transferring it to colleagues or collaborators) or what Delphine Dupré, in her thesis work (Dupré, 2020), calls “passionate outbursts”, cyber incivilities that eludes us and are often the result of excessive

pressure and solicitations during the day (this is the case of the e-mail sent on Friday evening, which we ought not have sent in that form, and which we regret on Monday morning).

The temporal and cognitive pressure that individuals undergo in the context of their work can also lead them to neglect polite forms of communication in digital exchanges, not to respond to requests or not to take into accounts the workload and working hours of their interlocutors. More generally, it is empathy, consideration, and respect for one's colleagues in exchanges that seem to suffer from the pressure that individuals find themselves under at work. This can result in a form of dehumanization, of commodification of work relationships, specific to contemporary organizations (Laborde, Carayol, 2021).

Interviews were conducted in 2017 in companies that are members of the "Prevention of Cyber Incivilities" working group (transport company and a bank). One of the questions asked was to understand whether they were aware of creating cyber incivilities and what modes of justification they were led to mobilize<sup>13</sup>.

These interviews show that the employees mainly evoke the lack of time, the urgent nature of their work and the lack of organization or clear answers that penalize them in their own tasks, to explain their uncivil behavior.

*"At times, it occurs to me internally that I do not answer people, that I forget emails... I can also have a violent countenance sometimes... under emergency" Community manager, transport company*

*"When I make a request and I do not get an answer, I often follow up with them and I follow up with them until I get an answer. So, I think I can generate stress for them because they know I would not give up. "Manager, banking sector*

*"It must have occurred with me to send emails without any polite formula, just with a question, so as not to disturb with a call... perhaps it was not a good experience" Executive, transport company*

*"Faced with this inertia, I used directive sentences and capital letters, I highlighted in bold when something was requested, there were no rude words or the like, especially not, but in the way the message was written, with the very imperative sentences, it was clear anyway that there was ... er... there was some nervousness behind it... but I was stuck waiting". Employee, banking sector*

Here cyber incivilities are often unintentional, the result of a new work culture. Uncivil exchanges via digital tools at work then become for some researchers "excusable" and may even appear as a new norm of exchange (Félonneau et al., 2019). This is the ordinary violence at work which Herreros talked about (Herreros, 2012), the dehumanization of work relations as a "mode of survival" in the face of the constraints of contemporary work. These incivilities, although often tolerated and sometimes considered indispensable, nonetheless weaken individuals and groups, as the studies we cited in the previous section show.

Other forms of cyber incivility, more conscious and active, have also been observed in our various fields. These are incivilities that allow individuals and groups to maintain some autonomy and power over their activities. They appear as a means, in the face of a work organization and communication tools, which dispossess us of our time, our space, and our core business, to escape, to some extent, from these constraints. Digital incivilities appear here as a small margin of maneuver that the individual can mobilize, an "interstitial freedom" (Carayol, 2003) that he or she will be able to grant him- or herself in an otherwise constraining system.

We can mention here the agendas filled in fictitiously so as not to be disturbed, the icons that are permanently "unavailable" in the chat room, or the absence of replies to emails, which can be the result of a cognitive overflow, though also a clear desire to regulate the flow of exchanges. This category also includes the refusal to use certain tools or to use them according to the company's norms of use.

## **Cyber Incivilities as a Sign of Disengagement**

Digital incivilities can also appear as a sign of disengagement from one's company, one's colleagues, or more generally from a work organization that no longer seems effective and legitimate in the eyes of individuals or groups.

This is a form of disengagement that is both active and insidious, which some authors believe is widespread in contemporary organizations.

For Ackroyd and Thompson, the forms of contestation within organizations have evolved since the 1980s. In place of the "sabotage" documented by ethnographic studies in post-war industrial companies, there are now other ways to show disengagement (Ackroyd & Thompson, 2016). The authors are interested in "insidious" behaviors (including incivilities at work), cynicism and certain forms of protest or dissent, particularly via social networks or forums (Thompson et al., 2020) as ways of "distancing oneself" or "disengaging" from one's organization that were already known but are now more systematized and widespread. For the authors, these are spaces of freedom that always remain below the level of sanction: "even in the most guarded workspaces (...) it is possible to modify the impact of (and even circumvent) work norms" (Ackroyd & Thompson, 2016).

We have not conducted data collection specifically on these issues, however a number of observations made in the field allow us to go in this direction and confirm the possibility, in certain contexts, of considering the production of digital incivilities as a more or less conscious act of disengagement.

Thus, as part of our 2017 intervention research, the public organization we investigated was in the midst of a transformation following the territorial reform. The exhaustion and tensions related to electronic exchanges that were revealed in the focus groups, essentially for the executives, were obviously inseparable from this situation. In addition to the difficulty of readjusting the methods of exchange within transformed groups, suspicion, discouragement, and concern for the evolution of one's position also contributed in some cases to a withdrawal and disengagement from the group and the organization in general. This could then translate into less empathy towards colleagues, voluntary isolation, and a loss of enthusiasm for the group, which is directly perceptible in the digital exchanges. In this particular context, more than conflictual inter-individual relationships or strong and proven incivilities, the transformations underway have proven to be conducive to the production of an environment of digital communications that are less "human" (civility, forms of politeness) and less "respectful of one's colleagues" (taking into account the workload, work schedules, and the constraints of others).

More generally, the growing isolation of individuals and the weakening of groups favored by new forms of work organization - what Dejours called "the pathologies of solitude" (Dejours, 2006) - seems to accentuate the disengagement of individuals from work groups. This disengagement translates into a lesser consideration of others in exchanges and a dehumanization of work relations. These phenomena are then conducive to the generation of digital incivilities in the professional context, be it consciously or unconsciously; passive or active.

These phenomena, which can be identified at the organizational level, are of course inseparable from a more global evolution of society, where the classic forms of commitment are breaking down and where the competition between individuals is generalized and results in what De Gaulejac called the "Struggle for places" (Gaulejac et al., 2014).

## **CONCLUSION**

In this article, we have shown the links that exist between cyber incivilities and the manufacture of vulnerabilities at work.

Beyond the potential of cyber incivilities and, more broadly, of uncivil environments to generate vulnerability at work, we have also shown that it is possible to view digital incivilities as the result and symptom of a process of vulnerability at work.

The vulnerability at work associated with cyber incivilities is thought of in this research as a process that unfolds slowly, through minor aggressions or cumulative constraints which gradually weaken individuals and degrade collectives. We therefore prefer to speak of the "vulnerability factory", as a construction, intricately linked here to the phenomena of cyber incivilities.

Uncivil work environments and the process of developing vulnerabilities at work can thus appear as two phenomena that participate in the same negative spiral of work, one leading to the other and vice versa.

Beyond the accountability of individuals or work teams (who are considered uncivil or vulnerable), we showed that these phenomena are above all organizational, linked to work contexts, modes of organization, and the ways of conceiving social links within organizations.

The new forms of work organization bring with them new conceptions of communication, cooperation, and participation at work (via devices and the dematerialization of exchanges in particular), which make individuals more fragile and are of direct interest to the information and communication sciences.

If this research was conducted at the organizational level, to be able to highlight the managerial and socio-technical factors that are likely to generate vulnerability and cyber incivilities at work, it also highlights, at the level of individuals and teams, processes of weakening, disengagement, and withdrawal. These observations and analyses can only be understood from the perspective of a generalized competition between individuals, who are seen as increasingly responsible and, in fact, increasingly solitary.

These different focuses, associated with a comprehensive research, have allowed us to pull out from existing studies in psychosociology of work on incivilities and cyber incivilities in a professional context, which are generally based on quantitative studies, and most often refocus the debate on the questions of intentionality and counter-productivity linked to incivilities. On the contrary, our approach highlights the links that can be made between incivilities at work, vulnerability at work and the disengagement and adaptation processes.

From this perspective, the critical work on organizational dark side studies opens up extraordinarily rich avenues of research to consider phenomena that appear as “deviant” or “counterproductive” in organizations, not as practices to be corrected, but as major revelations of organizational contexts and as forms of adaptation, disengagement and resistance at work in contemporary organizations.

## ENDNOTES

1. The CIVILINUM research program (2016-2022) brought together researchers in information and communication sciences, social and work psychology, and social law. Its focus being on digital incivilities as indicators or symptoms of work “backlogs”. (<https://www.civilinum.fr/le-projet/>)
2. Different forms of cyber incivilities experienced by employees are documented in (Laborde et al., 2017), (Laborde et al., 2020).
3. The methodology of this research and the main results are documented in an article (Laborde, 2017).
4. Initiated as part of the CIVILINUM program in partnership with 2 professional networks.
5. An interview grid was collectively constructed, notably using the critical incident method (Felio & Carayol, 2013) to document the theme.
6. Themes: “Cyber incivilities and employee relations”, “Cyber incivilities and customer/user relations”, “Link between cyber incivilities and SQVT”, “How to identify and analyze? “How to prevent and regulate?”, “What legal tools?”
7. The methodology is documented in an article (Laborde, 2020).
8. Study day organized by MICA within the framework of the CIVILINUM research program, with the support of the Région Nouvelle Aquitaine and the Université Bordeaux Montaigne: <https://civilinum.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Programme-complet.pdf>
9. To see all the results and the methodology: (Laborde, 2017)
10. 4 focus groups of 2h30 realized following the questionnaire.
11. The groups were led by the organization’s SQVT project manager and the researcher and included volunteers divided according to their geographical location and status (managers, non-managers, assistants).
12. For the record, the six categories of psychosocial risk factors are: emotional demands, autonomy in the task, social relationships at work, value conflicts, insecurity of the work situation, and work intensity (Gollac Report 2018).
13. QU: Can you give some examples of cyber incivilities which you have committed and the context thereof?

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