



DNC6 CONGRESS

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IMAGINARIES AND ENGAGEMENT OF THE DEAF COMMUNITY.

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Introduction – *A Decline or a Recomposition of Engagement?*

- Common observation (Foster et al., 2018 ; Rasquinet, 2025): a perceived *decline in Deaf people's engagement* with their community
- *Signs*: lower participation in events, weakened collective ties, reduced association involvement
- Sometimes *interpreted as* identity loss or declining cohesion
- Our approach: a critical reframing – asking whether we are not witnessing a *recomposition rather than disengagement*
- *Guiding questions*:
 - Are we really witnessing disengagement?
 - What dynamics underlie these changes?
 - What is the role of collective imaginaries?

Theoretical Framework – *A Cultural and Critical Approach*

- Based on *Cultural Disability Studies* (Waldschmidt, 2018).
- *Deafness as a situated cultural identity*, not as medical deficit.
- "Culture" in the anthropological sense (Cervulle & Quemener, 2018): shared representations, norms, and practices.
- Dominant norms (hearing, oralism) = marginalisation of Deaf ways of being.
- *Collective imaginaries* (Grassi, 2005; Durand, 1992): symbolic systems shaping what is thinkable, desirable and actionable.
- The imaginary is not fiction but a *meaning-making device* that orients subjectivities and guides action.

Methodology – *Situated Qualitative Fieldwork*

- 9 semi-structured *interviews* (April–July 2023, Brussels & Wallonia).
- *Diverse participants* (aged 18+): signers/oralists, using hearing devices or not, engaged/disengaged profiles.
- Interviews conducted in *sign language* (LSFB) or *French*, *video-recorded* to respect visual communication.
- Researcher's positionality: *CoDA* (*Children of Deaf Adult*), combining proximity and critical distance.
- Epistemological stance: *interpretive* paradigm - understanding trajectories, not measuring behaviors.

Empirical Findings – *Three Key Trends*

« With the advent of video conferencing, it is even easier to contact other deaf people and also hearing people who use sign language.. » (Olivia)

1. Digital technologies: *ambivalent role*

- Empowerment: access to information, self-expression, connection
- Downsides: fragmentation, remote interactions → isolation.

2. *Decline* in Deaf-specific event participation

- Clubs, gatherings, associations
- Not disinterest – but new modalities

« With new technologies, deaf people are much more connected, but also more isolated. It's a paradox! » (Zoé)

3. *Transformation* of engagement

- Not disappearance, but shift toward intersectional causes (LGBTQIA+, anti-racism, inclusive education).
- Engagement no longer centered solely on Deaf identity.

Empirical Findings – *Three Key Trends*

1. Digital technologies: *ambivalent role*

- Empowerment: access to information, social connection
- Downsides: fragmentation, remote interaction

« Nowadays, there are many more things accessible to deaf people than before, such as training courses, conferences, concerts, shows, etc. Before, the only activities available were centres for deaf people. » (Déborah)

2. ***Decline*** in Deaf-specific event participation

- Clubs, gatherings, associations struggling.
- Not disinterest – but new modalities of social connection.

3. *Transformation* of engagement

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« Before, there was also solidarity around the cause of recognising deaf identity. So all deaf people came together to defend their rights. Today, other identities have taken precedence. [...] Before, there was only one identity, being deaf, but now there are a multitude of identities.. » (Zoé)

3. *Transformation* of engagement

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Discursive Analysis – *The Imaginary as a Mediator*

- *Decline* in traditional community structures $\neq$ *disengagement*.
- Movement toward a fluid, *post-identitarian imaginaries*.
- Influences: contemporary individualisation of engagement (Durand, 1992).
- Minoritized subjectivation (Butler, 2004; Warner, 2002): controlled visibility, rejection of fixed identity categories.
- *Engagement* is not gone – it is less codified, more transversal, *exercised across multiple affiliations*.
- The *imaginary mediates between* lived experience and recognition.

Conclusion – *Reconfiguring Deaf Engagement*

- **Deaf engagement** is being **reconfigured**, not disappearing.
- **Shift** from identity-based visibility to intersectional, situated practices.
- The **collective imaginaries** evolves *from resistance & recognition* → *to multiplicity & discretion*.
- A dual approach (empirical + theoretical) reveals the symbolic and material logics of engagement.
- **Engagement = plural, situated, often discreet – but politically meaningful.**

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Thank you.

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