

Afterword

Final push

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“You don’t have to travel to the Arctic to disconnect, technically. If you’re strong of will, you could do it in your apartment”. So begins a news story that describes a detox camp located “at the End of the World”, or more accurately in the Finnish Lapland (Kingma, 2017). The story freeze-frames the spirit of our age characterised by the ubiquitous connectivity enabled by digital networks and devices, and the trips, both mental and physical, some take to find peace in this situation. The stories in this edited volume are also taking hold of this same zeitgeist, which is defined through the digital backlash, a critique of digital and networked technologies that was accentuated in the latter half of the 2010s.

Digital backlash raises its head in moments where networked connectivity fails, is at risk, or poses a risk to us and our societies alike. As many of the chapters in this book show, analysing the digital backlash is a way to make perplexities surrounding connectivity visible. Digital backlash is what Fast and Syvertsen describe in Chapter 3 as a “post-digital” moment marked by a collective loss of the charm of digital technologies and their affordances.

One of the major triggers of digital backlash was the case of Cambridge Analytica and the 2016 United States presidential election. The firm’s role in influencing political decision-making through social media forcefully brought the politics of Big Tech to public attention in 2018, as Helles and Lomborg write in Chapter 2. The platform’s users had been caught off guard by the extractive and exploitative practices of social media platforms and how, at

least allegedly, personalised Facebook data could be used to influence users' political decisions by exploiting their psychological traits. Facebook became the target of disconnection (Bagger, Chapter 6). Hashtags like #DeleteFacebook earmarked the platform, and newspapers like *The New York Times* reported that this was the final push for users to quit (Hsu, 2018).

The foothold of archaic social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter is not cemented. Twitter (now X) entered its own moment of backlash after Elon Musk took over the company. Unhappy with the new leadership and the change in the political culture of the platform, people started looking for alternative models of connectivity and abandoning the old ones. Crises such as these were not unexpected. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2011: 96) has argued that "new media is a crisis machine". Major changes to online services happen due to external and internal pressures, and platform renewal is part of the evolution. Yet, with these two cases, we saw an unprecedented moment of resistance against big social media platforms. Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's CEO, was questioned by the US Congress, and his public profile and Facebook's role as a platform of social influence were brought to the fore. Crises like this can be considered chances for social and institutional change, but they also express the prevalent discourses and whose voices are heard (Jespersen & Albris, Chapter 4). If you need more recent examples, consider the demands to regulate or ban TikTok for national security (Espada & Popli, 2023).

Digital backlash renders visible a myriad of different uses and practices of social media and digital technologies. Social media users differ, and the intensity of connectivity varies. Some users continue to use various social media services despite privacy concerns and others implant microchips into their bodies to be always connected (Scott Hansen, Chapter 10), while some manage their connectivity by placing their phone in a dedicated box, physically preventing them from using the device (Fast & Syvertsen, Chapter 3). This edited volume constructs a complex psycho-social profile of a human user, a person who is driven by desires, values, neuropsychology (Forsler et al., Chapter 5), and streams of affective and emotional influence, both from above and below (Agai, Chapter 13). Users make deliberate personal choices, but they also act under the influence of the lures of their networks and are affected on an impersonal level beyond rational awareness. Our digital culture is characterised by contradictory feelings and desires (Mannevu, 2023: 105). On many occasions, personal choices of leaving and self-regulation are juxtaposed against the structural system that requires – and thus aims to retain – connectivity.

Digital backlash is about the concern of individual well-being in a culture saturated by social media, smartphones, and connections that are always online. Furthermore, it illustrates desires for and resistances against the ebbs and flows of always-on capitalism. It brings hope that we have agency, that digital technologies cannot just take possession of our minds and exploit our weaknesses by offering us dopamine hits and social rewards as we browse our

Instagram feeds and interact with our digital peers. Its political and social power requires media literacy and operates between the extremities of total abstention and passive resistance avoiding direct confrontation: “I would prefer not to” (Melville, 1853/2024).

As many of the chapters in this edited volume state, our lives are online well beyond social media platforms. Online connectivity has become an important part of how Nordic societies and their core services are organised. As Victoria Andelsman Alvarez explains in Chapter 12, public and private services in Denmark and much of the Global North – from banking to taxes to school–parent communication – are accessed primarily through mobile apps. A new Nordic welfare state is online, and its functions – from education (Lai & Cone, Chapter 14) to patient care (Klausen, Chapter 8) and parenting (Andelsman Alvarez, Chapter 12) – have become mediatised. This has resulted in a new societal dependency on digital technologies. As Andelsman Alvarez writes, to completely disconnect from digital media, one would need to disengage from modern society.

The digital backlash opens a window to the new constituents of a modern society. The dependency on digital technologies and networks didn’t, of course, appear out of thin air, but was part of larger social and political projects. In the context of the Nordic countries, at least in Finland, since the mid-1990s, a national government-led initiative aimed to turn the country into an information society (Valtioneuvosto, 1999). Digital networks and information technologies were considered as having a central position in the organisation of modern society, and it was considered important that every citizen in the country have the required skills to use these networks and that an infrastructure needed to be built so that everyone had the ability to access them when needed. Contemporary connectivity is founded on technology, requires an infrastructure, and is always intertwined with the political, cultural, and social conditions of its time.

In the beginning of 2023, Starlink (www.starlink.com), a satellite Internet company operated by Elon Musk’s space exploration technology company SpaceX, updated a map describing the coverage of their service found on the company’s website (Starlink, n.a.). Their network now reaches the polar regions of North America and Europe. Satellite Internet is one of the latest technological solutions designed to overcome the vulnerabilities of a terrestrial network and enable planetary-scale Internet connectivity, as their tagline currently states on their home page: “Available almost anywhere on Earth”. Notable areas not covered by the network include Russia. The unavailability of the network in Russia may reflect the geopolitical tensions behind communication networks. In fact, Starlink’s system gained fame as a solution to a situation

where Ukrainian cities were temporarily disconnected from the Internet due to Russia's attack at the beginning of the Ukraine War (Simonite, 2022). In early 2023, SpaceX, however, prevented Ukraine's military from using the satellite Internet system with their drones, arguing that it should not be weaponised (Roulette, 2023). While connectivity seems to be expanding and our planet is increasingly enveloped by it, we are simultaneously, as Karin Fast (2021: 1615) has observed, in the midst of a "disconnection turn": a moment characterised by the breaking points of connectivity. The digital backlash requires us to think beyond the modern technologies at hand and develop methods to understand the cultural orders that retain footholds through them.

For the Nordic countries, whose Arctic regions received the Starlink network earlier this year, Starlink provides access to the Internet for areas that are difficult to connect. These Arctic areas are remote locations characterised by mountains and landscapes that are challenging to access and do not have a dense population. In other words, while the Nordic countries are very well connected to the Internet, there have still been areas where cables and wireless signals have not reached. When the Internet's coverage extends to these areas, what follows along, as Nicole Starosielski (2015: 77) has illustrated, are different cultural orders.

The Arctic region, which spans across Finland, Norway, Sweden, and northwest Russia, is also an area of Indigenous Sámi population. In the early 2000s, this area was a testbed for new forms of Internet connectivity. For example, the Sámi Network Connectivity project, which operated between 2002 and 2007, sought to establish "Internet communication for the Sámi population of reindeer herders, who live in remote areas" and did not have a reliable network connection where they lived (Lindgren et al., 2008: 1). The aspiration was that new network technologies would eventually take the area online and "give people new business opportunities and enable things like remote schooling, thus increasing the possibilities of continuing to live in the traditional way and locations" (Lindgren et al., 2008: 1). One of the affordances of connective media technologies is the coordination and orchestration of various activities and flows of people and things in time and space, as André Jansson notes in Chapter 17. Connectivity, as the editors of this volume mention in Chapter 1, is a social, cultural, and political phenomenon, infused with moral questions and practical concerns.

Pepita Hesselberth's (2018) article, "Discourses on Disconnectivity and the Right to Disconnect", has become an important essay for scholars of the digital backlash, especially those operating in the context of disconnection studies. In the article, Hesselberth articulated how connection and disconnection are different sides of the same coin and not two separate entities. The essay

was ahead of its time in its call to explore what emerges as the outside of connectivity in disconnection studies and what is being normalised by these studies.

One alluring assumption is that contemporary life can still be divided into two systems: online and offline. In the context of the digital backlash, especially in public debate, offline becomes an area of well-being. Digital detox programmes, self-help guides, and software applications to block or limit certain content (as Forsler, Guyard, and Andersson discuss in Chapter 5) celebrate the benefits of being offline. What is implied is that the online realm is somehow the source of all evil, the place that negatively shapes our experiences and social relations. There is a danger here that even scholarship replicates this division, and as Clara Wieghorst (2021: 217) noted, “digital technology [is] construed as ‘artificial’ against an idealized past that was ‘more natural’ and therefore closer to human nature”. Creating such binaries might result in the loss of an understanding of the complexities of living in network culture.

The turns of disconnection, its pushes and pulls, the hard breaks of turning away, the turns towards, and even returns can be used to direct attention toward the continuities of connectivity rather than enforcing a distinction between the online and offline. But to be clear, continuity does not necessarily need to mean the return of the same. To give backlash the spotlight is to recognise that actions generate reactions that generate differences: If disconnected, you may still use the smartphone as a torchlight, as André Jansson writes in Chapter 17. The complexities of our network culture become visible when we think of disconnection as a difference in connectivity rather than a separation between two distinct regimes. To think beyond the binaries is to see disconnection as a particular trick, much like a “fakie” in skateboarding – not a hard break but a backward movement where you need to re-learn tricks when the non-dominant foot is no longer in charge. The digital backlash has the feel of an end of an era, but we know that when one ends another begins. Keep pushing.

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