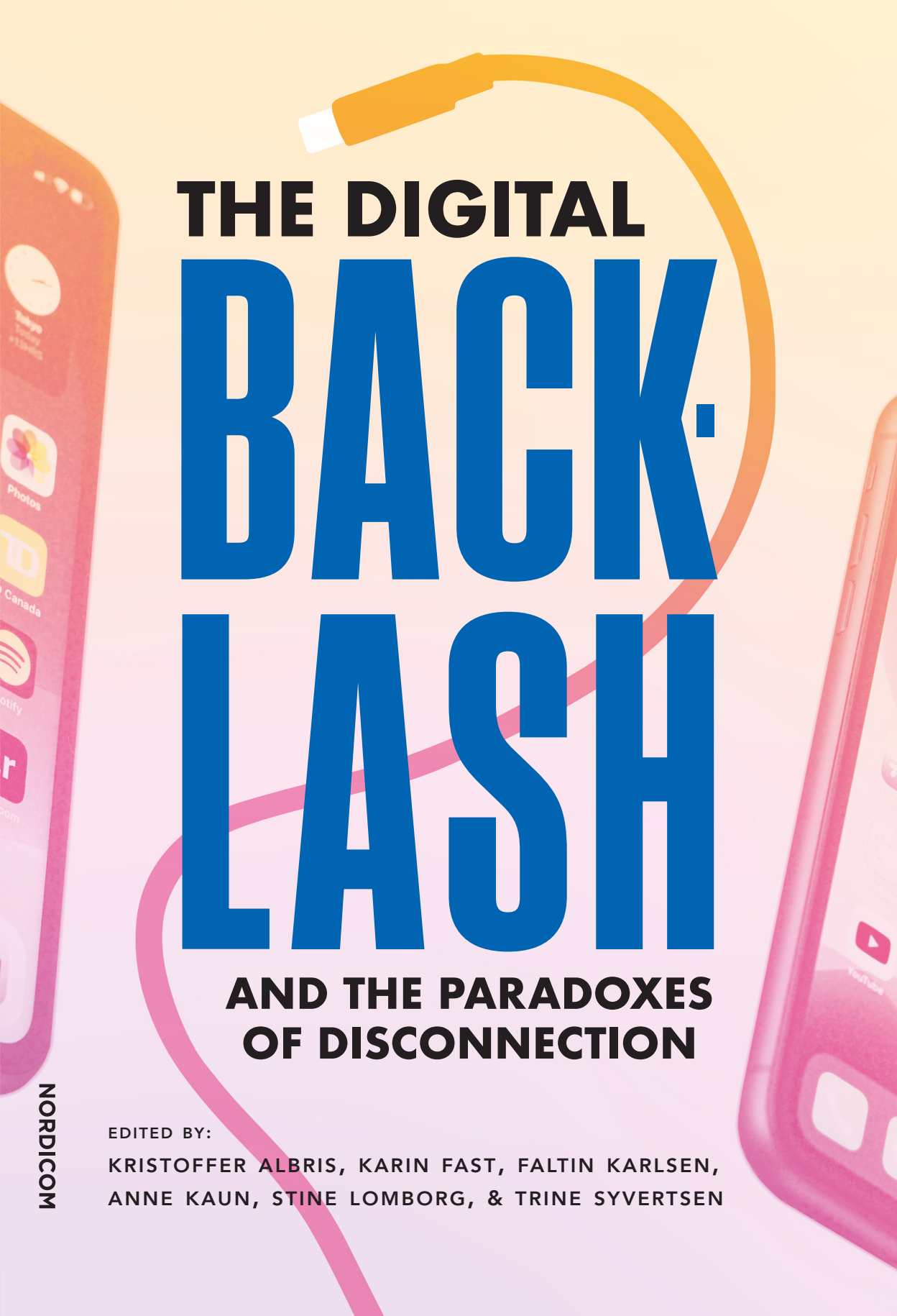




**THE DIGITAL**

# **BACK- LASH**

**AND THE PARADOXES  
OF DISCONNECTION**

EDITED BY:

KRISTOFFER ALBRIS, KARIN FAST, FALTIN KARLSEN,  
ANNE KAUN, STINE LOMBORG, & TRINE SYVERTSEN

**NORDICOM**

THE DIGITAL BACKLASH AND THE  
PARADOXES OF DISCONNECTION

*The Digital Backlash and the Paradoxes of  
Disconnection*

Kristoffer Albris, Karin Fast, Faltin Karlsen,  
Anne Kaun, Stine Lomborg, & Trine Syvertsen  
(Eds.)

© 2024 Respective authors. This work is licensed  
under the terms of the Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives  
4.0 International Public licence (CC BY-NC-  
ND 4.0). To view a copy of the licence, visit  
[creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

ISBN (PRINT): 978-91-88855-95-4

ISBN (PDF): 978-91-88855-96-1

ISBN (EPUB): 978-91-88855-97-8

This work is Open Access and available to read  
free of charge and without registration requirement  
at [www.nordicom.gu.se/en/publications/digital-  
backlash-and-paradoxes-disconnection](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/en/publications/digital-backlash-and-paradoxes-disconnection)

DOI:10.48335/9789188855961

CITE THIS WORK:

Albris, K., Fast, K., Karlsen, F., Kaun, A.,  
Lomborg, S., & Syvertsen, T. (Eds.). (2024).  
*The digital backlash and the paradoxes of  
disconnection*. Nordicom, University of  
Gothenburg.  
<https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961>

PUBLISHED BY:

Nordicom, University of Gothenburg  
Box 713  
SE 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

[www.nordicom.gu.se/en](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/en)

GRAPHIC DESIGN BY: Karin Andén

# **The Digital Backlash and the Paradoxes of Disconnection**

EDITED BY:

KRISTOFFER ALBRIS, KARIN FAST,  
FALTIN KARLSEN, ANNE KAUN,  
STINE LOMBORG, & TRINE SYVERTSEN



“After the ‘culture of connectivity’ we have entered a new zeitgeist: the ‘era of digital disconnection’. The current pushback against the societal norm to be always connected is compellingly illustrated in this timely book. From digital detoxes for smartphone junkies to the banning of social media platforms from schools, together the various chapters illustrate the paradoxical undercurrents of power and counterpower against big tech, addictive technology, and dehumanizing control. *The Digital Backlash* presents fascinating insights in the culture that come *after* connectivity”.

**JOSÉ VAN DIJCK**

PROFESSOR OF MEDIA AND DIGITAL SOCIETY AT UTRECHT UNIVERSITY IN THE NETHERLANDS AND AUTHOR OF *THE CULTURE OF CONNECTIVITY* AND *THE PLATFORM SOCIETY*.

“*The Digital Backlash* convincingly argues that we’re in a new era where the relentless demands of the 24/7 digitalised society are being challenged. By shedding light on this social change from diverse perspectives, the book equips readers with a rich vocabulary to express this growing undercurrent of resistance: *The Digital Backlash* helps us understand how individuals arm themselves in the battle against relentless connectivity, while facing constraints imposed by political, cultural, and economic systems”.

**MARIEK VANDEN ABEELE**

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT GHENT UNIVERSITY IN BELGIUM AND PI OF THE ERC-FUNDED DIGITAL WELLBEING PROJECT.

“This volume’s empirical insights and theoretical reflections unfold an eye-opening glance at a media landscape in which familiar phenomena like ‘digital detox’ and ‘digital disconnection’ are developed as symptoms of an increasingly screen-sceptical zeitgeist, which the editors term ‘the digital backlash’. I welcome the volume’s overall argument that we need to move beyond neuropsychological explanatory models and instead understand digital screen culture through the lens of human communication in the digital age”.

**KIM CHRISTIAN SCHRØDER**

PROFESSOR AT ROSKILDE UNIVERSITY IN DENMARK.

# Contents

|                                |                                                                                                                                                                        |     |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>PREFACE</b>                 | Preface.....                                                                                                                                                           | 8   |
| <b>CHAPTER 1</b>               | Introduction: The digital backlash<br>Kristoffer Albris, Karin Fast, Faltin Karlsen,<br>Anne Kaun, Stine Lomborg, & Trine Syvertsen.....                               | 11  |
| <br><b>PART I</b>              |                                                                                                                                                                        |     |
| <b>Discourses and disputes</b> |                                                                                                                                                                        |     |
| <b>CHAPTER 2</b>               | Techlash or tech change? How the image of Mark<br>Zuckerberg changed with Cambridge Analytica<br>Rasmus Helles & Stine Lomborg.....                                    | 25  |
| <b>CHAPTER 3</b>               | Post-digital consumption: The controversy<br>surrounding the mobile phone box as a means of<br>disconnection<br>Karin Fast & Trine Syvertsen.....                      | 45  |
| <b>CHAPTER 4</b>               | The public life of The Social Dilemma: Silicon<br>Valley's mea culpa moment and the rise of tech-<br>dissidents<br>Malene Hornstrup Jespersen & Kristoffer Albris..... | 67  |
| <b>CHAPTER 5</b>               | Detoxing the brain: Understanding digital backlash<br>in the context of the media effects tradition<br>Ingrid Forsler, Carina Guyard, &<br>Linus Andersson.....        | 91  |
| <b>CHAPTER 6</b>               | A decade of digital disconnection research in<br>review: Where, what, how, and who?<br>Christoffer Bagger.....                                                         | 109 |

## PART II

### Work and productivity

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                   |            |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>CHAPTER 7</b>  | Political work under post-digital conditions: Or, how politicians endure digital entrapment and distraction in daily life<br>Karin Fast & Gunn Enli.....          | <b>131</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 8</b>  | Disconnective care: Chronic illness and digital patienthood<br>Maja Klausen.....                                                                                  | <b>153</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 9</b>  | Stay focused and grow a Forest: The design and paradoxes of gamified digital disconnection<br>Yukun You.....                                                      | <b>171</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 10</b> | Disconnecting the communicating body: On the human work of articulation, maintenance, and repair in the use of personal tracking devices<br>Sne Scott Hansen..... | <b>193</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 11</b> | Disconnection or hyper-connectivity? Remote work and the case of Italian south working<br>Alessandro Gandini.....                                                 | <b>215</b> |

## PART III

### Children and youth

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                   |            |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>CHAPTER 12</b> | Navigating the moral imperatives of parenting in the age of (dis)connection: A care-minded approach to digital media use by parents in Denmark<br>Victoria Andelsman Alvarez..... | <b>235</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 13</b> | “I feel like a peasant among goddesses”: Digital disconnection as affect and process among Norwegian youth<br>Mehri Shekh Agai.....                                               | <b>257</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 14</b> | A day in the (datafied) life: Digital education platforms, commercial infrastructures, and the (im)possibilities of disconnection<br>Signe Sophus Lai & Lucas Cone.....           | <b>275</b> |

## PART IV

### Leisure and recreation

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                       |            |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>CHAPTER 15</b> | Revisiting the past, being in the present, preparing for the future: Making sense of a digital-free holiday camp for adults<br>Trine Syvertsen & Faltin Karlsen ..... | <b>303</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 16</b> | (Dis)connected atmospheres: Tourist locations in dead zones in post-pandemic Portugal<br>Ana Jorge .....                                                              | <b>325</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 17</b> | The cultured traveller: Three theses on cultural capital and the taste for disconnection in tourism<br>André Jansson .....                                            | <b>345</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 18</b> | Power, pride, and patience in literary reading: A paradox of precarious attention and disconnection<br>Kari Spjeldnæs .....                                           | <b>363</b> |
| <b>AFTERWORD</b>  | Final push<br>Tero Karppi .....                                                                                                                                       | <b>383</b> |

# Preface

What comes after the digital revolution of the 1990s and 2000s? How do societies adapt to the changes resulting from the digitalisation of (almost) everything? How do people express concerns about the omnipresence of smartphones and computers in everyday life? What does it take and what does it mean for people to disconnect from the media platforms and digital systems we are by now so reliant on?

These are big questions. Nevertheless, they speak to the heart of current debates and criticisms over the digitalisation of society. From critiques of Big Tech companies, also called the “techlash”, to discussions about smartphones in schools, social media’s impact on young people’s mental health, digital detoxing, and concerns about “Internet addiction”, we are witnessing a wide range of new reflexive debates and practices about the realities of the digital age. Such debates, discourses, practices, and forms of organising social life amount to what we in this book term “the digital backlash”.

As we unfold in greater detail in the introductory chapter, this backlash is not one unilateral thing. Nor is it determined by any single, clear-cut cultural force. Instead, we see this backlash as being the expression of a particular zeitgeist: a moment in time where the hype of the early days of the Internet and the digital revolution around the turn of the millennium slowly transformed into worry, scepticism, hesitation, critique, and reflection. The contributions in this edited volume present research that investigates various aspects of this backlash. While the themes across the chapters show the heterogenous nature of the topic, in combination, the chapters demonstrate the need for a wide scope of analysis for understanding this emergent and ephemeral zeitgeist.

We, as editors, wish to thank several individuals who have been central in the process of putting together the book. First, we wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers, who read the manuscript carefully and provided a wide range of constructive comments to all the chapters. We also extend our gratitude to the editorial staff at Nordicom, not least Johannes Bjerling, Josefine Bove, Kristin Clay, and Karin Zelano, and all others who helped and contributed to various stages of the development of the book.

Finally, we wish to deeply thank the authors who contributed with chapters. Without them, this volume would not exist. We are thankful to have been given the opportunity to collaborate with such an amazing group of scholars, who work on such important and timely topics.

Nordic cooperation is extensive in the field of media and communication studies, and the book demonstrates how cooperation extends to new research areas. Through seminars and events, a common aim has been to provide a productive environment for senior and junior researchers and international partners. This book is the result of work done in multiple research projects, and from scholarly conversations and paper sessions at events convened by the editors. Important events include:

- “The Digital Backlash: Mapping the Rise of Tech Critique and Digital Disconnection”, hosted jointly in September 2021 by the research projects “DISTRACT – The Political Economy of Distraction in Digitized Denmark” and “Personalizing the Professional”, both based at the University of Copenhagen.
- The ICA pre-conferences “Digital disconnection across borders” (Paris, May 2022) and “Key themes in digital disconnection research: Authenticity, wellness, datafication and power” (Toronto, May 2023). Both events were supported and attended by participants in the above projects, as well as from the research project “DIGITOX – Intrusive media, ambivalent users and digital detox”, based at the University of Oslo.
- The monthly online seminar series organised by DIGITOX as well as the PhD seminars organised by candidates in the field of disconnection studies.

The Editors,  
February 2024

## Acknowledgements

All editors have contributed equally to the different stages and tasks in putting together the volume. The names of the editors for this volume are listed alphabetically.

Kristoffer Albris acknowledges funding from the H2020 European Research Council (grant number 834540) as part of the project: “The Political Economy of Distraction in Digitized Denmark” (DISTRACT).

Karin Fast acknowledges funding from the Norwegian Research Council (grant number 287563) for the project “Intrusive media, ambivalent users and digital detox (DIGITOX)” (2019–2024).

Faltin Karlsen acknowledges funding from the Norwegian Research Council (grant number 287563) for the project “Intrusive media, ambivalent users and digital detox (DIGITOX)” (2019–2024) and the Norwegian Media Authority (reference 17/909-2/JEA) for the project “When digital media invades life” (2018–2019).

Anne Kaun acknowledges funding from the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation for the project “The Digital Welfare State” (2021–2026).

Stine Lomborg acknowledges funding from the H2020 European Research Council (ERC, DATAFIED LIVING, grant number 947735) and the Independent Research Fund Denmark (grant number 0132-00080B).

Trine Syvertsen acknowledges funding from the Norwegian Research Council (grant number 287563) for the project “Intrusive media, ambivalent users and digital detox (DIGITOX)” (2019–2024) and the Norwegian Media Authority (reference 17/909-2/JEA) for the project “When digital media invades life” (2018–2019).

# Introduction

## *The digital backlash*

KRISTOFFER ALBRIS,<sup>I</sup> KARIN FAST,<sup>II</sup> FALTIN KARLSEN,<sup>III</sup>  
ANNE KAUN,<sup>IV</sup> STINE LOMBORG,<sup>V</sup> & TRINE SYVERTSEN<sup>VI</sup>

<sup>I</sup> COPENHAGEN CENTER FOR SOCIAL DATA SCIENCE AND DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY,  
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

<sup>II</sup> DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, KARLSTAD UNIVERSITY,  
SWEDEN; DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO, NORWAY

<sup>III</sup> DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, KRISTIANIA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, NORWAY

<sup>IV</sup> DEPARTMENT FOR MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES, SÖDERTÖRN UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

<sup>V</sup> DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

<sup>VI</sup> DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO, NORWAY

### ABSTRACT

What we in this volume call the “the digital backlash” covers a range of social and cultural practices of digital disconnection, as well as critiques of the impact of digital technologies and platforms in the world today. It thus includes a variety of overlapping and multifaceted changes and tendencies across societies, including digital disconnection, digital detox, the right to disconnect, media refusal, and what has been called “the techlash”. Hence, it can best be described as a kind of zeitgeist: a period in history in which the norms about digital behaviour, consumption, and habits are being questioned, and where the hype of the early digital era beginning in the 1990s is being challenged. In this introduction, we set the scene of the book by giving an overview of these tendencies and the history of digital critiques, serving to provide a framing for the chapters in the book.

**KEYWORDS:** disconnection, digital backlash, techlash, digital detox, media critique

---

Albris, K., Fast, K., Karlsen, F., Kaun, A., Lomborg, S., & Syvertsen, T. (2024). Introduction: The digital backlash. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 11–22). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-1>



The Swedish government recently announced that it will drastically change the syllabus for pupils in preschools. More specifically, it will remove the requirement to use digital media as pedagogical tools in teaching (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023). This represents a significant change compared with the previously strong focus on digitalising teaching and learning across schools and other educational institutions. With reference to recent research on potential harms caused by too much screen time, the official approach of “the more digital tools the better” – which has led some Swedish schools to not use any printed books – has been supplanted by a more restrictive approach. This example is, however, indicative of a general zeitgeist that extends far beyond Sweden. The question is: Are we experiencing a digital backlash?

There is a current surge in debates and concerns tied to the social, cultural, and political impacts of digital devices and platforms in contemporary society. This includes calls for more restrictive, or more “mindful”, uses of digital technologies and digital media (see, e.g., Jansson & Adams, 2021; Karppi, 2018; Syvertsen, 2020), as well as cases of employers implementing work regulations along the lines of a “right to disconnect” framework, or workplaces deliberately incorporating “digital dead zones” in their office layouts. It also includes the rise of new entrepreneurs in the growing “digital detox” business, who offer a range of commodities such as apps, self-help books, vacations, workshops, and “dumb” media devices that are meant to help us “opt out” of being constantly connected to the digital (Karppi et al., 2021). Parents are increasingly also encouraged to track and regulate their children’s screen time, while many schools are rendered mobile-free. Meanwhile, tech businesses adjust their public relations campaigns, as well as their goods and services, to the new norms of disconnection, trying to save face in the wake of growing public critique by acting ethically. Google’s Digital Wellbeing project, which among other things instructs users to “unplug more often”, is a case in point.

These examples are all instantiations of what we in this book term “the digital backlash”, which is to be understood as a broad umbrella term, covering critiques of the role that digital devices, technologies, and platforms play in contemporary society. This includes examples of what has been labelled “the techlash” (see Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume), which points to public debate and social, political, and cultural critique of the role of Big Tech companies, such as Facebook or Google. It also includes a range of different practices of digital disconnection and people’s mundane, reflexive responses to the role that smartphones and computers should play in everyday life. Disconnection is sometimes tied to the perceived negative consequences of social media platforms on the mental health of especially young adolescents (Haidt, 2024; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018; Kardefelt-Winther et al., 2020; Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021), and more generally with concerns about people’s dependence on digital connectivity across spheres of daily life. Disconnection also speaks

to how traditional pre-digital (Stäheli & Stoltenberg, 2024) cultural practices are reinvented in lieu of these new reflexive stances towards all things digital.

The digital backlash is therefore not just one “thing”: It involves different changes and tendencies across societies. It can indeed best be described culturally and sociologically as a kind of *zeitgeist*, as a moment in history where norms about digital habits, consumption, and behaviour are being called into question, and where the assumptions of the first eras of the digital and Internet revolutions since the 1990s are being challenged. Indeed, this is also what is captured in the idea of the “post-digital”, of which new types of digital consumption patterns are emerging (see Fast & Syvertsen, Chapter 3 in this volume). This edited volume is an attempt to provide a collection of empirical and theoretical chapters that examine this societal and cultural shift, with a distinct and specific focus on social practices and discourses related to new ways that people adapt and appropriate digital technologies in everyday life.

Our motivation for putting together this volume is twofold. Firstly, we wanted a collection of chapters that include both theoretical outlooks on the many facets of the digital backlash and detailed empirical studies of social domains where digital critiques and dependencies, as well as practices of disconnection, take on specific meanings and cultural significance. Secondly, and building on this point, we wanted to show how such critiques and practices vary depending on context, technologies, platforms, ethics, and other parameters, yet are all connected by being instantiations of the same overarching *zeitgeist*.

The book consists of 19 chapters, including this Introduction, seventeen chapters, and an Afterword by Tero Karppi, whose work has significantly fuelled the agenda of disconnection scholarship. To address the broad scope of the topic, the book is divided into four main parts, each focusing on specific themes where digital critiques and disconnection practices unfold: 1) Discourses and disputes, 2) Work and productivity, 3) Children and youth, and 4) Leisure and recreation. Throughout the chapters, the contributors present empirical studies and theoretical discussions that are nested in media and communication studies, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and related fields. Each of the four parts of the book starts with a short editorial introduction, which provides an overview of the most important questions and topics that cut across the contributions. By dividing the chapters into these four parts, we aim to highlight that the varied shapes of the digital backlash depend on the cultural and social domains and situations in which they unfold. In this Introduction, we set the scene of the book by first giving a brief historical overview of the digital backlash, as well as providing a contextualisation of the many different types of digital critiques and practices of digital disconnection, which serves as a frame for the contributing chapters.

## From digital optimism to digital backlash

With the growing availability of digital devices such as computers and mobile phones, and the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, the world was set for a digital hype. While there were indeed critiques and calls for caution amongst commentators about the impact of computers, gaming, and other digital wonders (e.g., Brook & Boal, 1995), there was a widespread optimism connected to the benefits that information technology (IT) in general could bring to society and culture. Soon, societies across the Western world – and later most other parts of the world as well – would become increasingly reliant on digital infrastructures and communication technologies. With the IT bubble and the millennial Y2K scare, however, the first wave of widespread public concerns about our reliance on digital communication technology started to emerge. Yet the digital revolution rolled on into the 2000s, and with the emergence of Web 2.0 – where social media platforms supplanted websites as the primary focal points for online culture – a new era of digital excitement emerged alongside the widespread rollout of smartphones, tablets, and constant online connectivity.

Around the beginning of the 2010s, however, something changed. First, the Snowden leaks in 2013 gave the public insights into a world of widespread international surveillance, which had been facilitated by the rollout of cables around the world and by digital platforms where users happily gave up their personal information, without paying attention to the potentials risks of doing so. In parallel to concerns tied to government surveillance as exposed by the Snowden leaks, digital disconnection practices began emerging. One famous example of this is Camp Grounded, which has been highlighted as a key example of digital detoxing. In Sutton's (2017, 2020) seminal work on Camp Grounded, she highlighted how people were motivated to attend the camp through a sense of being unable to disengage from their smartphones and other digital devices through the phrase “disconnect to reconnect” (see also Enli & Syvertsen, 2021). In a Nordic setting, 2010 was also the first year Syvertsen and colleagues (2019) found instances of digital detoxing in Norway.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal that came in the wake of Brexit and the 2016 American presidential election represented another pivotal moment in time. The scandal made it publicly clear that concerns about the misuse of people's data on social media platforms were warranted, as it revealed how Facebook user data was used to micro-target voters for political campaigning without their knowledge or consent. Critiques of Big Tech corporations had already been voiced for some years (e.g., Lanier, 2011), and there is a longer history to public debate about the role of Silicon Valley's inventions and business models (see Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume). Yet, the Cambridge Analytica scandal became the catalyser for what we now refer to as the techlash, whereby widespread critiques of Facebook

(now Meta), Google, Amazon, and other Big Tech corporations drew headlines across the world. The techlash marks a point in time where Big Tech and platforms are sought to be held accountable by politicians, journalists, nongovernmental organisations, interest organisations, individual citizens, and regulatory bodies (Chia et al., 2021). This development also made the question of whether to quit social media platforms even more pertinent for people, as using these platforms was now not only tied to concerns about whether constant connectivity is healthy, but also a moral and political question (Brown, 2020; Chia et al., 2021). Users of social media platforms, as several studies note, were consequently also performing media refusal as a form of social and political activism against Silicon Valley capitalism (Kaun & Treré, 2020; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). This has, in turn, given rise to a host of self-criticism from former tech employees that are publicly staged in performative and theatrical ways (see Jespersen & Albris, Chapter 4 in this volume; Karppi & Nieborg, 2021).

In recent years, practices of disconnection and digital detoxing are becoming more widespread and are even being offered as tourism packages (Stäheli & Stoltenberg, 2024) where people can vacation “off the grid”. Digital detoxing is simultaneously being merged with mindfulness and well-being practices in a wide range of ways, through courses, coaching programmes, corporate retreats, and meditation (Syvertsen, 2020). Yet, there does not exist any uniform or unilateral way that people practice disconnection or take a critical stance towards digital devices, technologies, or platforms. Indeed, disconnecting from one’s smartphone, computer, or tablet is fraught with questions of morality and ethics (e.g., “what is a good life in the digital age?”), on the one hand, and practical and social dilemmas confronting people if they choose to limit their digital usage (e.g., fear of missing out or being cut out from social networks), on the other.

As a testament to the growing popular interest in disconnection and digital well-being, one need only consider the plethora of popular texts and phenomena that have surfaced in recent years. A few examples are the popular documentary films *Offline is the New Luxury* (2016) and *The Social Dilemma* (2020), the “National Day of Unplugging” initiative, the selection of the “Mobile Phone Box” as the 2019 Christmas Gift of the Year in Sweden (see Fast & Syvertsen, Chapter 3 in this volume), the Swedish radio show *Nedkopplad* [*Disconnected*], and bestselling self-help books such as Cal Newport’s *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (2019), Jennifer Rauch’s *Slow Media: Why Slow is Satisfying, Sustainable, and Smart* (2018), Imran Rashid’s *Sluk* [*Turn Off*] (2017), or Tanya Goodin’s *Off: Your Digital Detox for a Better Life* (2017). All these films and books are examples of cultural products that are widely seen and read, and which signal that the public interest in limiting one’s own use of digital devices has significantly increased.

## Contextualising the digital backlash

As noted earlier, the digital backlash encompasses a broad range of cases and societal trends – from people explicitly trying to minimise the role of digital technologies in their lives, to public worries of the detrimental effects of especially social media platforms and demands for holding Big Tech accountable. It includes practices and discourses that signal a general cultural turn against the hitherto hegemonic notion that digitalisation always leads to something good, as well as the ingrained techno-digital determinism espoused by countless Silicon Valley executives (Williams, 2018). These discussions are different, and they unfold in different contexts and situations.

This is especially so with respect to the overarching term digital disconnection. What does this term mean, and which types of practices, ideas, and discourses does it encompass? And what does it mean for individuals to disconnect? Regardless of whether people perceive digital disconnection as a good and desirable thing to engage in, they encounter a range of pull factors towards remaining or becoming increasingly digitally connected: from having to deal with their own forces of habit to accessing state welfare services through digital platforms (see Lai & Cone, Chapter 14, and Klausen, Chapter 8 in this volume), to the experience of peer pressure to be part of specific social networks. Digital disconnection also requires *work* on the part of those wanting to disconnect. Several studies have empirically analysed the varied strategies and navigational tactics that people use when trying to “break out” from constant connectivity (Russo et al., 2019), also in cases where there is simply no opt-out button to press (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2022), where disconnection requires a great deal of time investment, or where it is outright impossible. For social media platforms such as Facebook, wanting to limit one’s use or to disconnect entirely is, as Karppi (2018) has shown, fraught with a range of “affective bonds”. In this sense, disconnection can involve several paradoxes and dilemmas.

The digital backlash is also coupled with mindfulness and meditation practices that were perhaps once considered fringe or tied to a “New Age” identity (see also Sutton, 2020), but which are now promoted at the highest echelons of power to combat the perceived crisis of attention amongst political leaders (Cook, 2016; Pedersen et al., 2021). This tendency also points to the fact that pushbacks against hyperconnectivity and an unlimited digital presence are increasingly becoming institutionalised and scripted. For instance, as Syvertsen (2023) has shown, many digital detoxing initiatives can be considered ambiguous forms of contemporary activism, ranging from self-help to corporate action.

Discussions about the impact and role of digital technologies and platforms often verge on moral panics – that screen time is inherently bad for us all, especially the younger generation (for public discourse analyses of this debate, see Størup & Lieberoth, 2023; Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021). This is especially

pertinent concerning the question of whether digital devices and certain platforms are indeed addictive, and whether we can even say that things such as Internet addiction or smartphone addiction exist (Panova & Carbonell, 2018; Sutton, 2020). While there are genuine scientific discussions around whether something like Internet addiction exists, the debate also has far-ranging political and practical implications, for instance, in terms of whether such addictions should be incorporated into official lists and indexes of recognised behavioural disorders (Helm & Matzner, 2023). It is therefore important to remain critical about comparisons between, for instance, smartphone use and substance addiction. If commentators, either in academia or public debate, discursively evoke, for instance, Instagram use as a form of “digital drug”, on par with cocaine addiction, it becomes difficult to discuss the many nuances and variations that people’s everyday use of digital platforms entail, as several of the contributions to this book attempt to show.

Closely related to the scientific and political debate about digital forms of addiction is the question of well-being in relation to ubiquitous and constant connectivity (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Twenge et al., 2022). Discourses of well-being are increasingly being tied to whether there is such a thing as digital overuse, and how people try to organise their lives in meaningful ways when they are dependent on digital technologies (see Andelsman Alvarez, Chapter 12, and Gandini, Chapter 11 in this volume), while also remaining critical of the role they play (Büchi et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2021; Sullivan & Reiner, 2021). Yet, what well-being means obviously differs between geographical and cultural contexts, and across age groups and socioeconomic parameters. As such, discussions of well-being in relation to the digital condition are not of much use unless they are situated in relation to specific social, political, and cultural circumstances.

There are, in other words, a range of both normative and moral discussions about the proper and correct ways we should use digital technologies in society, and knowledge controversies and disagreements that coalesce with these normative discussions. This ought to also serve as a reminder that the debate about the role and impact of digital devices and platforms is highly politicised and entangled with a variety of discussions about cultural values and social norms, which change according to context. Understanding these debates, and how they relate to people’s everyday experiences with using digital technologies and disconnecting from them, is an integral part of what we seek to offer to readers of this book.

## **Themes of the book**

The chapter contributions to this edited volume have been divided into four parts that deal with different thematic perspectives on the digital backlash. In the following, we explicate and qualify why these four themes are central.

The short introductory sections that can be found at the beginning of each part serve to further situate the individual chapters in relation to the respective themes.

Part I – Discourses and disputes – includes five contributions that present case studies and overviews of public debates about digital technologies and platforms. The digital backlash signals a broad social and cultural shift in the way digital technologies and platforms are discussed and debated. The contributions in this part of the book aim to highlight different examples of how societal communication and political opinions on digital issues change societies, and are in turn being adapted to the changing stances and wishes of the general public, interest groups, corporations, and policymakers. Through analyses of significant cases such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the *Social Dilemma* film, and the mobile phone box, the contributors seek to discuss how individual events and initiatives generate and catalyse debates about digital technologies in the public sphere. This part of the book also provides an overview of the role that researchers play in digital connectivity and disconnection debates and what the state of the art currently is with respect to digital disconnection research.

Part II – Work and productivity – includes five contributions that deal with different aspects of how digital connectivity and disconnection relate to work. As the contributions show, digital disconnection as a social and political issue is highly visible and riddled with ambivalences in the context of workplaces and other contexts in which people do “work”. As Fast (2021) has noted, digital disconnection both redefines work ideals and shapes the culture of workplaces. Indeed, there are numerous examples today of schools, workplaces, and other institutions that are instituting policies and rules for how to limit digital use, carried forward by policies for promoting more healthy digital practices. While the Internet revolution has profoundly altered the labour market and welfare institutions across societies, the role that digital technologies and platforms should play in the structuring of work relations or in health systems – to take a few examples – is increasingly becoming part of public conversations and debates. In doing so, the contributions to this part of the book also probe questions about the good life and the ethics of everyday life, and how these questions intersect with and create ambivalences around the use of smartphones and other digital devices.

Part III – Children and youth – includes three contributions that in different ways seek to understand questions of digital critique, digital dependency, and digital disconnection in the context of parenting, from the perspective of young people and across contexts of home and school life. Echoing a concern that permeates many people’s everyday concerns with the role of digital technologies, parents attempt to find all sorts of ways to orchestrate daily family life with digital devices that are, from their perspective, in line with modern ideals of child rearing. From the perspective of young people, one

of the contributions seeks to understand the complex reasonings that adolescents give when they explain their desires to disconnect from their phones and other digital devices, yet choose not to do so. In the context of schools, both pupils and teachers must make sense of an everyday institutional life where the reliance on digital devices has by now become a premise, testifying to the limits of the digital backlash.

Part IV – Leisure and recreation – includes four contributions that turn attention towards the many cases and examples of how the digital backlash, and in particular digital disconnection, are tied to travelling, free time, and tourism. In everyday lives saturated with connectivity, leisure is a sphere where many try to regain some disconnected time, yet tensions and dilemmas prevail about how people are more apt to limit and control their screen time and digital consumption, and how such practices are tied to notions of what counts as “authentic”. The chapter contributions in various ways show how digital disconnection practices become commodified and advertised to convey a sense of mindfulness, authenticity, and nostalgia about a world before the digital revolution. This can either be in the form of people travelling to “dead-zones”, places located outside of wireless Internet connection, or how people make sense of attending outdoor camps where they are asked to digitally detox for a short period of time. In such leisure and recreational contexts, digital disconnection practices need to be situated in relation to the personal values and motivations of the individuals in question, and especially how people make sense of the notion of being digitally free.

## **Aims and scope of the book**

The study of the digital backlash as it manifests across societal debates and individual practices is still a nascent research field in the social sciences and humanities. Yet, the amount of research being published on the topic of disconnection as one instantiation of the digital backlash is growing fast, as Bagger also notes in his contribution to this volume (Chapter 6). A few path-breaking books have been published in recent years (e.g., Jansson & Adams, 2021; Karppi, 2018; Ytre-Arne, 2023) – including by some of the editors of this book (Syvertsen, 2020). Several special issues devoted to the topic have been coming out in recent years (e.g., in journals *Media, Culture & Society* and *Convergence*), and in successful special themed conferences, pre-conferences, and panels (e.g., Geomedia 2021: “Off the Grid”; the ECREA pre-conference “Advancing Digital Disconnection Studies”; Digital Cultures: Unrelating: Infrastructures, Imaginaries and Politics of Disconnection; ICA pre-conference “Key themes in digital disconnection”), as well as popular seminar series that we as editors of the volume have organised in recent years as part of different research projects. Yet, there is a need for studies that tie



disconnection research to more foundational problematics and ambivalences of digital connectivity across personal, work, and institutional contexts of everyday life. With this book, we aim to provide this precise combination.

This book has a general focus on Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Norway, and Sweden – which is evident given the case studies found in the chapters that are localised in these countries. A few chapters present case studies from other contexts, for instance, Italy (Gandini, Chapter 11) and Portugal (Jorge, Chapter 16), or present country comparisons (e.g., Denmark and the US, see Jespersen & Albris, Chapter 4). A central question that arises in lieu of this regional focus is how user modes and sentiments pertaining to the digital backlash surface in the Nordic countries. The Scandinavian context is interesting because of its high levels of connectivity and its long tradition of media politics along the lines of a media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Furthermore, it represents a context in which ideals of hyper-connectivity exist next to oppositional values, such as living a simple or “authentic” life close to nature but far from screens. Yet, it is of course important to stress that the Scandinavian context simultaneously foregrounds some perspectives. The empirical cases and themes might look quite different were we to focus on, for example, Southern Europe, North America, Eastern Africa, and so on.

It is, however, our hope that this volume can become a resource for readers around the world, and even outside of academia, to acquire insight into the digital backlash and disconnection. In the context of growing public concerns about the impacts that the ubiquitous digitalisation and datafication are having on society, academic books play a key role in explaining, nuancing, and criticising current trends. As such, discussions around digital disconnection are not merely academic and theoretical, but deeply practical and political. In a similar vein, with this book we aim to contribute both theoretically and empirically with analyses of digital disconnection that can inform audiences beyond academia, including policymakers, journalists, think tanks, and youth education (i.e., high schools). For Nordic policymakers, for whom the idea of a media welfare state has been principal (Syvertsen et al., 2014), this book should be relevant and noteworthy. Moreover, we aim for the book to be a critical contrast to the expanding market of digital detox self-help books, which in and of itself is proof of the growing interest in digital disconnection outside of academia. Such books typically construct media dependency as an individual problem, rather than approaching it – as we aim to do in this book – as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon, infused with moral questions and practical concerns that change according to context.

## References

- Brook, J., & Boal, I. (Eds.). (1995). *Resisting the virtual life: The culture and politics of information*. City Lights Books.
- Brown, A. J. (2020). "Should I stay or should I leave?" Exploring (dis)continued Facebook use after the Cambridge Analytica scandal. *Social Media + Society*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120913884>
- Büchi, M., Festic, N., & Latzer, M. (2019). Digital overuse and subjective well-being in a digitized society. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119886031>
- Chia, A., Jorge, A., & Karppi, T. (2021). *Reckoning with social media: Disconnection in the age of the techlash*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cook, J. (2016). Mindful in Westminster: The politics of meditation and the limits of neoliberal critique. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6(1), 141–161. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau6.1.011>
- Enli, G., & Syvertsen, T. (2021). Disconnect to reconnect! Self-help to regain an authentic sense of space through digital detoxing. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 227–C9.P150). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.003.0010>
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnection work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Goodin, T. (2017). *Off: Your digital detox for a better life*. Hachette.
- Government Offices of Sweden. (2023, October 2). Regeringen vill ta bort kravet på digitala lärvverktyg i förskolan [The Government will remove the requirement of digital tools in pre-schools] [Press release]. <https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2023/10/regeringen-vill-ta-bort-kravet-pa-digitala-larverktyg-i-forskolan/>
- Haidt, J. (2024). *The anxious generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness*. Penguin Random House.
- Haidt, J., & Lukianoff, G. (2018). *The coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. Penguin.
- Helm, P., & Matzner, T. (2023). Co-addictive human-machine configurations: Relating critical design and algorithm studies to medical-psychiatric research on "problematic internet use". *New Media & Society*. OnlineFirst. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231165916>
- Jansson, A., & Adams, P. C. (Eds.). (2021). *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection*. Oxford University Press.
- Kardefelt-Winther, D., Rees, G., & Livingstone, S. (2020). Contextualising the link between adolescents' use of digital technology and their mental health: A multi-country study of time spent online and life satisfaction. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 61(8), 875–889. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13280>
- Karppi, T. (2018). *Disconnect: Facebook's affective bonds*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Karppi, T., Chia, A., & Jorge, A. (2021). In the mood for disconnection. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1599–1614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211034621>
- Karppi, T., & Nieborg, D. B. (2021). Facebook confessions: Corporate abdication and Silicon Valley dystopianism. *New Media & Society*, 23(9), 2634–2649. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820933549>
- Kaun, A., & Tréré, E. (2020). Repression, resistance and lifestyle: Charting (dis)connection and activism in times of accelerated capitalism. *Social Movement Studies*, 19(5-6), 697–715. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2018.1555752>
- Kuntsman, A., & Miyake, E. (2022). *Paradoxes of digital disengagement: In search of the opt-out button*. University of Westminster Press.
- Lanier, J. (2011). *You are not a gadget: A manifesto*. Vintage.
- Newport, C. (2019). *Digital minimalism: Choosing a focused life in a noisy world*. Penguin.
- Nguyen, M. H. (2021). Managing social media use in an "always-on" society: Exploring digital wellbeing strategies that people use to disconnect. *Mass Communication and Society*, 24(6), 795–817. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2021.1979045>
- Orben, A., & Przybylski, A. K. (2019). The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 3(2), 173–182. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0506-1>

- Panova, T., & Carbonell, X. (2018). Is smartphone addiction really an addiction? *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 7(2), 252–259. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.7.2018.49>
- Pedersen, M. A., Albris, K., & Seaver, N. (2021). The political economy of attention. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 50, 309–325. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-101819-110356>
- Portwood-Stacer, L. (2013). Media refusal and conspicuous non-consumption: The performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention. *New Media & Society*, 15(7), 1041–1057. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812465139>
- Rashid, I. (2017). *Sluk [Turn Off]*. Lindhardt og Ringhof.
- Rauch, J. (2018). *Slow media: Why slow is satisfying, sustainable, and smart*. Oxford University Press.
- Russo, M., Ollier-Malaterre, A., & Morandin, G. (2019). Breaking out from constant connectivity: Agentic regulation of smartphone use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 98, 11–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.03.038>
- Stäheli, U., & Stoltenberg, L. (2024). Digital detox tourism: Practices of analogization. *New Media & Society*, 26(2), 1056–1073. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211072808>
- Størup, J. O., & Lieberoth, A. (2023). What's the problem with “screen time”? A content analysis of dominant voices and worries in three years of national print media. *Convergence*, 29(1), 201–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211065299>
- Sullivan, L., & Reiner, P. (2021). Digital wellness and persuasive technologies. *Philosophy & Technology*, 34, 413–424. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-019-00376-5>
- Sutton, T. (2017). Disconnect to reconnect: The food/technology metaphor in digital detoxing. *First Monday*, 22(6). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i6.7561>
- Sutton, T. (2020). *Digital re-enchantment: Tribal belonging, new age science and the search for happiness in a digital detoxing community* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, UK].
- Syvvertsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The politics of disconnecting*. Emerald Group.
- Syvvertsen, T. (2023). Framing digital disconnection: Problem definitions, values, and actions among digital detox organisers. *Convergence*, 29(3), 658–674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221122910>
- Syvvertsen, T., Enli, G., Mjøs, O., & Moe, H. (2014). *The media welfare state: Nordic media in the digital era*. University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/nmw.12367206.0001.001>
- Syvvertsen, T., Karlsen, F., & Bolling, J. (2019). Digital detox på norsk [Digital detox in Norway]. *Norsk medietidsskrift*, 26(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN.0805-9535-2019-02-02>
- Twenge, J. M., Haidt, J., Lozano, J., & Cummins, K. M. (2022). Specification curve analysis shows that social media use is linked to poor mental health, especially among girls. *Acta Psychologica*, 224. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103512>
- Vanden Abeele, M. M., & Mohr, V. (2021). Media addictions as Apparategeist: What discourse on TV and smartphone addiction reveals about society. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1536–1557. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211038539>
- Williams, J. (2018). *Stand out of our light: Freedom and resistance in the attention economy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ytre-Arne, B. (2023). *Media use in digital everyday life*. Emerald Group.

# Discourses and disputes

The digital backlash and digital disconnection are contested concepts, potentially associated with outlooks on technology and society that not everyone would agree with. Can we find empirical evidence for the alleged techlash? Is there such a thing as “digital overload”? Can one actually “disconnect”? The chapters in this section illuminate how discourse pertaining to the digital backlash and digital disconnection evolves, and who gets to say what about these matters. Covered in this section are public as well as academic debates, and four key observations can be highlighted.

## **Specific events spark debate and disputes**

The debates and disputes surfacing in this section largely tie into older technology concerns and discourses. However, as the chapters here disclose, terms like the digital backlash emerge in response to specific events situated in specific locations. Rasmus Helles and Stine Lomborg (Chapter 2) place their aim at the Cambridge Analytical scandal, which in 2018 became symbolic of the great “techlash” and brought public awareness to the exploitive nature of Facebook’s business model. Karin Fast and Trine Syvertsen (Chapter 3) dismantle an animated debate about the “mobile phone box”, which was made the “Christmas Gift of the Year” in Sweden in November 2019, while Malene Hornstrup Jespersen and Kristoffer Albris (Chapter 4) investigate how the 2020 documentary film *The Social Dilemma* (Netflix) was framed and received by social media users in Denmark and the US.

## **Academics play a part in public controversies – but which academics?**

Fast and Syvertsen show that popular authors and other actors with something to sell dominated the debate that followed the announcement of the mobile phone box as the “official” Christmas Gift in 2019. To the extent that academics intervened in or were referred to in the debate, they were more likely to be psychologists or neuroscientists than media researchers. This observation corresponds with the findings of Ingrid Forsler, Carina Guyard, and Linus Andersson (Chapter 5), who show that the Swedish debate has hitherto been dominated by neuropsychological explanatory models rather than media studies theory.

## **Research reflects public concerns – but also narrows the field**

Christopher Bagger (Chapter 6) offers a discussion of how academic research on digital disconnection has evolved. By way of a cross-disciplinary review of recent empirical research, Bagger displays how the early phases of disconnection research were dominated by studies of how (predominantly young) individuals take (mainly) temporary breaks from particular media platforms (notably social networking sites). Although this bias mirrors public concerns and interests, it also means that other topics and empirical contexts have ended up less researched (e.g., work).

## **Power and morality**

Ultimately, what the chapters in this section bring to the fore are issues of power and morality. Together, they offer insight into the evolvment of surveillance capitalism, the attention economy, and the power (and power struggles) of platforms. But they also show how our relationship with our devices, both individually and socially, involve deeply moral questions as well as how different actors discursively frame their arguments to be about the good life and human agency in a post-digital world.

# Techlash or tech change?

*How the image of Mark Zuckerberg changed with Cambridge Analytica*

RASMUS HELLES & STINE LOMBORG

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

## ABSTRACT

The Cambridge Analytica scandal shook political establishments and news audiences alike in 2018. The scandal, which figures prominently in accounts of the “techlash”, has been followed by a substantial reorientation in the attitudes held towards the digital sector. The aim of this chapter is to tell the story of the developing history of the digital backlash as seen through an empirical analysis of the Danish media coverage of Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook. While we find that the public’s view of Zuckerberg, Facebook, and the tech industry did change dramatically, we suggest that this was anticipated by a long-term change in the media representation of them in the years before. This challenges the notion of quick and sudden pushback, as implied by the metaphor of a backlash, instead suggesting that the scandal is part of a gradual process of change in public opinion regarding technology companies, their CEOs, and their operations.

**KEYWORDS:** agenda-setting, techlash, quantitative content analysis, natural language processing, NLP, news coverage

---

Helles, R., & Lomborg, S. (2024). Techlash or tech change? How the image of Mark Zuckerberg changed with Cambridge Analytica. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 25–43). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-2>

## Introduction

The Cambridge Analytica scandal forcefully brought the politics of Big Tech to public attention in 2018. The scandal ostensibly exposed what the algorithms of data mining systems could accomplish when unleashed on the vast collections of personal data hoarded by social media companies (even if the actual capabilities of Cambridge Analytica have since been questioned). The scandal unfolded in the wake of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump for president in the US, as well as the Snowden revelations, which shook political establishments across the Global North. It also contributed significantly to a growing sense of unease around social media platforms as means for information, communication, and action in society, as well as about the unprecedented surveillance regimes that were made possible by digital technology. In a Danish context, it has been part of a process that has brought the operations of Big Tech to the forefront of political debates, if not (yet) to meaningful, regulatory initiatives.

The metaphor of the techlash, which emerged as a catchphrase in the wake of the scandal (e.g., Doctorow, 2019), embodies the notion of something reaching a tipping point and a sudden change of state – in this case, in the perceptions and public debates about Big Tech. Our analysis in this chapter finds that the metaphor, in some important ways, clouds our vision of a broader set of concerns about digital technologies, data, and the role they play in shaping societal developments and individual everyday lives over a longer time span (Rust, 2019).

The aim of this chapter is to tell the story of the developing history of the digital backlash as seen through the Danish media coverage of Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook (now Meta), one of the key entities in debates about the role of digital technology in society during the past decade and a half (Bucher, 2021). We rely on a full sample of all coverage of Zuckerberg and Facebook from 2010 to 2021 in the Danish daily newspapers *Ekstra Bladet*, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Politiken*, all owned by JP/Politikens Hus and kindly donated to us for this research as part of the “Platform Intelligence in News” project. Denmark is often considered a digital frontrunner, and the backlash in public discourse on tech should arguably be viewed against a generally tech-enthusiastic Danish public. At the same time, we do not mean to suggest that the digital backlash is a nationally specific process of push-back, but rather that it largely mirrors an international (notably American) shift in public opinion and debate about Big Tech and its translation into the politics and ethics of ordinary people’s lives through debates about, for example, digital disconnection and detoxing.

In using a longitudinal analysis of media coverage of Zuckerberg and Facebook as a case in point for studying the techlash, we seek to bring empirical nuance and deepen explanatory efforts to account for the current, largely critical debate over the role of technology and tech giants in society. At the

same time, we use the chapter to showcase and reflect upon what can be learned about the digital backlash by studying media coverage in full scale.

With the empirical analysis, we situate the so-called techlash in public opinion in critical developments that started before the Snowden and Cambridge Analytica events but was catapulted further by them (see also Bechmann, 2019). While the analysis of media coverage suggests that the public's opinion of Zuckerberg and Facebook did change dramatically with the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which hit the news in 2018, this was anticipated by negative changes in the media representation of them also in the years before. In addition, many of the preceding changes were linked to other dimensions of the role of Zuckerberg and Facebook other than the Cambridge Analytica scandal. This challenges the notion of quick and sudden pushback and forces us to think about the techlash as part of a gradual process of change in public opinion regarding technology companies, their operations and CEOs, and – perhaps – their place in everyday life and in society (O'Sullivan & Fortunati, 2021).

## Background

Prior work has dealt with the scandals that came to fuel the techlash, particularly the Snowden leaks (Dencik & Cable, 2017) and Cambridge Analytica (González et al., 2019), albeit without a particular interest in the key human actors involved in these cases. Existing work on the media representations and coverage of tech entrepreneurs is surprisingly sparse.

Some work exists on representations of the so-called celebrity CEO status of tech entrepreneurs and media moguls, from Rupert Murdoch and Richard Branson to Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg. It has particularly paid attention to the interrelation between the personal brand of the individual entrepreneur and the brand of the tech company they lead. Little and Winch (2018), for instance, analysed how company public relations material from Facebook, capitalising on showcasing stories from CEO Mark Zuckerberg's personal life, contributed to the corporate branding of the company in question, Facebook, and the storytelling of global tech leadership of Zuckerberg himself. This work was extended in a book (Little & Winch, 2021), which drew together celebrity studies, feminist theory, and more to explore the mythical status and ideological power of Zuckerberg alongside fellow tech celebrity entrepreneurs, who are dubbed the patriarchs of digital capitalism.

Park and Wallace (2020) analysed alleged tensions between personal leadership, power, and ethical judgments in the social media performances of global leaders, using Elon Musk, Donald Trump, and Mark Zuckerberg as case exemplars. Their study was based on a sample of news articles on the uses and misuses (misinformation or “big blunders”) of said social media to show how these celebrity CEOs construct and brand specific personas



while at the same time troubling and politicising the relationship between ethics and technology innovation. Additionally, there is a handful of studies that use textual analyses of Zuckerberg's public speeches and corporate communications to suggest the discursive power of Big Tech in future-making, by their advancing narratives of technological developments as political forces for enhancing individual freedom and connectivity for social progress (Haupt, 2021; Hoffmann et al., 2018). Taking a somewhat different analytical route, Moran (2020) appropriated Arsenault and Castells's (2008: 492) theory of network switchers and power to explore how Zuckerberg acts as a "network switcher" who connects economic, political, and cultural networks by way of his control over Facebook, which in turn serves as a "programmer" of common goals and resources in society. Moran's analysis suggests that in addition to discursive power, we should take interest in how tech CEOs, through the relationship between themselves and the platforms they own, wield social, economic, and political power.

A few studies have taken their starting point in other public actors' communication about Big Tech and their CEOs. For instance, Karppi and Nieborg (2021) used the confessions of key figures who left Facebook and other companies to show the development of dystopian counter-narratives of the Silicon Valley that have emerged in the wake of the Brexit referendum, the Trump election, and the Cambridge Analytical scandal. Creech and Maddox (2022) analysed public debate around Zuckerberg in American elite media outlets and attended to the role of these media in legitimising or challenging the discursive power of Zuckerberg. Hobbs (2007) studied mass media coverage of Rupert Murdoch, demonstrating the co-existence of positive and negative narratives about the "Aussie underdog" and the "greedy media mogul". These studies show how media coverage carries and co-constructs myths and ideologies of celebrity CEOs and contributes to facilitating societal debate and forming public opinion around them. By extension, they suggest the political and ideological power of tech CEOs as exercised through the discourse surrounding them. When compared to the quite extensive body of literature existing on the media coverage, social media use, and public personas of politicians, especially in the wake of the election of Donald Trump for president of the US in 2016 (e.g., Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018), the sparse literature on tech CEOs is somewhat surprising.

Even if there is a surprising gap in the literature on media representations and public opinion on tech billionaires and their personas, we suggest there might be important lessons to learn about the digital backlash from analysing such representations. In this chapter, we take inspiration from the historically grounded core tradition in media studies of the role of the mass media in agenda-setting and framing to cultivate public opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, 2007). We are indebted to this tradition for the ways of understanding and studying media coverage of a specific topic and for how

our study changes over time to understand the formation of public opinion and deliberation about a topic of societal interest. In this chapter, however, we are not eliciting framings, but simply – and more descriptively – looking for semantic connections and formations around Zuckerberg and Facebook in Danish media, and what stories these might help us tell of the techlash and the historical trajectory of the broader digital backlash.

## Research design and operationalisation

In our analysis, we aim to outline how media representations of Mark Zuckerberg have changed, with particular emphasis on the way scandals and criticism have played a crucial part in shaping those changes.

The project is a spin-off from an applied research project on artificial intelligence in news, where we take part in a consortium of researchers and practitioners to understand the role and consequences of implementing recommender systems and natural language processing techniques in news production and dissemination. Our empirical analysis departs from a sample of articles from *Politiken* (a national broadsheet), *Jyllands-Posten* (also a national broadsheet), and *Ekstra Bladet* (a national tabloid). The sample comprises all articles that mention Mark Zuckerberg in the three newspapers from October 2007 to April 2021. The three papers can be considered core exemplars of the Danish newspaper landscape, and they broadly cover the existing spectrum of political leanings: *Politiken* and *Ekstra Bladet* are considered centrist or slightly left-leaning in their editorial orientation, whereas *Jyllands-Posten* is right-leaning.

We approach the analysis as a corpus-based analysis, using an array of natural language processing techniques, with the goal of mapping the way that coverage of Zuckerberg has changed and how it is interlaced with the coverage of Facebook. The natural language processing-based approach to the analysis of news content shares a number of general assumptions with the traditional approach in quantitative content analysis (Eskjær & Helles, 2015; Krippendorff, 2013), in particular, the general assumption that news texts can be meaningfully quantified and operationalised for analysis, and that core changes in news coverage can be identified through numerical analysis of such datasets. A major difference between traditional content analysis and the natural language processing-based approach is in the specifics of how the quantification of the data is done and the analytical techniques employed. Traditional content analysis relies on the development of coding protocols that are used by human coders to capture chosen patterns of textual meaning, such as particular relationships between specific entities (e.g., how different journalistic framings are applied to political actors in relation to a given topic). Since the coding process is labour intensive, sampling is almost always used, and typically aims at selecting as small a sample of texts as possible.

Manual coding of thousands of news stories is costly, so the selection of texts for analysis typically aims at being just large enough to support the requirements of statistical analysis for representativity in relation to the total universe of texts that could be sampled. Subsequent analysis typically focuses on tracing how the coded constructs differ over time or between different news outlets, and explanatory validity is often established through statistical significance testing. Complete corpora of texts, such as the one we use here, sidestep the issue of statistical representativity because there is no need to assess the relationship between the coded sample and the complete corpus.

In contrast to traditional content analysis, the approach of natural language processing does not employ human coding but instead uses a variety of algorithmic approaches to make the language in news stories available to quantitative analysis. Therefore, natural language processing-based analysis is often conducted on much larger corpora than those that are typical of traditional content analysis, which means that the pool of stories that are of relevance to a study often coincide with the sample that is analysed.

The shift also means that the analytical procedures differ substantially, not least because the datasets that follow from the two approaches have different analytical units: In traditional content analysis, the unit of analysis reflects theoretical concepts from mass communication theory, such as, for example, framing (Krippendorff, 2013). Frames are broadly understood to be characteristic ways that news organisations cast different issues, for example, whether environmental issues are addressed, or framed, as political, economic, or existential problems.

In contrast, natural language processing-based approaches typically depart from linguistic categories such as word type or syntactical relationships, or from mathematical concepts such as vector spaces (Grimmer et al., 2022). This also strongly influences the analytical tools that are used in the two approaches, where the natural language processing approach employs a wide range of tools for analysis and visualisation of relationships in the data, many of which are adapted from the traditions of corpus linguistics and computational linguistics. Other analytical techniques have developed natively as part of the natural language processing landscape, such as, for example, topic modelling for typologising stories in different categories, or sentiment analysis for establishing the tone of sentences or entire texts.

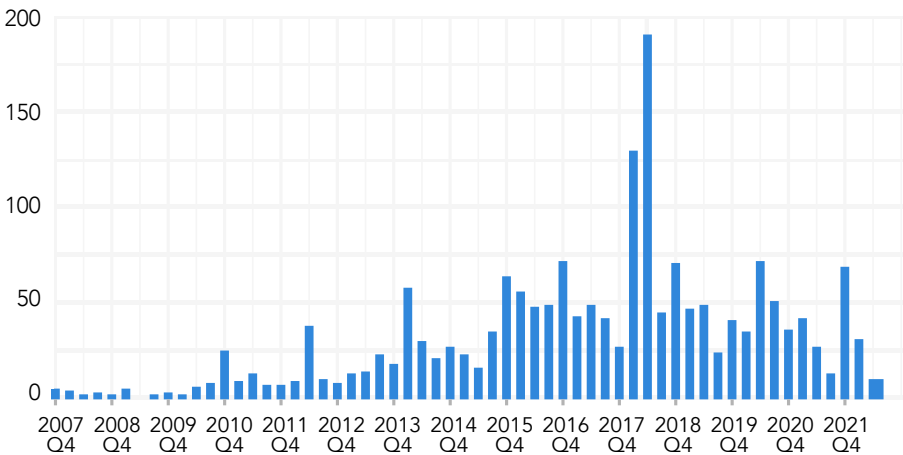
We are interested in the broad trajectories of changes in the ways Zuckerberg and Facebook have been covered in the sample, and how this relates to the techlash that is broadly conceived to have followed in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. However, we do not focus specifically on that scandal, but approach the data in ways that allow us to assess both the timing of the techlash in more detail, as well as changes that happened prior to it as part of a broader process of pushback against digital developments. Our dataset covers about 14.5 years (from October 2007 to April 2021) and comprises 1,836 articles.

# Findings

## The techlash did happen

A very general indication of the importance of the events related to the Cambridge Analytica scandal can be seen in Figure 2.1, which shows the annual distribution of stories. The spike in the two first quarters of 2018 clearly reflect a massive change in the intensity of coverage related to Zuckerberg during 2018, when former Cambridge Analytica employee Christopher Wylie’s revelations brought the scandal to the news media. Indeed, half the stories in our corpus have been published since March 2018, even if the period between that date and the end of our sample covers only a quarter of the total sample period.

**FIGURE 2.1** Number of news stories mentioning Mark Zuckerberg, 2007–2021



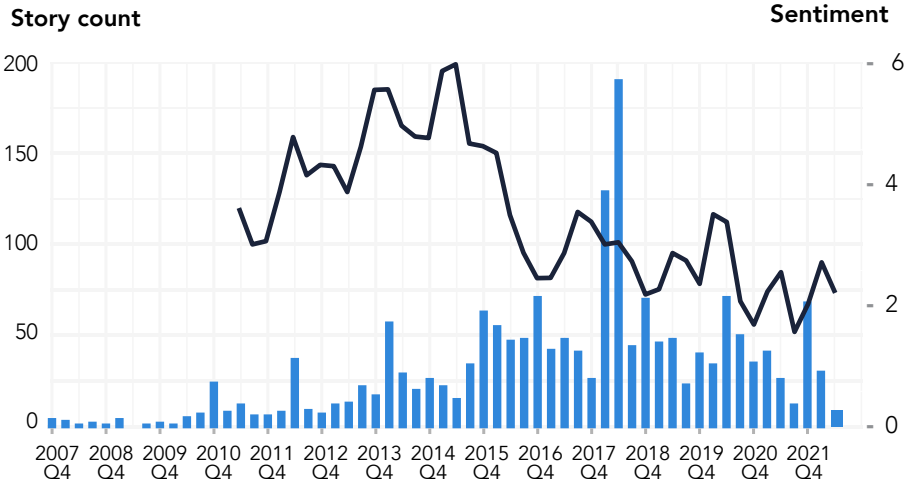
Comments: The graph includes all stories that mention Zuckerberg from the sample from *Jyllands-Posten*, *Ekstra Bladet*, and *Politiken*, October 2007–April 2021.

The spike in 2018 means that 23.1 per cent of all stories in our corpus are from that year, even though 2018 only represents 6.9 per cent of the period covered in the sample. The spike reflects the massive change in both public and political awareness of the relationship between social media as reflected in news coverage, even if our corpus only comprises stories that explicitly mention Zuckerberg; this means that there is likely to be additional news texts that could meaningfully be included in a complete analysis of the techlash, but that are not part of our sample.

However, the presence of the spike does not document any change in coverage beyond the increased intensity. To better understand the *character* of the change in the coverage of Zuckerberg, we conducted a sentiment analysis of

all sentences in the corpus that mention him. A sentiment analysis algorithm uses (long) lists of words in a selected language (here Danish), where each word is given a value on a gradual scale from negative to positive.<sup>1</sup> For example, words such as “murder” or “fraud” are given large negative values, whereas words like “happy” are given large positive values. Algorithms for sentiment analysis seek to take the role of modifier words (e.g., reinforcement words like “strong” hatred) and signs (e.g., “!”) into account. About 10 per cent of all sentences in the corpus mentions Zuckerberg, and the analysis of the rolling quarterly average of these sentences are shown in Figure 2.2. The line shows a marked dip in average, annual sentiment.

**FIGURE 2.2** Number of news stories mentioning Mark Zuckerberg, and average sentiment of sentences mentioning Mark Zuckerberg, 2007–2021



Comments: The number of news stories mentioning Mark Zuckerberg is indicated by the blue bars. The average sentiment of sentences mentioning Mark Zuckerberg is indicated by the black line. Average sentiment not calculated prior to 2011 due to the sparsity of data before that time.

It is noticeable that the steepest drop in sentiment happens during the third and fourth quarter of 2015, which likely reflects discussions of the role of social media in relation to the 2016 American presidential election and the perceived inaction of Facebook in relation to Donald Trump’s campaign. While the techlash appears as a change in the intensity of stories in 2018, the tone of the coverage already began to change in the third and fourth quarter of 2015. This suggests that the techlash is not uniquely linked to a singular incident but consists of a compound effect of different moments in a sequence of events and developments. In particular, the dramatic change in 2015 suggests that the transformation of the representation of Zuckerberg and Facebook is linked to the moment when it was no longer possible for them to deny their role in real political power struggles in American politics.

## Developing a story typology for the broader digital backlash

The changes in sentiment depicted in Figure 2.2 refer to a very high level of aggregation and reveal little about how these overall changes manifested in terms of actual, discursive patterns in the news coverage that could further substantiate the analysis of techlash or tech change.

To explore this, we produced a typology of the stories in the corpus. In natural language processing–based analysis, this is known as topic modelling, and there are different ways to do it. The approaches share the goal of grouping together texts that are more similar to each other, and they all do this via measurements based on the words that constitute the corpus texts. The main differences are found in how the words in the text are approached. Until recently, the most common method has been to use latent Dirichlet allocation, which finds sets of words that often occur in the same documents, and subsequently scores each document according to which sets of words are most prevalent in it. If applied to our present data, one set of words might turn out to be about stock market prices and value, and another might be the names of top managers from Facebook. A news story about a new, all-time high course for the Facebook stock would probably score high on both (because financial news often mentions top management), whereas a news story about the pros and cons of using Facebook during one’s holiday would likely score low on both those sets.

For the purposes of our analysis, we have opted to go with a more recent approach to topic modelling, called *top2vec*, which uses vector representations of words and documents. Instead of relying on statistics of word counts per document, vector models score a word by recursively looking at its immediate neighbourhood: For each unique word in the corpus, all windows (meaning the 5 or 10 words immediately before and after it) are pooled, and based on the words in the pool, a string of numerical values (usually between 50 and 300) are calculated. This string (the vector) ends up acting as a kind of semantic profile of the word. In vector models, words that often occur closely together in the corpus have similar vectors. If run on a corpus of cookbooks, “salt” and “pepper” would most likely have similar vectors, because they often occur together; however, whereas “salt” and “water” would also have similarities, “pepper” and “water” would probably not. The key affordance of vector models is that words with similar vectors also often belong closely together semantically.

In a vector-based topic model, a single vector is calculated for each document based on the vectors of individual words that constitute the document, and it is shaped from the semantic domains that dominate among them. Developing a document typology consists of grouping together documents that have the most similar document vectors, since they are likely to deal with semantically similar domains.

We chose the vector approach over the latent Dirichlet allocation approach in part based on experiments with the corpus, and in part in recognition of

the persistent critique that latent Dirichlet allocation models are highly dependent on the settings that control the statistical parameters for the model development: Even very small changes often have dramatic consequences for the resulting model. Vector-based models also depend on settings (hyper parameters), but in our case, the stability of the resulting models was vastly superior to the latent Dirichlet allocation models. Also, and more importantly, the interpretability of vector-based models is often more convincing: Qualitative evaluation of a topic model is a key analytical step, and in comparison, vector models are often considered more immediately sensible to human analysts (Egger & Yu, 2022).

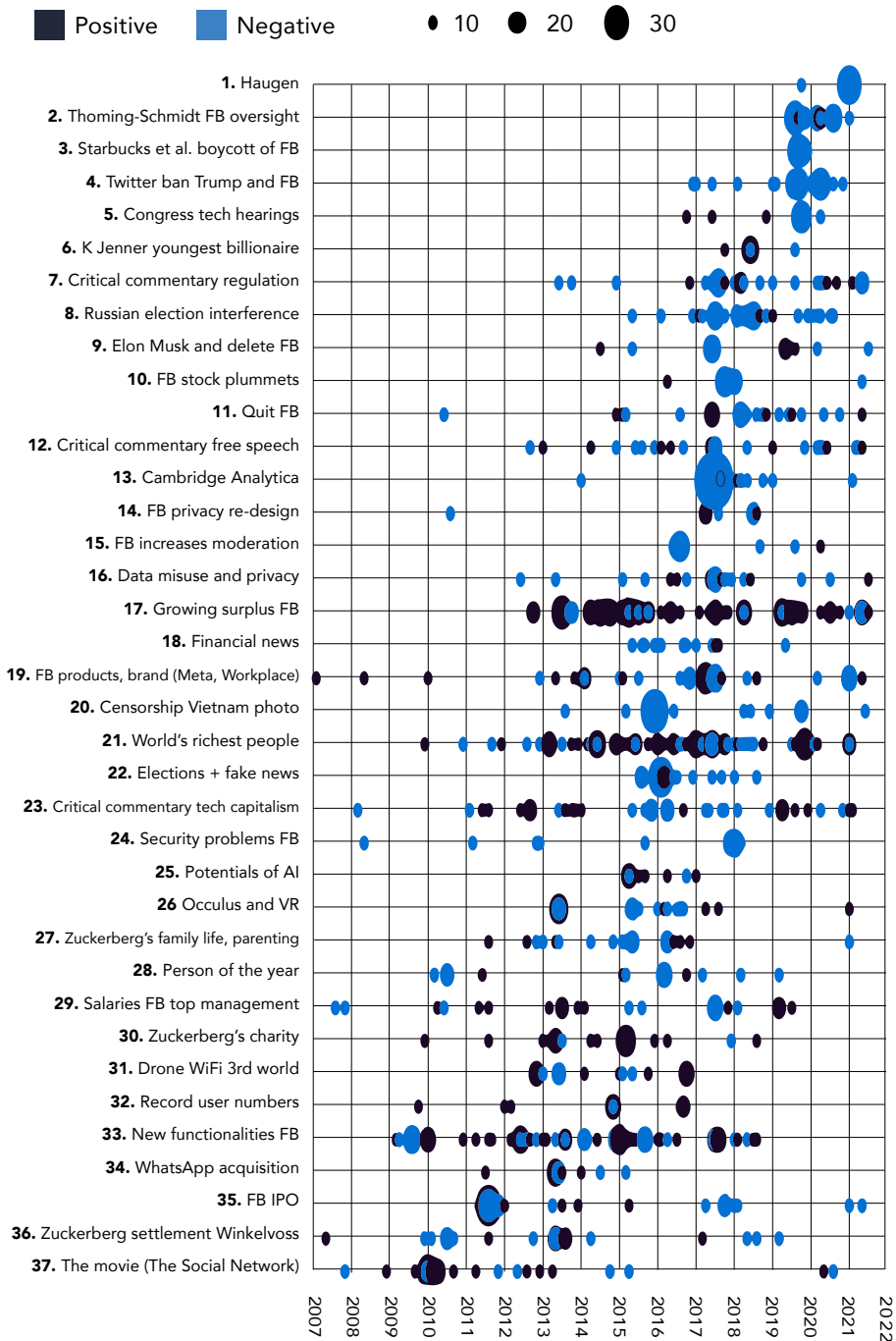
In the topic model that we developed for the corpus<sup>2</sup> of texts mentioning Zuckerberg, we identified a total of 38 types (clusters), of which 37 contain a total of 65.8 per cent of the stories in the corpus. The remaining 34.2 per cent belong to a noise cluster with little internal coherence. While the noise cluster is large, all clustering approaches involve a trade-off between the number of clusters and the limit to clustering. Other versions of our model classify more texts into clusters, but most of these additional clusters are small (fewer than five stories), providing little additional information beyond the chosen model.

## Topics and time

Figure 2.3 organises the clusters along the vertical axis. It shows how they manifest in the news coverage corpus over time. The clusters are sorted after recency with the newest clusters at the top and the oldest at the bottom, based on the average age of the stories comprising each cluster. The stories are grouped into monthly intervals, and the size of each dot indicates how many stories of each cluster were published in that particular month. The colour of the dots represents the average sentiment of the stories of a particular month in relation to all stories in the corpus: red indicating more positive (above average) and blue indicating more negative (below average).

In the following sections, we provide summary descriptions of a range of different story groups. The summaries reflect both the contents of the individual groups, but also an aspect of the method that incorporates thousands of stories in a single analysis: It is the tectonic shifts in the patterns of coverage, rather than the discursive details of individual stories, that are central to the analysis. The only exception we make is in the identification of the tipping point in story sentiment, where we provide some textual context.

**FIGURE 2.3** News story clusters and sentiments, 2007–2021



Comments:  $N = 1,208$  (noise cluster excluded).



## The honeymoon years

At first glance, the developments charted in Figure 2.3 reinforce the global trend in sentiment displayed in Figure 2.2: Stories grow more negative over time. The stories in the top-right corner of Figure 2.3 are clearly more negative than those in the bottom-left corner.

An inspection of the sentiment composition of the different clusters also reveals that there are clearly more negative than positive clusters, and that most clusters combine negative and positive stories (note that some dots represent more than one story). The most prevalent and predominantly positive clusters are those that deal with Zuckerberg as one of the World's richest people (#21) and news about the quarterly financial reports from Facebook and the astronomical surpluses they document (#17). Closer inspection of the financial news cluster (#17) also shows the repetitive nature of this kind of journalism, since the spacing between the stories is remarkably even, most likely reflecting the routine publication of these stories in conjunction with the publication of Facebook's quarterly financial statements. The overall positive sentiment in nearly all these stories also reflects a basic celebratory reporting on the quarterly reports' display of Facebook's tremendous financial accumulation. It is remarkable that one of the only unambiguously positive story types about Zuckerberg and Facebook is one that is not primarily driven by core criteria of newsworthiness: Neither the sentiment nor the timing of the stories suggest that they are anything but a routine form of reporting, repeating the common criticism that business journalism is often unnecessarily celebratory (Butterick, 2015; Kjær & Slaatta, 2007). By the same token, the repeated reporting of the year's richest person includes Zuckerberg several times, not because he is the richest person each year, but because these stories frequently reiterate the previous top-scorers on the list. Taken together, the two aforementioned story clusters represent the lion's share of unequivocally positive coverage of Zuckerberg and Facebook, at least insofar as they can be said to deal with them as actors that are presented in some form of social capacity that renders them comparable to other parts of society. The same is true of a minor (in terms of story volume) cluster, namely the one reporting on Zuckerberg's personal philanthropy and charity (#30). Prior to mid-2015, several stories detailed Zuckerberg's spending on charities aimed at eradicating diseases, and his pledge (in late 2015) to give away 99 per cent of his stake in Facebook to charity during his lifetime. The positive tone of these stories, also after 2015, suggests the reluctance of reporters to link Zuckerberg's mounting problems to the pledge, despite the dramatic turn towards negative coverage in the same media during the same period.

It is noteworthy that Zuckerberg as a person has been met with mixed coverage from the beginning, and that most of the early negative coverage stems from clusters of stories that deal with his personal qualities. The two earliest clusters deal with the film *The Social Network* (Fincher, 2010), which

did not portray Zuckerberg particularly positively. In the corpus, the stories about the film have mixed sentiments, which reflects that they combine largely negative references to the real-world Zuckerberg with positive evaluations of the film itself. Temporally, the film discussion coincides with stories about the real-world conflict between Zuckerberg and former fellow students, who claimed that they had made material contributions to the early development of Facebook at Harvard, and therefore had a stake in the company, which Zuckerberg had illegitimately claimed for himself.

## Emerging problems

Figure 2.3 also helps bring out in more detail what drives the initial turn against Facebook and the tech industry. Two clusters have concentrations of stories in the second half of 2015, namely stories about the American presidential election and fake news (#22) and stories about censorship (#20), particularly of photographs. Central to the latter group are a series of stories from 2016, which report on Facebook's decision to take down a post by Norwegian writer Tom Egeland, in which he included Tom Ut's classic picture *The Terror of War* from 1972, showing the naked girl Kim Phuc running away from an American napalm attack during the Vietnam War. This provoked sharp rebukes from the Norwegian press, echoed by Danish newspapers, which were compounded when a posting by the Norwegian prime minister at the time, Erna Solberg, was also removed.

While the two topics are clearly of separate origin, their temporal coincidence invited a double criticism, since the refusal to censor obvious false news on the one hand, and the willingness to censor historical fact on the other, was considered an untenable double standard. Furthermore, their combined effect is to locate Zuckerberg and Facebook as recognisable political actors in the public sphere: The (in-)action documented in the two clusters of stories activates registers of public debate and critical news coverage, which are difficult or impossible to escape via the kinds of corporate communication strategies that Facebook tried to use. One of the stories in the cluster about the Vietnam War photograph is a comment by the Danish politician Ida Auken (2016: n.p.), and begins like this:

The world's most powerful editor refuses to be an editor. How do we guarantee the right to a free and open debate, when a giant corporation can edit the conversation, without reference to the ordinary rules of democratic debate? Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg tries to wiggle his way out of responsibility, but that is not how things work.

The quote clearly shows how the censoring of the photo and the complications following in its wake allows others to posit Zuckerberg and Facebook in the discursive domain of politics, including the allusion that Zuckerberg's attempt to escape responsibility is strategic manoeuvring ("wiggle") rather

than a genuine position about the novel role of a social media platform with respect to freedom of speech and censorship.

The two streams of stories about censorship and fake news also coincide with a change in sentiment in one of the longest-running clusters of stories in the corpus, namely the critical commentary on the nature of tech entrepreneurs as members of an ultra-rich class of global capitalists (#23). This stream of articles is made up of discussion pieces by journalists and initially foregrounds the global elite, and thus deals with Zuckerberg in that capacity. This changes after 2015, where the coverage also becomes more consistently negative. The previous commentary combines many different perspectives on wealth and redistribution, but Zuckerberg and Facebook clearly enter the discussion in a more coherent way after the changes in 2015. Later examples from the cluster clearly show how the wealth of tech moguls gets linked to the fate of ordinary people in a more direct way:

Super billionaires laugh all the way to the bank, while millions are pushed into poverty. The world needs more international cooperation if something is to be done about inequality, says Professor [...]. This [is the conclusion] in a report by Ibis Oxfam. (Ritzau, 2021: n.p.)

This quote also shows how relationships between the tech entrepreneurs is linked to new discursive domains, here the adverse effects of the lockdowns in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic. The link from money to redistribution is made by a nongovernmental organisation, but it is notable that while the story is brought by *Politiken*, it is a reproduction from the news agency Ritzau: Despite its very overt political charge, the role of the tech giants appears to have changed sufficiently to allow it.

The repositioning of Zuckerberg and Facebook as political actors is compounded by the Cambridge Analytical scandal (cluster #13), which exploded into Danish (and global) news in 2018, when whistleblower Christopher Wylie made his public statements and revelations. The scandal combines problems from the initial scandal about Zuckerberg's hesitation to sanction Trump's spreading of fake news on Facebook with privacy concerns for the 87 million Facebook users, whose data were harvested by Cambridge Analytica and the researcher Alexandr Korgan. The data that Cambridge Analytica appropriated was used to fuel the election campaign of Donald Trump, and it was speculated that it might have helped him win the election. While Zuckerberg and Facebook had clearly already become part of the political domain earlier, the Cambridge Analytica scandal further elaborated that role, since an immediate consequence was that Zuckerberg had to appear in congressional hearings about his company.

Coverage of the Cambridge Analytica scandal all but died out as a topic in the news once Wylie's revelations ended (see topic #13 in Figure 2.3). Yet, a range of new clusters of stories emerges in the corpus, just as some preexisting clusters increase in publication intensity. The most immediate successor to the stories about Cambridge Analytica were stories about Russian interference

in the election that saw Trump become president (#8), which also coincides with an intensification of stories about the possibilities of regulating social media and platforms (#7). While the stories of election interference died out in the latter part of the period under study, the stories of regulation persist, remaining active during the period covered in our analysis. Similarly, a cluster of stories deal with the perceived error of Facebook not banning Trump when Twitter did (#4), which persists till the end of the period covered in the data.

Moreover, in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, there is a range of stories which describe actions by other social actors, undertaken in reaction to the changed landscape of public opinion that manifested after the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Two groups of these stories have to do with boycotts: one initiated by Elon Musk (#9), and one led by Starbucks as part of a pressure campaign (#3), linked directly to the failure to ban Trump from Facebook when Twitter did.

Perhaps unique to the Danish coverage is a strong (negative) emphasis on the inclusion of the former prime minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, in Facebook's Oversight Board (#2). This was largely perceived as an attempt to divert attention from the problems raised by the two main scandals, which clearly drowned out the interest in a Dane getting an international position.

## **Goodbye Zuckerberg**

Once Zuckerberg and Facebook manifest as political actors, it is also noteworthy that the role of Zuckerberg becomes much more limited in the news coverage. He is mentioned in all the stories in the corpus, but at the level of the clusters, it becomes clear that he figures much less as a person and much more in the capacity of the owner and top manager of Facebook. Prior to the problems relating to the Trump campaign and fake news and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, there were several clusters of stories that had Zuckerberg as the explicit focus. One was the above-mentioned cluster about his philanthropy (#30), and another is the stream of stories about Zuckerberg's family life (#27). The latter group largely relate strategic disclosures about Zuckerberg's personal life, which are clearly designed to humanise his image, such as him opting to take parental leave when his child was born, and before that about his marriage and difficulties in life. These stories are mixed with regard to sentiment, which both stems from the fact that some of them relate stories about the couple's problems with having a child, and from the fact that some of the topics of the stories are interpreted through the different cultural and social values of Danish society; for example, Zuckerberg's decision to take parental leave (which is common among Danish fathers) was not understood as a progressive choice. These groups of stories stop, and so does the interest in depicting Zuckerberg as anything but a corporate representative. Even the mentions of his astronomical wealth, which as mentioned was a core element in the early part of the corpus, seem to dry up in the later parts.

This can also be seen from the fact that many of the other senior executives at Facebook begin to appear much more regularly as names in the clusters that are characteristic of the latter part of the period. Where Zuckerberg was previously synonymous with the company, and Facebook routinely put out material that formed the basis of some of the early clusters, this has now stopped (or has stopped being reported). Instead, other figures, such as Sheryl Sandberg and Sundar Pichai, become more prominent in the stories, while Zuckerberg's human persona retreats.

## Concluding discussion

Our analysis can be read as a historical narrative of the digital backlash as expressed through the case of public debate about Facebook. As we have seen, seeds were sown in news coverage throughout the studied period to raise critical concerns about Facebook and its role in matters of freedom of speech, censorship, misinformation, global inequalities, privacy, and data security, but also simply the consequences of seemingly minimal changes to the interface for mundane communication and overcoming alleged Facebook addiction through disconnection, and so on. These concerns gained strength over time, but have been part of the story all along, underlining the idea of slow and gradual change in public opinion about tech, where ambivalences may turn into full-blown outrage in the face of scandals.

Speaking to the notion of techlash, it is, however, with the Cambridge Analytica scandal that Facebook became recognisable as a political actor, rather than a neutral platform, to the public. As we have seen, critical – and politically contested – topics flourished more widely in the aftermath of the scandal, and the critical voices, of political as well as business executives and ordinary citizens, figured more forcefully in the news coverage from 2018 and onwards. Hence, arguably, the empirical material speaks beyond the case at hand to illustrate the moment where Big Tech became identifiably political. As Creech and Maddox (2022) argued, media coverage plays a part in legitimising or challenging the power of Zuckerberg and Facebook. The gradual shift in media coverage, and the persistence of some of the positive business news categories, perhaps suggests how actors such as Zuckerberg and Facebook, who are both perfectly aligned with core tenets of neoliberalism concerning the benefits of unregulated markets and consumption, are especially hard to wear down; the varnish of novelty and innovation, in combination with a new and unfamiliar technology use case, has escaped political scrutiny for a surprisingly long time.

Furthermore, the analysis testifies to the relationship between the tech CEO and his company, as it develops over time. As we have observed, Zuckerberg himself played a core role across topics in the Danish news coverage before 2018, but largely disappeared from public view as a person as the coverage became more critical. The differential attribution of blame and agency between

Facebook and its CEO Mark Zuckerberg indicated in the analysis of changes in sentiment before and after the Cambridge Analytica scandal shows that the consequences of the techlash are unevenly distributed. The preference for blaming companies rather than CEOs and owners has been found in other studies. In particular, a study by González and colleagues (2019), which found differences in the attribution of blame between Zuckerberg and Facebook in tweets relating to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, seems to offer a degree of corroboration. They found that while concerns were shared between most commenters, Spanish-speaking Twitter users were more prone to assign blame to Zuckerberg, while English speakers followed a pattern similar to what our analysis finds.

The reluctance to assign blame more directly to Zuckerberg is relevant to several different debates. In the specific context of news coverage, it seems that the preparedness of the Danish press to adequately cover the kinds of power that are intrinsic to global power brokers such as Mark Zuckerberg is insufficient: Modelling Zuckerberg as a company owner finding himself in a bad situation is not likely to be adequately addressed through coverage of congressional hearings.

We argue that our findings of semantic connections in the media coverage of Zuckerberg and Facebook can usefully be seen as a shift from stories rooted in the cultural domain of the public sphere towards the political domain, and argue that this gradual change was in part a reason why the scandal broke so forcefully: While the overall coverage of the executives remained stable until the scandal, the gradual change in the news coverage had prepared the ground for a comprehensive reorientation in the national conversation about the status of the tech giants. By extension, this has paved the way for the current forceful attempts at regulatory action, such as those underway at the European Union level.

Serving as a case in point, our mapping of the specific coverage of a central pair, Zuckerberg and Facebook, further suggests we need to consider the digital backlash in a longitudinal perspective to see how shifts in public opinion come about, starting with perhaps a vague sense of unease to full-blown rage in public debate and possibly to disconnection, public resignation, or pushes for regulation of tech giants, such as those we are currently witnessing in Denmark. Moreover, while certainly amplified by public scandals, the digital backlash cannot be reduced to the immediate public responses to them. In accounting for critical attitudes and practices towards all things digital, we might be best served by taking interest in the *longue durée* (or, at least, longer *durée*) of debates about media in society to learn about both continuity and change – whether sudden or gradual (for a similar argument about digital disconnection, see Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021).

Finally, our analysis and the resulting story of techlash, or tech change, narrated through the case of the perhaps most prominent Silicon Valley

executive, can be read as an initial take on what might be gained for media and communication scholars from full-scale studies of media coverage using machine-learning methods. We have demonstrated how such methods may speak to both the big picture (i.e., the negative sentiment trend over time) and the details (i.e., the specific topics that form around Zuckerberg and Facebook as the storyline unfolds). As such, our methodology and analysis may help ignite new research questions to deepen our understanding of the digital backlash in society, and the role of media coverage therein.

## Acknowledgements

The project was conducted as part of the Platform Intelligence in News project, funded by the Innovation Fund Denmark.

## References

- Arsenault, A. H., & Castells, M. (2008). The structure and dynamics of global multi-media business networks. *International Journal of Communication*, 2, 707–748.  
<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/298>
- Auken, I. (2016, September 15). Verdens mest magtfulde redaktør nægter at være redaktør [The world's most powerful editor refuses to be an editor]. *JP/Finans*.  
<https://finans.dk/debat/ECE8998903/verdens-mest-magtfulde-redaktør-nægter-at-være-redaktør/>
- Bechmann, A. (2019). Data as humans: Representation, accountability, and equality in big data. In R. F. Jørgensen (Ed.), *Human rights in the age of platforms* (pp. 73–94). MIT Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11304.003.0008>
- Boczowski, P. J., & Papacharissi, Z. (2018). *Trump and the media*. MIT Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11464.001.0001>
- Bucher, T. (2021). *Facebook*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Butterick, K. J. (2015). *Collusion and complacency: A critical introduction to business and financial journalism*. Pluto Press.
- Creech, B., & Maddox, J. (2022, August 16). Thus spoke Zuckerberg: Journalistic discourse, executive personae, and the personalization of tech industry power. *New Media & Society*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221116344>
- Dencik, L., & Cable, J. (2017). The advent of surveillance realism: Public opinion and activist responses to the Snowden leaks. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 763–781.  
<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5524>
- Doctorow, C. (2019). Barlow's legacy. *Duke Law & Technology Review*, 18, 61–68.
- Egger, R., & Yu, J. (2022). A topic modeling comparison between LDA, NMF, Top2Vec, and BERTopic to demystify Twitter posts. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 7.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.886498>
- Eskjær, M. F., & Helles, R. (2015). *Kvantitativ indholdsanalyse [Quantitative content analysis]*. Samfundslitteratur.
- Fincher, D. (Director). (2010). *The social network* [Film]. Columbia Pictures; Relativity Media; Scott Rudin Productions; Michael De Luca Productions; Trigger Street Productions.
- González, F., Yu, Y., Figueroa, A., López, C., & Aragon, C. (2019). Global reactions to the Cambridge analytica scandal: A cross-language social media study. In *Proceedings of the 2019 world wide web conference* (pp. 799–806). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3308560.3316456>
- Grimmer, J., Roberts, M. E., & Stewart, B. M. (2022). *Text as data: A new framework for machine learning and the social sciences*. Princeton University Press.
- Haupt, J. (2021). Facebook futures: Mark Zuckerberg's discursive construction of a better world. *New Media & Society*, 23(2), 237–257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820929315>

- Hobbs, M. (2007). 'More paper than physical': The reincorporation of News Corp and its representation in the Australian press. *Journal of Sociology*, 43(3), 263–281. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783307080106>
- Hoffmann, A. L., Proferes, N., & Zimmer, M. (2018). "Making the world more open and connected": Mark Zuckerberg and the discursive construction of Facebook and its users. *New Media & Society*, 20(1), 199–218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816660784>
- Karppi, T., & Nieborg, D. B. (2021). Facebook confessions: Corporate abdication and Silicon Valley dystopianism. *New Media & Society*, 23(9), 2634–2649. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820933549>
- Kjær, P., & Slaatta, T. (2007). *Mediating business: The expansion of business journalism*. Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Little, B., & Winch, A. (2018). "Just hanging out with you in my back yard": Mark Zuckerberg and mediated paternalism. *Open Cultural Studies*, 1(1), 417–427. <https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2017-0039>
- Little, B., & Winch, A. (2021). *The new patriarchs of digital capitalism: Celebrity tech founders and networks of power*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429291005>
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267990>
- Moran, R. E. (2020). Examining switching power: Mark Zuckerberg as a novel networked media mogul. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(4), 491–506. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1518473>
- O'Sullivan, J., & Fortunati, L. (2021). Media convergence: Expanding perspectives beyond the digital. In B. Gabriele, R. Nelson, S. Valérie, & S. Christian (Eds.), *Digital roots* (pp. 41–58). De Gruyter Oldenbourg. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/9783110740202-003>
- Park, K. M., & Wallace, F. (2020). Leadership and power in the digital economic revolution: Celebrity status, social media, and big blunders? *Journal of Global Business and Technology*, 16(2), 1–17.
- Ritzau. (2021, January 25). Supermilliardærer griner hele vejen til banken mens millioner skubbes ud i fattigdom [Super billionaires laugh all the way to the bank, while millions are pushed into poverty]. *Politiken*. <https://politiken.dk/internationalt/art8077421/Supermilliardærer-griner-hele-vejen-til-banken-mens-millioner-skubbes-ud-i-fattigdom>
- Rust, H. (2019). Techlash. In H. Rust (Ed.), *Rettung der Digitalisierung vor dem Digitalismus: Der "Europäische Weg" in eine nicht nur künstlich intelligente Zukunft [Rescuing digitalisation from digitalism: the "European way" towards a not just artificially intelligent future]* (pp. 79–94). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-26998-2\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-26998-2_6)
- Vanden Abeele, M. M., & Mohr, V. (2021). Media addictions as Apparatchik: What discourse on TV and smartphone addiction reveals about society. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1536–1557. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211038539>
- Weaver, D. H. (2007). Thoughts on agenda setting, framing, and priming. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 142–147. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00333.x>



## Endnotes

1. We conducted the sentiment analysis using the R package ‘Sentida’ v. 1.1.
2. The model was developed using R version 4.2.1 and the R package ‘doc2vec’ v. 0.20.0 by Jan Wijnffels et al.

# Post-digital consumption

*The controversy surrounding the mobile phone box as a means of disconnection*

KARIN FAST<sup>I</sup> & TRINE SYVERTSEN<sup>II</sup>

<sup>I</sup> DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, KARLSTAD UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN;  
DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO, NORWAY

<sup>II</sup> DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO, NORWAY

## ABSTRACT

This chapter expands the understanding of contemporary disconnective technologies by providing a case study of a mundane, low-tech artefact that has gained popularity in both private and public spaces: the mobile phone box. A mobile phone box (or a phone basket, as it is often called) is a place to put away smartphones for shorter or longer durations; boxes range from sophisticated products to simple homemade solutions. In this chapter, we identify the mobile phone box as a post-digital consumer object, representing the disenchantment with hyper-connected life that is visible in studies of digital disconnection. To scrutinise the diverse meanings of the artefact – and the broader discussion about the role of connective technologies in our lives – we investigate the debate following a Swedish trade association’s decision to award the mobile phone box the title “Christmas Gift of the Year” in 2019. Our analysis indicates that the box, and the solutions it embodies – putting away one’s phone – is highly contested, yet also an indication that the digital backlash and disconnection sentiments have become part of mainstream culture. The chapter contributes insights into hitherto under-researched guises of the post-digital and the kind of discursive battles that this condition may trigger.

**KEYWORDS:** mobile phone box, post-digital, disconnection, digital detox, discourse

---

Fast, K., & Syvertsen, T. (2024). Post-digital consumption: The controversy surrounding the mobile phone box as a means of disconnection. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 45–66). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-3>

## Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the expansion of consumer products designed to solve problems typically framed as screen “over-use” or “addiction”. Studies of digital detox apps and software to block access to Wi-Fi or social media offer insight into how disconnectivity may be stimulated – or simulated – through manoeuvring the very affordances of connectivity (see, e.g., Beattie, 2020; Beattie & Cassidy, 2021; Mannell, 2019; You, Chapter 9 in this volume). Less researched are disconnective designs that exist beyond the confines of our digital devices. This chapter expands the understanding of disconnective consumer products by providing a case study of the mobile phone box, a mundane, low-tech artefact that has gained popularity as a place to put away smartphones for a temporary break. While mobile phone boxes can be bought in many shapes and forms, they can also be homemade or created spontaneously with simple means – any basket or container will do. Hence, “the box” is a multidimensional object: It is an artefact, it can be a consumer product, but it is also an idea and a method for digital detoxing (Syvertsen, 2020).

The mobile phone box follows a historical trajectory of artefacts to deal with intrusive media (e.g., Syvertsen, 2017). However, in 2019, the mobile phone box received particular attention in Sweden, as it was elected “Årets julklapp”, or “Christmas Gift of the Year” (CGY) by retail research organisation HUI Research. HUI Research is owned by Svensk Handel [Swedish Trade], an employer organisation promoting trade competitiveness. A primary criterion for the award was that CGY products should be emblematic of the times we live in, and, tellingly, in 1994, the mobile phone itself was awarded the label. 25 years later, CEO Jonas Arnberg motivated the phone box award by stating: “Swedes are reflecting more and more on the use of the mobile phone, and are now increasingly trying to adjust their behaviour accordingly” (HUI Research, 2019).

The announcement triggered mixed reactions: Online and mass media items immediately appeared to praise, ridicule, or criticise the award. We chose the CGY debate as an exemplary case for three reasons. First, it represents a microcosmos of the ongoing discussion about the use (and misuse) of connected devices and exemplifies how problem definitions and solutions are framed in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Second, it helps to establish the timeline for the digital backlash and disconnection sentiments and document the type of events constituting the post-digital condition in the Scandinavian context. Analysts and observers use mass and social media coverage to demonstrate that a backlash is emerging (see, e.g., Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume), and this event produced massive coverage. Third, the debate illustrates how different stakeholders defend their positions concerning connectivity in the public sphere, including how actors with blatant economic interests use diverse measures to deflect criticism. Events like the CGY award play into an existing discursive landscape where

stakeholders struggle for interpretive dominance. While disconnection studies often focus on individuals, in this chapter, we discuss a public event and add information from a Scandinavian context (see, e.g., Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021; Sutton, 2020; Bagger, Chapter 6 in this volume).

We draw on the theoretical framework of the post-digital and identify the mobile phone box as a moral marker of the post-digital society. The post-digital society is simultaneously marked by the “disenchantment” of the digital and the increasing valorisation of objects, context, and practices that are or appear to be digitally disconnected (see, e.g., Cramer, 2015; Fast, 2021; Humayun & Belk, 2020; Thorén et al., 2019). Following Humayun and Belk (2020: 634), we recognise the mobile phone box as a post-digital object intended to provide an “escape” from “digital ephemerality”. However, as we argue in this chapter, mobile phone boxes are not about permanent escape; rather, they signify the emerging insight from disconnection studies that breaks are almost always temporary and that self-regulating measures are part of managing everyday (digital) life (Light, 2015; Syvertsen, 2023; Ytre-Arne, 2023).

The overarching goal of the chapter is to discuss how sentiments related to disconnection and the digital backlash manifest beyond individual motivations and strategies. This overarching goal derives from our interest in historicising the post-digital condition and understanding societal aspects of disconnection (Fast, 2021; Syvertsen, 2023). Two analytical questions structure the discussion:

1. What problems is the mobile phone box supposed to solve?
2. Which ideological positions are explicated by stakeholders?

We begin the chapter with a theoretical elaboration of the mobile phone box as a post-digital consumer object, followed by a note on methods and sources. Then we turn to an “unboxing” of the discursive battles around the CGY award, explicating four central positions: 1) HUI Research’s justification of the CGY award as a vehicle for mental health and sustainability, 2) retailers’ promotion of commercial boxes as a consumer object to improve social relations, 3) telecom-related stakeholders’ dismissal and ridicule of the artefact, and 4) the positions of bystanders and commentators who tag on with concerns of their own. In conclusion, we relate the analysis to the study’s main contribution: insights into the post-digital condition and discursive battles in societies where the digital is simultaneously praised and problematised.

## **The mobile phone box as a post-digital consumer object**

In this section, we first elaborate on the theoretical framework of the post-digital before turning to three critical dimensions of the mobile phone box as a post-digital object, emblematic of contemporary society.

## The post-digital condition and the disenchantment of connectivity

As indicated above, the “post” in post-digital does not signify a shift from the digitalised world. Instead, as post-digital theorist Cramer (2015) remarked, it resembles the “posts” in concepts like post-colonialism or post-feminism, signalling continuations and mutations of the referred phenomenon rather than the absolute ending of it. The post-digital condition implies not only blurred boundaries between analogue and digital, but also “a contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets, or a period in which our fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical” (Cramer, 2015: 12). Cramer began his conceptualisation of the post-digital by referencing a popular Reddit meme from 2013 that points to a digitally saturated social context: that of the young, urban, and fashionable “hipster”. The meme, with the words “You are not a real hipster unless you take your typewriter to the park”, helped Cramer (2015: 11) introduce what is significant of the post-digital condition:

In 2013, using a mechanical typewriter rather than a mobile computing device is [...] no longer a sign of being old-fashioned [, but rather] a deliberate choice of renouncing electronic technology, thereby calling into question the common assumption that computers, as meta-machines, represent obvious technological progress and therefore constitute a logical upgrade from any older media technology.

Cramer’s (2015) conceptualisation has lately been effectively engaged in empirical analyses of post-digital artefacts. Thorén and colleagues (2019) drew on Cramer’s work when exploring the promotion of digital disconnection through hybrid technologies, such as the “dumb phone”. Relatedly, Humayun and Belk (2020: 634) engaged the concept of post-digital consumption to understand how analogue artefacts – notably paper notebooks and film cameras – may be used to “escape from our digital world”. As they observed, “the role that objects play in contradiction to digital ephemerality has been neglected thus far” and “consumers are seeking to escape the relentless march of the digital through the use of non-digital analogue objects” (Humayun & Belk, 2020: 634). Post-digital consumption, they argued, offers a kind of “mundane resistance” (Humayun & Belk: 634–635) against the digitally overloaded society.

Hence, the concept of the post-digital implies that connectivity is not, by default, superior to disconnectivity (Humayun & Belk, 2020). This is, indeed, the leitmotif of the expanding digital detox industry which symptomatically gained momentum, not with the arrival of digital technology, but with the *normalisation* of constant connectivity through wireless Wi-Fi, mobile devices, and “smart” technologies in the 2010s (see, e.g., Syvertsen, 2020).

## What makes the mobile phone box post-digital?

Following and advancing the notion of the post-digital condition, we highlight three interrelated dimensions defining the mobile phone box as a post-digital object.

The first dimension concerns the historical embeddedness of the mobile phone box. Employing a box or a basket to put away one's phone was triggered by problems emblematic of our deeply mediated culture (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2019). The box belongs to the digital age, as there were, so to speak, no boxes where you could put a landline phone. A survey of mass media items and relevant Instagram hashtags indicates that commercial and homemade boxes and baskets for this purpose emerged in the broader consumer market in the mid-2010s, alongside a rise of digital-free holidays (Li et al., 2018) and digital detox apps (see You, Chapter 9 in this volume). The Factiva database, which holds media items worldwide, contains articles about "phone baskets" earlier than 2015, but as a referent for something different; for example, an item from 2007 suggests how one can have a basket of toys to give to the kids when one wants to speak uninterrupted (!) on the phone (Factiva, 2007). Even though there were no specific analogue frontrunners, the use of tools to restrict media use is not unique to the digitalised society (for historical measures of media resistance, see, e.g., Syvertsen, 2017; Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021). Many historical media technologies have also been "boxed in"; a prominent example is the television or radio cabinets where closed doors hid the device. In a sense, the mobile phone box alleviates the placelessness of contemporary mobile media (Kleinman, 2007) and provides the smartphone with a home base, so to speak.

While the contemporary mobile phone box is not a retro object like the typewriter or other technologies dubbed post-digital (Cramer, 2015; Thorén et al., 2019), many are designed to *look* retro – to have an "authentic" feel to them. This takes us to the second post-digital dimension of the mobile phone box: aesthetics and design. As argued by Humayun and Belk (2020: 635), the post-digital does not foreshadow a new age of the non-digital, but "it does often emerge as a form of old-world nostalgia for the vintage and retro". The empirical analysis reveals that retail mobile phone boxes come in various appearances and price categories. Many are designed as decorative interior items, sharing traits with iconic analogue objects such as Moleskine notebooks or beautifully crafted board games (e.g., chess sets). At the high end, there are design products, such as the "mobile phone bed" sold by author and entrepreneur Ariana Huffington's Thrive Global – an organisation dedicated to wellness and bearing the same name as Huffington's book *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder* (published in 2015). The product costs 65 American dollars and is made of "solid wood with velvet-lined compartments and satin liners" (Thrive Global, 2022). It also has built-in charging possibilities for up

to ten devices. On the other end, there are inexpensive, un-electrified wooden boxes, often with a moral or uplifting message (e.g., “Life is too short to be scrolled away”) in handwritten style (see Figure 3.1). These are frequently sold in romantic settings like farm shops or vintage stores that sell old or vintage-looking artefacts.

**FIGURE 3.1** “Life is too short to be scrolled away” mobile phone box



*Comments:* Inscription on a wooden mobile phone box. The box was marketed by the retailer, Textil & Presentia, as “shabby chic”, a decoration style associated with simulated vintage and retro.

*Source:* photo by Karin Fast

Instagram posts demonstrate how phone boxes can be made from diverse materials (see, e.g., posts with the hashtags #mobillåda [mobile phone box] or #mobilkorg [mobile phone basket]). Although cases made of plastic are common in stores, mobile phone boxes displayed on Instagram – including homemade DIY (do-it-yourself) objects – are often made of organic or re-used material such as wood, glass, carton, concrete, ceramics, textile, wicker, straw, or leather. Several, including some plastic ones, are made of recycled material. Arguably, the aesthetic and design lend a form of authenticity, warmth, and a “sense of humanity” to many boxes (Humayun & Belk, 2020: 635), typical of post-digital consumer objects and experiences (see also Enli & Syvertsen, 2021; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Also, the fact that many boxes include digital components – ranging from Huffington’s electrified “bed” to standard cases

that also work as charging stations – reflects how post-digital artefacts may blur the line between analogue and digital (Cramer, 2015; Thorén et al., 2019). Especially when serving its very purpose – to contain a digital device – the mobile phone box becomes as a sort of “hybrid assemblage” (Thorén et al., 2019: 337), where the digital and the analogue co-exist (see also Yuan, 2021) and where the “offline” solution supports online life.

The third post-digital dimension of the mobile phone box is its *social context*. As disconnection research discloses, disconnective initiatives are typically individualistic (Fish, 2017; Jorge, 2019; Kaun & Trére, 2020; Natale & Trére, 2020; Syvertsen, 2020, 2023), resting on the premise of self-help. The mobile phone box is no exception; it is regularly promoted as a private object with which one can put their phone away, often in situations within a family or amongst friends. However, post-digital moralities extend beyond our private spaces. Fast (2021: 1618) proposed that what we currently witness is the instalment of post-digital capitalism, an accelerated political-economic regime where disconnection is neither just a “luxury” nor only a necessity for “surviving” in today’s hyper-connected world, but increasingly also “*a moral obligation*”, especially in working life. Symptomatically, the mobile phone box appears in public or semi-public spaces like workplaces, restaurants, bars, schools, kindergartens, and holiday resorts.

Hence, the mobile phone also reflects ambitions to regulate the behaviour of a wider public, connoting authority and (paternalistic) control. In workplaces, the artefact symbolises the tendency of imposed regulation and disconnective work modes (Fast, 2021; Guyard & Kaun, 2018). On this note, the management magazine *Chef* featured a short article in response to the 2019 announcement, rhetorically asking its readers: “Is this year’s Christmas present a dream for all managers? For how often have you not sat in meetings where employees secretly worked on their mobiles – or even worse, scrolled through Instagram and Facebook” (O’Mahony, 2019).

Furthermore, online and social media representations include numerous mobile boxes used in schools, ranging from homemade solutions (a simple plastic box) to elaborate metal or plastic lockable “mobile hotels” or “mobile prisons”. These solutions are also recommended for cultural and sporting events, holiday destinations, and restaurants. An example of the fuzzy area between voluntary and enforced disconnection via the mobile phone box is the vintage table-top boxes at the Hearth Restaurant in New York (Ballentine, 2018). The encouragement to put away the mobile device is found inside the box. Operating at the meso level of society, these boxes are not individualistic but neither are they seriously challenging the power of technology on the societal level, for example, by being a signpost in favour of regulation. Arguably, they are post-digital also in the sense that they reflect the need to “escape” but also that “escapes are only temporary or partial” (Humayun & Belk, 2020: 635).

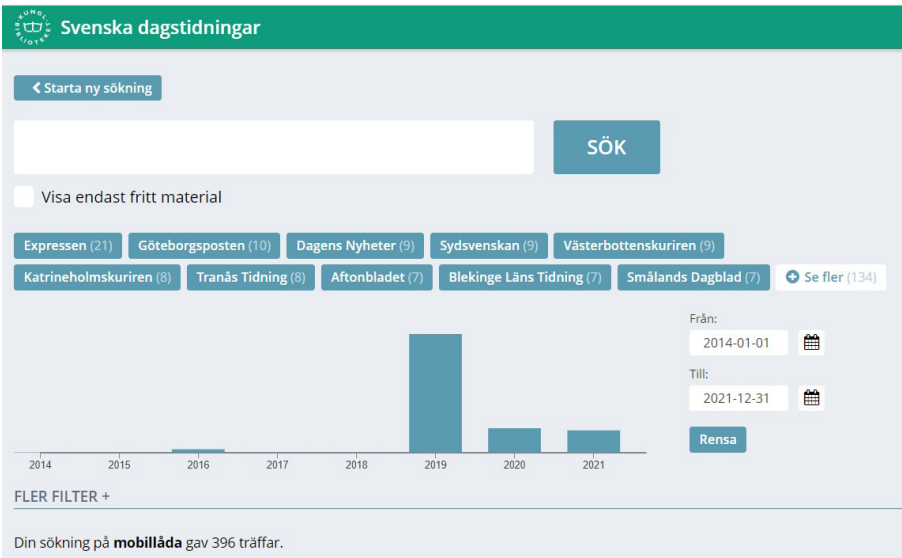


# Method, data, and analytical framework

Our study maps the emergence of a contemporary phenomenon and relates it to cultural and political debates. The research design resembles historical studies using digitised archive material. As Brennen (2017: 101) noted, historians “gather as much documentary evidence as possible” about their topic, “evaluate that evidence for reliability and authenticity”, “interpret the significance and meaning of the evidence”, and “craft stories about their findings”. As with many historical items, abundant evidence is available on the mobile phone box, necessitating selection based on relevance.

The selection of analytical material is based on a three-step search strategy. The first is broad searches on Google, newspaper databases, and social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook) to locate the phenomenon in context and map relevant terms and concepts. We searched keywords both in English and Scandinavian languages (such as “mobillåda”, “mobile box”, “phone basket”, and more). To narrow down the material for textual analysis, the second step was to identify media texts reacting to the CGY announcement. Figure 3.2 illustrates how the announcement triggered commentary and debate.

**FIGURE 3.2** Screenshot of search results for “mobillådan” [mobile phone box], 2014–2021



*Comments:* Results from svenska dagstidningar [Swedish daily newspapers] database (National Library of Sweden), searched 23 April 2022.

The third step was to select the precise sample based on two criteria: 1) whether the mobile phone box was explicitly featured and placed in an ideological or rhetorical context, and/or 2) whether it featured stakeholders contributing to constructing the box as a post-digital artefact.

The analysis of the selected sample is guided by the research question and the theoretical framework of the post-digital, focusing on how the box is framed as a solution to problems inherent to the post-digital condition. Specifically, we discuss how different stakeholders discursively construct the mobile phone box. Discourse analyses map struggles around the meaning of events and objects and how these reflect historical and cultural contexts (Brennen, 2017: 2). The analysis identifies ideological positions in the text, what is considered common sense and “natural”, how texts and objects reinforce consensual interpretations, and which conceptions are challenged. The analysis furthermore includes elements from rhetorical analysis (Brennen, 2017: 216–217), noting how the texts aim to persuade readers. As the analysis reveals, stakeholders appeal to readers through references to facts and scientific evidence, but also by appealing to emotions using humour, irony, and sarcasm. We have translated all quotes not originally in English.

## **Unboxing the mobile phone box: Four positions**

The empirical section identifies significant facets of the CGY debate, pointing to different stakeholders and their discursive stances toward the artefact. Four ideological positions and types of stakeholders are identified.

First, the position and motives of HUI research are explicated. They argued that overuse of mobile phones is associated with mental health issues and pointed to the box as a sustainable solution: You do not have to buy anything this Christmas, you can even make your own box. Second, we discuss the discourses of retailers selling boxes. They promote commercially made boxes and take the Christmas Gift Award literally: You need to buy a box to spend quality time with family over Christmas. Third, we turn to the interventions of connectivity stakeholders – those representing telecommunication or smartphone industries. They oppose the idea that the mobile phone is a problem and point instead to the award as a problem: If you support the box, you suffer from collective moral panic. Fourth, we turn to the discourses of bystanders and commentators in mass and social media. The CGY rapidly became the object of a meta-debate where commentators with various axes to grind exploited the award’s publicity to promote their concerns. The widespread commentary indicates that the discourses associated with the post-digital condition, such as digital overuse, disconnection, and nostalgia for pre-digital artefacts, are well-known cultural phenomena, and that the award plays into an already established discursive landscape in Sweden anno 2019.

## Mental health and sustainability: The Christmas Gift of the Year announcement

HUI Research was founded as Handelsns Utredningsinstitut [Trade Research Institute] in 1968, and they conduct research, investigations, and analyses about trade and tourism (HUI, n.d.). The CGY award was introduced in 1988 to increase publicity around the organisation's Christmas trade forecast (Dagens Nyheter, 2018). The product is chosen by HUI analysts based on market research (Rågsjö Thorell, 2018), and the first award was to the bread-making machine. Given the criteria stipulated by the organisation – the product should be new, have high sales value, or represent the time we live in – it is perhaps no surprise that many CGY products are media or “smart” technologies.

Among the 32 products that have hitherto been announced CGY are, for example, the video camera (1989), the CD player (1991), the mobile phone (1994), the “Internet package” (1996), the computer game (1998), the DVD player (2000), the flat screen television (2004), the audiobook (2006), GPS (2007), the tablet (2010), the smart watch (2014), the robot vacuum cleaner (2015), and VR (virtual reality) goggles (2016). Although the mobile phone box is one out of many technology products that have been appointed CGY, it represents a break with the HUI tradition of commercially pushing new digital consumer products into the market.

In the CGY announcement on 20 November 2019, the HUI website and *Christmas Report* acknowledged structural changes, making the mobile phone box a timely object (quotes derive from their website; see HUI, 2019). “Swedes love their mobile phones”, HUI has asserted, yet, in 2019, more “have opened their eyes to the impact of mobile phones on our lives”. The announcement acknowledges that “there are apps to regulate screen time” but promotes the mobile phone box as “an aid during the times of the day you want to put away your mobile to read a book instead, sleep or spend time with the family”. Although positive functions of online communication are mentioned, a “balance between connectivity and freedom from screens” is needed. Furthermore, excessive phone use is explicitly linked to mental health issues:

Today, 92 per cent of the population over the age of 11 have a smartphone. On average, we spend over three hours in front of screens every day and the use increases every year. At the same time, as the mobile phone constantly demands our attention, we sleep one hour less per night than 100 years ago, and mental illness is increasing. (HUI, 2019)

HUI's arguments problematise the effects on our brains linked to meaningless social media use (we are told that “only one in four Swedes” finds social media “meaningful”). To back up their argument, HUI refers explicitly to popularised research by Anders Hansen, a psychiatrist known to the Swedish public through numerous television and radio appearances (see also Forsler et al., Chapter 5 in this volume). Hansen's book, *Skärmbjörnan: Hur en hjärna*

*i osynk med sin tid kan göra oss stressade deprimerade och ångestfyllda* [*The Screen Brain: How a Brain Out of Synch with its Time Can Make Us Depressed and Anguished*], was also published in 2019, solidifying Hansen's role as an influential commentator. Other factual sources lending authority to the decision are the Internet Foundation and eMarketer.

The impact of the mobile phone on the brain has been highlighted in 2019, in more and more forums. Existing research results have been highlighted and new ones have been added. Books, magazines, TV programmes, and this year's most downloaded summer talk [radio feature with Anders Hansen] have made more Swedes open their eyes to how mobile phones both adapt to and shape our brains. (HUI, 2019)

In addition to problematising negative effects of communication technology, HUI Research uses the award to mark another break with the past. In an interview in *Resumé*, a magazine and website specialising in media and marketing, CEO Jonas Arnberg pointed to how the mobile phone box represents a turn towards sustainability as a critical value (Törner, 2019). From its inception in the late 1980s, the CGY award has been condemned by critics – such as non-profit member organisation Sveriges Konsumenter [Swedish Consumers' Association] – for being nothing but a public relations trick to promote sales. CGY products have been criticised for being expensive (Sydsvenska Dagbladet, 2017) and the award itself for stimulating over-consumption (Dagens Nyheter, 2018). When asked if the mobile phone box (and the 2018 election of the recycled garment as the CGY) represents a “shift from previous years' more commercial products?”, CEO Arnberg replied:

Yes, I agree. We try to reflect the time we live in, and we can see that people are thinking more about the issue of sustainability. Depending on how broadly the concept of sustainability is defined, one could say that the need to disconnect is also about some form of sustainability. (Törner, 2019)

As HUI Research also points out at the beginning of their announcement, “the mobile box can be a box that you buy, already have at home, or manufacture yourself” (HUI, 2019).

By emphasising mental health and sustainability, HUI Research signals responsibility for two contested aspects of consumer capitalism: the scarcity of attention and the scarcity of natural resources, both accentuated by over-consumption of “smart” communication products. While there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of the analysts, the justification includes elements of “greenwashing”. The award gives the impression that “we care” about social problems while obfuscating how HUI Research is associated with a lobbyist promoting trade. Nevertheless, HUI Research helps constitute the post-digital condition by alluding to the benefits of a simpler and more authentic life, where neither connection nor consumption is a condition for health and happiness.

## **Buy a box and be sociable over Christmas: Mobile phone box retailers**

The CGY award became immediately and widely exploited in retailer marketing. Ignoring the make-your-own sustainability argument, producers and retailers latched on to a welcome possibility to increase sales. For example, Swedish online store CDON began selling their mobile phone boxes with direct reference to the award. The company, which also sells mobile phones and other electronic gadgets, offers the box in many designs, including 8 × 15 centimetre black or white wooden cases. In humorous jargon – and with an emphasis on the assumed difficulties of celebrating Christmas without a mobile phone – the company promoted the product as the solution to the problem of mobile phone distraction in social situations:

Now it's time to challenge the whole family for a mobile-free Christmas. Can you hold a digital detox throughout Christmas Eve? No – you may not even use the phone as a timer during the Christmas gift game! One may think a box would be unnecessary to put the phone away successfully. But the fact is that it becomes much easier to not go stare at the screen time after time when it has a special place. Focus on not burning the meatballs and hugging the ones you like a little extra. Just do it! (Retrieved from the CDON website 7 April 2022)

Online retail store *iphonebutiken* also made explicit references to the announcement on their website, where they also sell mobile phones. The retailer's three designs of mobile phone boxes were all introduced with reference to unspecified "research" and "large studies" suggesting that a designated box is needed (Retrieved from the *iphonebutiken* website 7 April 2022). As in the case of CDON's promotion, the problem with excessive use is chiefly constructed as a social one. The box is thus sold as an instrument for reclaiming sociability and taking a temporary break:

Since the iPhone and other smartphones became commonplace, researchers have been fighting for funding to conduct research in the field. The main question has obviously been: How will people ever be able to socialise again, without staring at screens? According to large studies that have been done, the researchers came to the conclusion that a box is needed. (Retrieved from the *iphonebutiken* website 7 April 2022)

One of the boxes sold by *iphonebutiken* is lockable. A more extreme variant of lockable mobile phone boxes is the cage, which comes in many designs. One design, called "Mobile Phone Prison" (see Figure 3.3), is sold by previously mentioned CDON on the premise that mobile phones interrupt social situations, such as parties or dinners. The "prison", according to the e-retailer, allows you to "keep your mobile phone safe" (from burglary, one can assume) as well as to "lock the kids' mobile phones for mobile-free family evenings!" (Retrieved from the CDON website 7 April 2022).

**FIGURE 3.3** “Mobile phone prison”



*Comments:* A lockable cage for mobile phones. The retailer, CDON, markets the product as a “safe” storage of your own – or “the kids” – mobile phone. In addition, the box is promoted as a tool for enhancing family sociality.

*Source:* photo by Trine Syvertsen

Another type is sold by TUPP Reklam, a Swedish advertising profiling company whose lockable cage-looking box holds up to six phones and is equipped with USB sockets for charging possibilities. Albeit focused on the product’s technical qualities rather than its assumed usefulness, the company used the CGY announcement to promote what they call “the mobile phone box 2.0” (Retrieved from the Tupp Reklam website 10 March 2022).

As these examples indicate, there was a tendency in the commercial promotion of the mobile phone box to construct the problem with screen or phone overuse as, first and foremost, a problem concerning interpersonal communication. The mental health aspect – which dominates the CGY announcement and related communication – is less present among those selling both digital and post-digital objects. Hence, the original justification of the award is downplayed. The argument about sustainability is also lost. The presumed solution, in this case, is a commercial consumer product and, in many instances, a product which will get both the phone and the user back in the attention flow after a quick recharge. Rhetorically, retailers refer to

scientific evidence to sell boxes, although references are vague and unspecified. Nevertheless, these stakeholders have an explicit interest in the commercial success of the artefact.

### **Just another moral panic: Connectivity stakeholders**

While some retailers used the award to sell mobile phone boxes, what we term connectivity stakeholders explicitly confronted the message of HUI Research. By connectivity stakeholders, we mean companies in the telecom business which have, although to varying degrees, an economic interest in the *failure* of the artefact. Norwegian-based Telenor, one of the dominant operators in the Scandinavian telecom market, chose a head-on attack: The same day as the HUI announcement, Telenor authored an opinion piece in the tabloid daily *Expressen* (Hamnholm, 2019). Signed by Katarina Hamnholm, trend analyst at Telenor, the article attacked the CGY announcement for “shaming” consumers, making them feel guilty about their phone use. Reflecting on the emerging techlash and disconnective sentiments, Hamnholm identified 2019 as “the most technology-anxious year so far”. Hamnholm argued that anxiety is rooted in misconceptions or “myths” about the negative impact of screen time and a generalised “fear” of all things new. Hence, the mobile phone box is constructed as nothing but a recent manifestation of the long history of media-induced moral panic:

But we humans are still generally afraid of change. Therefore, we easily see the new as a threat. This applies not least to new technology. When the video recorder came on the market, the new technology was quickly painted as destructive. Some years later, videogames came with the same debate about threats and dangers. Now we hear the same show about our mobile phone use. (Hamnholm, 2019)

Although acknowledging that “extreme over-consumption can of course be bad”, the article argues that critique of screen use “makes many people feel ashamed about something they probably don’t have to be ashamed about”. Instead, Hamnholm emphasised the benefits of mobile phone use, including how it helps us “keep in touch with family and friends, learn new things, solve problems, apply for a new job and find a new partner”. She argued that what she calls “the screen time debate” “should not be about time per se, but about how we use it”, thereby diverting blame away from telecom operators and back towards individuals.

Telenor uses various measures to communicate its message, including website items and podcasts. In November 2019, on their Swedish website, the company introduced a podcast series called “Världen har förändrats: Like-raketer och skärmtidsångest – en podd om våra uppkopplade liv” [“The World has Changed: Like Rockets and Screen Time Anxiety – A Podcast about Our Connected Lives”]. In total, nine podcast episodes were published between

November 2019 and April 2020 during a period of “digital backlash”, as Telenor called it. The heading “Remove the mobile phone box – I am actually an adult” on the company website was followed by a short preamble where the mobile phone box is dismissed as not “the right way to go”:

The mobile phone box, or mobile phone basket as it is also called, and screen time has become such a hot topic this year that the mobile phone box has been announced as this year’s Christmas present [of the year]. And it has become increasingly common to present a box and ask guests to leave their mobile phones there. But many do not think it is the right way to go. (Telenor, 2019)

The article features an interview with comedian and author Elinor Svensson, who stated: “No bans please, away with the mobile phone baskets at dinner, we are adults. The solution is not a basket but perhaps rather that we learn to manage life offline and online in one great symbiosis” (Telenor, 2019).

Other stakeholders responded more sarcastically, as also *Resumé* was quick to notice (see Törner, 2019). On the same day as the announcement was made, Elgiganten, one of Sweden’s leading chains in consumer electronics, published a facetious Facebook post declaring that, indeed, the forward-looking company has stored mobile phone boxes for several years. The photo showed a pile of empty cardboard boxes labelled “Free mobile phone boxes” and the words: “Welcome in and pick up your mobile phone box at our place, totally free of charge and first come first served!” (Törner, 2019). Elgiganten, like many other mobile phone retailers (including CDON and iphonebutiken) also sells mobile phone boxes, and their dismissal is playful and ironic. Others went further in ridiculing the mobile phone box and hailing the smartphone as a solution rather than a problem. Responding to the CGY announcement, Swedish telecom company Tele2 published a picture on Facebook, showing a man inside a branded box, with only his legs sticking out. The accompanying text reads:

This year’s Christmas present is here! A mobile phone box for you who want a moment of your own time with your mobile phone, take a break from your relatives with whom you have been hanging out for several hours. Have undisturbed text conversations with friends, enjoy comics, audiobooks and more! Completely unlimited with Tele2’s own mobile box. #unlimited. (Törner, 2019)

The CGY announcement provided business stakeholders with a welcome marketing opportunity but also reflected how the industry counters bad press and defends its interests in the debate about intrusive connectivity. The industry stakeholders openly contested the problem definitions of the two previous groups of actors, arguing that the problem is not overuse, intrusiveness, or sustainability issues, but rather family pressures and an outdated technophobic outlook. Telenor’s defence strategy explicates how the



academic terminology of moral and media panic is effortlessly adopted by connectivity stakeholders with blatant economic interests to defend. Tele2's tongue-in-cheek statement furthermore presumes that the positions in the debate are already well-known, and that humour and sarcasm are effective methods to promote the sale of electronic gadgets.

### **An established field: Puns, memes, causes, and experts**

HUI Research has historically used the CGY award to attract publicity, and the mobile phone box award is no exception. Apart from the stakeholders who have a defined interest in the success or failure of the artefact, a range of actors exploit the publicity of the award to promote concerns of their own. Among the many contributions of bystanders and commentators, four types stand out.

First, there is a range of humorous expressions where different actors tag onto the award to increase interest in their social media messages. Numerous individuals post pictures of mobile boxes and play with puns and memes in a running commentary. Corporate actors with unrelated products use similar tactics; for example, pharmacy company Kronans Apotek published a Facebook post in a humorous tone explaining that their Christmas products come in recyclable boxes that can be made into "a practical mobile phone box" (Törner, 2019). This is perhaps the best indication of the post-digital condition; the disenchantment with the digital is so well established that it can be referenced to promote almost anything.

Second, we see instances of what has been termed whataboutism, defined as "the technique or practice of responding to an accusation or difficult question by making a counter-accusation or raising a different issue" (Dictionary, n.d.). Several commentators in the press used the award to comment ironically on the award as a symbol of what is generally wrong with society. In an editorial in *Dagens Nyheter*, called "The Christmas Gift of the Year is the morality box", columnist Erik Helmersson used the award to criticise moralism and consumerism in general, pointing out that the commercial box might well be replaced by "a shoebox" (Helmersson, 2019). His argument conveniently neglected that this was indeed a purpose of the award in the first place, as Arnberg at HUI Research was careful to point out that consumption is unnecessary: "Of course, you can buy a box that says 'mobile phone box', but I think most people have some kind of box at home that you can use or maybe you can make your own" (Törner, 2019).

Third, and more relevant to the award, are contributions of organisations promoting climate-friendly Christmas gifts. These actors have picked up on the sustainability message while paying less attention to overuse of mobile phones. The Swedish branch of the Red Cross used the announcement to promote their ideas for a sustainable Christmas, including suggestions to make your own mobile phone box, "in handicraft" or "with an old drawer or boxes" (Red Cross, 2019). A (rather cute) 45-second video published on

their Facebook page, Naturskyddsföreningen [The Association for Nature Protection], demonstrates how a mobile phone box can be made of LEGO (Naturskyddsföreningen, 2019). It is suggested that the money saved from the do-it-yourself version be donated to nature preservation, and viewers are invited to post their own ideas.

Fourth and last, the commentary tells us something about who are considered relevant experts in the field. Two days after the award decision, journalist Jan Andersson, in *Göteborgs-Posten*, commented on the contested nature of the object under the heading “The Christmas Gift of the Year Divides the Nation” (Andersson, 2019). Here, Andersson pointed to diverging comments from authors of popular self-help books, who presumably are the most authoritative voices of “the nation”. We already saw that HUI Research referred to Anders Hansen and his popular book *Skärmhjärnan* [*The Screen Brain*] in their justification of the award (see also Forsler et al., Chapter 5 in this volume). Andersson’s article pointed to two other authors of popular books with opposing views. Henrik Pallin is a social worker, educator, and author of the book *Kampen om skärmtiden: Vad varje förälder behöver veta om unga och nätet* [*The Battle for Screen Time: What Every Parent Needs to Know about Young People and the Web*], which was also published in 2019. He represents the techno-optimistic position and is cited as having dismissed the mobile phone box as nothing but – in Andersson’s words – “poorly substantiated moralism”. His arguments are balanced by Andersson with statements from Patrik Wincent, host of the reality show *Lyxfällan* (TV3), therapist, and author of several books about addictive media consumption, including *Digital Diet* and *Nomophobia*. Contrary to Pallin, Wincent is quoted as embracing the mobile phone box as a good solution to the problem of “stress” caused by high levels of mobile phone use.

Andersson’s article ends with five recommendations – delivered by Wincent but familiar from self-help literature – on how to reduce screen time (e.g., “leave your phone at home when going for a walk” and “put your phone away one hour before bedtime”). Clearly, the public commentary fits into a discursive field where already established actors with books to sell are posed against others (also with products to promote) in an established dichotomy. While the self-help authors are constituted as authoritative sources, the political and academic field is largely unrepresented and not called upon to comment. Instead, the self-help tips and messaging imply that if there is a problem, it is yours to solve.

## Concluding discussion

Our overarching goal in this chapter has been to discuss how sentiments related to disconnection and the digital backlash manifest beyond individual motivations and strategies. Against the backdrop of post-digital theory, we asked the following questions:

1. What main problems is the mobile phone box supposed to solve?
2. Which ideological positions are explicated by stakeholders in the CGY debate?

While largely supporting observations in other studies of disconnective technologies, studying the mobile phone box has provided additional cues to the material and discursive manifestations of the post-digital. Our study adds complementary perspectives to the ongoing debate about individualisation and responsabilisation in disconnection studies (see, e.g., Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020; Bagger, Chapter 6 in this volume) by focusing on a means of disconnection that is neither restricted to private use (e.g., personalised self-help apps), nor located on the level of policy (e.g., “right to disconnect” legislation), but rather as a tool for disconnection at the group or institutional level (e.g., in the family or workplace).

We have approached the mobile phone box as a post-digital consumer object based on three dimensions of the artefact: 1) its historical embeddedness in an époque marked by deep mediatization and digital disenchantment; 2) its particular aesthetics and designs, which ultimately constitute the artefact as a “hybrid assemblage” (Thorén et al., 2019: 337), diffusing borders between analogue and digital; and 3) its context of post-digital capitalism, which makes the product relevant and desirable in diverse social settings, ranging from private to public and semi-public spaces. We have argued that the mobile phone box not only deserves attention because it serves as a container and “home base” for the signature technology of our time, but also for sentiments, moralities, and ideologies signifying the post-digital society.

Although disconnection sentiments circulate widely, it is important to investigate where – and whom – such sentiments stem from: to locate digital concerns in specific situations and to explore the relationship between stakeholders’ material interests and symbolic interactions in the public sphere. From our review of existing digital disconnection studies, we can conclude that it is still rare to study how different stakeholders in specific cultural contexts (e.g., Sweden in the late 2010s around Christmas time), discursively position themselves in relation to a specific (low-tech) disconnective technology (e.g., the mobile phone box). By “unboxing” the mobile phone box as a contested artefact whose meaning derives from the public stance-taking of various agents, we add knowledge about what is considered “natural” or “common sense” in the post-digital society. On top of this, we learn about who is

present and who is absent in the debate about digital disconnection. Our analysis discloses that agents with something to *sell* – mobile phones boxes, mobile phones, books, news, pharmaceuticals, and so on – dominate the debate, whereas media researchers, for instance, (see also Forsler et al., Chapter 5 in this volume) and politicians (see Fast & Enli, Chapter 7 in this volume) are far more or completely absent.

The fact that the mobile phone box was appointed as the Christmas Gift of the Year in Sweden in 2019 is evidence of how disconnection sentiments are legitimised by powerful actors. Although our analysis exposes conflicts rather than consensus in terms of problems and potential solutions pertaining to intrusive media, it also reveals how the trope of digital disconnection becomes increasingly mainstreamed by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. In our data, the mobile phone box manifests itself as a cultural referent that many agents, regardless of their attitude towards the object, can decode – and even play with and joke about. Apparently, disconnection discourse has become so well known that even organisations with no direct stake in the telecom market (e.g., non-profit environmental organisation Naturskyddsföreningen and Kronans Apotek) can use the CGY award to promote loosely related – or even unrelated – issues, such as nature conservation or pharmaceutical goods.

Through references to research and experts, HUI Research, retailers, and other promoters of the mobile phone box construct it as a tool for solving health problems (notably brain deficits caused by phone and social media overuse) and sociability (especially loss of interpersonal interaction). Although the focus on interpersonal communication and community was most likely enhanced by the Christmas gift context of the CGY announcement, these problem definitions are familiar from other studies of disconnection discourse, for example, in self-help books (see, e.g., Fast, 2021; Guyard & Kaun, 2018; Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020). Such discursive overlaps indicate, in turn, that the social construction of the mobile phone box does not happen in isolation but is constituted in a discursive field where polarised interpretations of connection and disconnection is already established.

Relatedly, it is not surprising to find that the mobile phone box, like many other historical measures of media regulation (Syvertsen, 2017), was dismissed by connectivity stakeholders and commentators for reflecting technophobia and moral panic (e.g., telecom company Telenor). On this point, we might, however, ask if whether certain connectivity stakeholders are too rash in their dismissal of the object. As has been noted, even temporary “escapes from our digital world” (Humayun & Belk, 2020: 634) might be the recipe for enduring the high levels of connectivity that tech businesses strive to achieve (see also, e.g., Karppi, 2018).

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge funding from the Norwegian Research Council (grant number 287563) for the project “Intrusive media, ambivalent users and digital detox (DIGITOX)” (2019–2024).

## References

- Andersson, J. (2019, November 21). Årets julklapp delar landet [The Christmas gift of the year divides the nation]. *Göteborgsposten*.  
<https://www.gp.se/kultur/kultur/%C3%A5rets-julklapp-delar-landet-1.20616624>
- Ballentine, C. (2018, July 14). Could you make it through dinner without checking your phone? *The New York Times*.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/14/technology/dinner-without-cellphone.html>
- Beattie, A. (2020). *The manufacture of disconnection* [Doctoral dissertation, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Te Herenga Waka – Victoria of University of Wellington, New Zealand].
- Beattie, A., & Cassidy, E. (2021). Locative disconnection: The use of location-based technologies to make disconnection easier, enforceable and exclusive. *Convergence*, 27(2), 395–413.  
<http://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520956854>
- Brennen, B. (2017). *Qualitative research methods for media studies*. Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003122388>
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity Press.
- Cramer, F. (2015). What is ‘post-digital’? In D. M. Berry, & M. Dieter (Eds.). (2015). *Postdigital aesthetics: Art, computation and design* (pp. 12–26). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dagens Nyheter. (2018, November 15). Årets julklapp 2018: Här är prylen som tippas vinna [Christmas gift of the year 2018: Here is the gadget tipped to win]. *Dagens Nyheter*.  
<https://www.dn.se/ekonomi/arets-julklapp-2018-har-ar-prylen-som-tippas-vinna/>
- Dictionary. (n.d.). Whataboutism. In *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved August 16, 2023, from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/whataboutism>
- Enli, G., & Syvertsen, T. (2021). Disconnect to reconnect! Self-help to regain an authentic sense of space through digital detoxing. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 227–252). Oxford University Press.
- Factiva. (2007). *Toys can provide timely distraction*. The Factiva Database.
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnection work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <http://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Fish, A. (2017). Technology retreats and the politics of social media. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 15(1), 355–369. <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v15i1.807>
- Guyard, C., & Kaun, A. (2018). Workfulness: Governing the disobedient brain. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 11(6), 535–548. <http://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2018.1481877>
- Hamnholm, K. (2019, November 20). Årets julklapp vill bara få dig att känna skam [The Christmas gift of the year just wants you to feel shame]. *Expressen*.  
<https://www.expressen.se/debatt/arets-julklapp-vill-bara-fa-dig-att-kanna-skam/>
- Hansen, A. (2019). *Skärmbjörnen: Hur en hjärna i osynk med sin tid kan göra oss stressade, deprimerade och ångestfyllda* [The screen brain: How a brain out of synch with its time can make us depressed and anguished]. Bonnier fakta.
- Helmersson, E. (2019, November 20). Årets julklapp är morallådan [The gift of the year is the moral box]. *Dagens Nyheter*.  
<https://www.dn.se/ledare/erik-helmerson-arets-julklapp-ar-moralladan/>
- Hepp, A. (2019). *Deep mediatization*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351064903>
- Huffington, A. (2015). *Thrive: The third metric to redefining success and creating a life of well-being, wisdom, and wonder*. Harmony.
- HUI. (n.d.). *Om HUI* [About HU]. Retrieved August 16, 2023 from <https://hui.se/om-hui/>

- HUI. (2019, November 20). *Mobillådan är årets julklapp 2019* [The mobile phone box is Christmas gift of the year 2019]. <https://hui.se/mobilladan-ar-arets-julklapp-2019/>
- HUI Research. (2019, November 20). *Julrapport 2019* [Christmas report 2019]. <https://hui.se/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Julklappsrapport-2019.pdf>
- Humayun, M., & Belk, R. (2020). The analogue diaries of postdigital consumption. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(7-8), 633–659. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2020.1724178>
- Jorge, A. (2019). Social media, interrupted: Users recounting temporary disconnection on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119881691>
- Karppi, T. (2018). *Disconnect: Facebook's affective bonds*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Kaun, A., & Treré, E. (2020). Repression, resistance and lifestyle: Charting (dis)connection and activism in times of accelerated capitalism. *Social Movement Studies*, 19(5-6), 697–715. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2018.1555752>
- Kleinman, S (Ed.). (2007). *Displacing place: Mobile communication in the twenty-first century*. Peter Lang.
- Li, J., Pearce, P. L., & Low, D. (2018). Media representation of digital-free tourism: A critical discourse analysis. *Tourism Management*, 69, 317–329. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.06.027>
- Light, B. (2015). *Disconnecting with social networking sites*. Palgrave.
- Lomborg, S., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Advancing digital disconnection research: Introduction to the special issue. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1529–1535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211057518>
- Mannell, K. (2019). A typology of mobile messaging's disconnective affordances. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 7(1), 76–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157918772864>
- Moe, H., & Madsen, O. J. (2021). Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1584–1598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211048969>
- Natale, S., & Treré, E. (2020). Vinyl won't save us: Reframing disconnection as engagement. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(4), 626–633. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720914027>
- Naturskyddsföreningen. (2019, November 20). *Så klart du ska ha en mobillåda!* [Of course you should have a mobile phone box!] [Video]. Facebook. [https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=564224207690853&\\_rdr](https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=564224207690853&_rdr)
- O'Mahony, K. (2019, November 20). Årets julklapp utsedd: mobillådan [The Christmas gift of the year: The mobile phone box]. *Chef*. <https://chef.se/arets-julklapp-utsedd-mobilladan/>
- Pallin, H. (2019). *Kampen om skärmtiden: Vad varje förälder behöver veta om unga och nätet* [The battle for screen time: What every parent needs to know about young people and the web]. Books on Demand.
- Red Cross. (2019). *Tips för en hållbar jul* [Tips for a sustainable Christmas]. Röda Korset. <https://www.rodakorset.se/vad-vi-gor/second-hand/tips-for-en-hallbar-jul/>
- Rågsjö Thorell, A. (2018, November 20). Årets julklapp: Utses av "tomtegrupp" på två personer – skapar PR-boost [Christmas gift of the year: Appointed by "Santa group" of two people – creates a PR boost]. *Resumé*. <https://www.resume.se/alla-nyheter/nyheter/arets-julklapp-utses-av-tomtegrupp-pa-tva-personer-skapar-pr-boost/>
- Sutton, T. (2020). *Digital re-enchantment: Tribal belonging, new age science, and the search for happiness in a digital detoxing community* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, UK].
- Sydsvenska Dagbladet. (2017, November 21). *Årets julklapp – en dyr historia* [The Christmas gift of the year: An expensive story]. <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2017-11-21/arets-julklapp--en-dyr-historia>
- Syvetsen, T. (2017). *Media resistance: Protest, dislike, abstention*. Palgrave.
- Syvetsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The politics of disconnecting*. Emerald.
- Syvetsen, T. (2023). Framing digital disconnection: Problem definitions, values, and actions among digital detox organizers, *Convergence*, 29(3), 658–674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221122910>
- Syvetsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Telenor. (2019). "Bort med mobillådan – jag är faktiskt vuxen" ["Remove the mobile phone box – I am actually an adult"]. <https://www.telenor.se/skarmlivet/mobillada/>

- Thorén, C., Edenius, M., Lundström, J. E., & Kitzmann, A. (2019). The hipster's dilemma: What is analogue or digital in the post-digital society? *Convergence*, 25(2), 324–339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517713139>
- Thrive Global. (2022). *Arianna Huffington's phone bed charging station*. <https://thrivophonebed.com/products/phone-bed>
- Törner, A. (2019, November 20). Årets julklapp skapar förvirring – ”Köper kritiken om hur bra lådan är som symbol” [The Christmas gift of the year creates confusion: “Accepts the criticism about how good the box is as a symbol”]. *Resumé*. <https://www.resume.se/kommunikation/pr/arets-julklapp-skapar-forvirring-koper-kritiken-om-hur-bra-ladan-ar-som-symbol/>
- Vanden Abeele, M. M., & Mohr, V. (2021). Media addictions as Apparategeist: What discourse on TV and smartphone addiction reveals about society. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1536–1557. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211038539>
- Ytre-Arne, B. (2023). *Media use in digital everyday life*. Emerald.
- Yuan, Y. (2021). ‘Think on paper, share online’: Interrogating the sense of slowness and disconnection in the rise of Shouzhong in China. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.) *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 189–224). Oxford University Press.

# The public life of *The Social Dilemma*

*Silicon Valley's mea culpa moment and the rise of tech-dissidents*

MALENE HORNSTRUP JESPERSEN<sup>I</sup> & KRISTOFFER ALBRIS<sup>II</sup>

<sup>I</sup> COPENHAGEN CENTER FOR SOCIAL DATA SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

<sup>II</sup> COPENHAGEN CENTER FOR SOCIAL DATA SCIENCE AND DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

## ABSTRACT

The 2020 documentary film *The Social Dilemma*, produced by Netflix, is one of several examples of Big Tech critiques that have emerged in recent years. At the time of writing, it is the second most watched documentary Netflix has ever released, reaching 38 million viewers in 28 days. The film provides a scathing condemnation of Facebook, Google, and others, and acts as an admission of guilt for former central figures in the industry. The fact that Netflix, a Big Tech company itself, produced the film gives it an ambivalent status. In this chapter, we present a qualitative analysis of how the *The Social Dilemma* was received on social media, comparing its reception in the US and Denmark. We highlight how dominant discourses were composed both of praise for the film's main message as well as critiques of its creators. Such critiques display a widespread scepticism of both positive and negative portraits of Big Tech coming out of Silicon Valley.

**KEYWORDS:** techlash, Big Tech, data ethics, social media, critique

---

Jespersen, M. H., & Albris, K. (2024). The public life of *The Social Dilemma*: Silicon Valley's mea culpa moment and the rise of tech-dissidents. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 67–89). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-4>



## Introduction

How digital devices and platforms impact society is a topic that emerges with increasing regularity not only in public debate and political deliberations, but also in films, theatre, and art. Documentaries concerned with how digital technologies and online platforms play a significant role in our lives often surge in the wake of scandals and controversies such as the Snowden leaks or the Cambridge Analytica files (see Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume), and hence, they play an important role in shaping public debates about digital technologies. In this chapter, we look at the public life of one such documentary film, how responses to it exemplify current public sentiments toward the world of Big Tech, and how discussions about the so-called techlash become framed through the medium of the documentary format.

*The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020) is a self-described documentary-drama hybrid that “reveals how social media is reprogramming civilization with tech experts sounding the alarm on their own creations”, as is stated on the film’s accompanying website ([www.thesocialdilemma.com](http://www.thesocialdilemma.com)). The film has been applauded as a notable public culture example of the so-called techlash, or digital backlash, focusing on the manipulative trade secrets of social media platforms and Big Tech companies. In doing so, the film aims to sound the alarm against the impact that online platforms and digital technologies have on everyday life and urge a move towards more disconnection practices, for instance, turning off notifications and deleting one’s social media accounts. Yet the film has also received a host of criticisms, in some cases from media and social science scholars, as well as some sceptical responses on social media and in the mass media, albeit to a smaller degree compared with scholarly critiques.

In this chapter, we discuss the film as a type of mea culpa tech criticism by the way it puts emphasis on how former tech entrepreneurs and executives, who have transformed themselves into tech-dissidents, in some respect admit their own guilt and complicity, by analysing public responses on social media, as well as reviews and criticisms published in the news media. The question that concerns us is not whether the film correctly analyses Shoshanna Zuboff’s (2019) notion of surveillance capitalism, whether it rightly addresses the current woes of the digital platform economy, nor whether the solutions it proposes can ameliorate the current “crisis of attention” (Pedersen et al., 2021; Williams, 2018) – although these are important discussions. Rather, we are interested in how *The Social Dilemma* exemplifies a wider social concern with digital devices and platforms, and how it can be considered an instantiation of what Phan and colleagues (2022) have described as an emerging “economics of virtue” in the world of Big Tech. Or, in an inversed way, how confessions of former tech employees such as those presented in the film signify what Karppi and Nieborg (2021) called “Silicon Valley dystopianism”, and how public and scholarly responses to the film exemplify the role of documentaries in the debate about digital platforms.

In other words, if digital devices and platforms have become a general matter of concern, to borrow phrasing from Latour (2004), around which discussions, controversies, panics, and critiques are emerging, how does *The Social Dilemma* exemplify and express this? And, equally important, which, if any, public discourses have emerged as responses to the film as indications of public opinion against Big Tech? By investigating the public life of the film in the form of its reception, we aim to show how it taps into a digital backlash zeitgeist, whereby concerns over limiting the use of mobile phones and screens in general become tied to larger political discussions of the business models of Big Tech companies.

The chapter begins with an introduction to the film, detailing its arguments, the characters, and its documentary-drama hybrid style. We then briefly discuss a few criticisms of the film that academic scholars have made in reviews and commentaries. Next, we trace the different public conversations that took place when the film was first made available on Netflix. We do this via three different datasets: first, a preliminary focus group with Danish high school students that gave us a first indication of responses to the film; second, a Twitter (now X) dataset consisting of tweets collected via the platform's API, used to analyse responses to posts made by the profiles representing the film, as well as by searching for central keywords and hashtags in conjunction with the film to elucidate which themes responses on Twitter focused on; and third, a set of news articles from Danish newspapers and media outlets commenting and reporting on the film and responses to it. By analysing these datasets together, we aim to gauge whether it was the messages of the film, or rather its genre or style – and especially the role of tech-dissidents – that primarily prompted public reactions. As a conclusion, we compare these different responses to the film, leading us to a discussion about how the film can be considered a new instantiation of the techlash, namely as a kind of mea culpa, self-referring tech-dissidence, in which tech leaders, testifying to their transgressions, become the symbols of a corrupted industry.

## ***The Social Dilemma* film**

*The Social Dilemma* was directed by Jeff Orlowski, who has also produced and directed two documentaries on climate change. And indeed, Orlowski, along with the main protagonist of the film, Tristan Harris from the Center for Humane Technology, has been known to equate the challenges of social media and the digital platform economy with that of climate change (Harris & Raskin, 2019). *The Social Dilemma* seeks to address a wide and general audience, with the explicit aim of raising awareness about the consequences of the current business models of social media platforms and their parent tech companies. The wish to address a wide audience is perhaps why it was also produced by and launched on Netflix, a somewhat ironic point which we return to later.

The film is divided into two styles or genres of communicating its messages: an interview-based storyline and a fictional storyline. In the former, we are presented with interviews of a range of university experts, former Silicon Valley tech executives, and notable Internet entrepreneurs. This includes a discussion of how psychological and neurolinguistic principles are being applied to capture and retain the attention of platform users, creating a craving for scrolling news feeds akin to that of a drug addiction. The film also addresses questions related to the downstream negative effects of social media, especially for young people, in the form of depression, anxiety, and suicide. In doing so, the film draws on several academic experts from various fields, including Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist at the New York University Stern School of Business, and co-author of *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018); Anna Lembke, medical director of addiction medicine at Stanford University; and Shoshana Zuboff, Professor Emeritus at Harvard Business School, author of the widely read book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). This book describes how Big Tech companies compile the online data of users as behavioural surplus, which is then sold as data commodities. As is well known, Zuboff was by no means the first to make this point (e.g., Couldry & Mejias, 2019), yet the book's huge public reach has made it the face of the new criticism of Big Tech and social media – a critique which *The Social Dilemma* is also a clear-cut example of. Hence, Zuboff's prominent role in the film seeks to give it “academic weight”.

Yet, the gallery of characters who have the most screen time in the interview-based part of the film – and which is arguably also the most interesting – is that of former tech executives and employees who have now become critics of their past employers. The gallery is quite substantial, and includes the following:

- Tristan Harris, former Google design ethicist, co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology
- Tim Kendall, former Facebook executive
- Jaron Lanier, computer scientist and author of *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (2018)
- Roger McNamee, early investor at Facebook and author of *Zucked* (2020)
- Aza Raskin, co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology
- Justin Rosenstein, former lead engineer at Facebook and product manager at Google
- Cathy O'Neil, former Wall Street employee, data scientist, and author of *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016)
- Jeff Seibert, former executive at Twitter, serial tech entrepreneur, and co-founder of Digits

- Chamath Palihapitiya, former vice president of growth at Facebook
- Sean Parker, former president at Facebook
- Sandy Parakilas, former operations manager at Facebook and former product manager at Uber

Through the interviews, the audience is presented with a host of background information about how digital platforms work, how psychological tools are used to retain the attention of people using these platforms, and how Big Tech is intentionally exploiting the seemingly unending craving for scrolling through content on smartphones.

In the fictional storyline, we follow an American family consumed by smartphones and social media. The two main characters are the son (portrayed by Skyler Gisondo) and the daughter (portrayed by Sophia Hammons), who, each in their own way, struggle with constantly being drawn to their phones and confronted with online hate speech and false information through social media. An addition to this storyline is a series of scenes shot within what appears to be a maleficent social media company's algorithm, personified by Vincent Kartheiser, that feeds the son of the family with tailor-made content and notifications aiming to manipulate his attention to fixate on his smartphone. This portrayal of an almost James Bond villain type of evil is, as we show later, the subject of much criticism of the film.

The film ends with the interviewed experts and tech entrepreneurs giving their own opinions on how the growing impact of social media and surveillance capitalism on everyday life can be confronted. Such suggestions are mostly framed as being about setting screen-time limits for oneself and one's family, or about turning off notifications on one's digital devices, thereby limiting the degree of digital distractions one is exposed to. Some suggestions for political reform of the Big Tech industry (e.g., through regulation and taxation reform) are mentioned, but these are generally few and much less concrete than the suggestions for action to be taken by individuals and families.

*The Social Dilemma* is in some respects unique due to its hybrid genre format, but it is also part of a very recognisable trend of tech-critical films in recent years. The 2019 documentary *The Great Hack* delves into the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which created shock ripples throughout the tech world and can be seen as a pivotal moment in the turn towards Big Tech criticism (see also Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume). The 2020 film *Coded Bias* discusses how algorithms are designed with bias flaws and how we might change current algorithmic practices. In a distinctly different genre, *The Circle*, from 2017, is a fictional take on the global reach and power of social media, depicting a young, new employee (portrayed by Emma Watson) at a tech company resembling Facebook, which seeks to become the all-encompassing platform through which people interact, personified by its megalomaniac CEO (portrayed by Tom Hanks). Other films and movies aiming

to showcase the dark side of social media and Silicon Valley include *Terms and Conditions May Apply* (2013), *Citizenfour* (2014), *The Cleaners* (2018), and *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019). These films are each unique in their own way, yet they also represent recognisable genres such as documentaries (e.g., *The Great Hack*), fiction (e.g., *The Circle*), or movies based on true stories (e.g., *Brexit: The Uncivil War*).

*The Social Dilemma* has two design features that are worth noting. First, the film fluctuates between the two storylines of 1) a more classical, testimonial based documentary of experts and insiders telling viewers how the world really works, and 2) the fictional story of a family – exemplifying society at large – being negatively impacted by social media. This fluctuation between a classic documentary and a fictional story makes it difficult to pinpoint what type of film genre the movie follows.

Second, by using the voices of former tech executives and engineers turned ethical thinkers, the film almost resembles a tribunal of former culprits now admitting their guilt. While this angle is meant to convey sensation and uniqueness – the fact that so many former top tech people participate is quite impressive – it also seems like the film’s creators wanted to make the film noticeable simply by showcasing the sheer number of former tech people willing to speak out, without much variation between what these characters have to say.

These characteristics of the film have also been noted by academics responding to it, leading to a range of critiques of its depiction of the impact that the tech industry has on people’s lives. Five of these criticisms are worth noting here. First, with respect to the fictional storyline showing the personified algorithm of a manipulative social media company, critics have noted that the film seems to contradict itself by making this depiction while at the same time claiming that nobody knows what is going on behind the scenes of Big Tech companies and social media platforms (Mansell, 2020). Second, some commentators highlighted that themes such as the working conditions of the employees at Big Tech companies are overlooked (Du, 2021; Murdock, 2020). A third prevalent criticism is that, while the film succeeds in describing the problems and symptoms, it does not offer any real solutions to users apart from a few points of advice, such as turning off notifications (Du, 2021). Fourth, the fact that the film is produced by and broadcast on Netflix – a major global streaming platform – is conspicuous, given its lack of suggestions for broader structural changes with respect to tech policies (Na, 2021). Fifth, the role of former tech executives and employees, turned tech-dissidents, is both a cause for praise and an object of criticism in the eyes of commentators (e.g., Mansell, 2020). As Mansell noted, for instance, the problem is that these tech-dissidents become portrayed as the saviours of our current perils, while they are also the source of that peril to begin with: “the main message is of dystopian individual disempowerment that might be rescued by enlightened technology designers finding their way to the ‘tech for good’ design ethos of a not-so-distant past” (Mansell, 2020: 87).

These critiques indicate that for some observers, there is a paradoxical relation between the kinds of issues that the film focuses on, related to social media and surveillance capitalism, as well as its framing of these issues, and the types of voices represented in the film. In the following section, we outline how we ventured out to study public responses to the film on social media and in the news media.

## Methods and datasets

In our analysis, we draw on three different datasets that complement one another in our attempt to gauge public responses to *The Social Dilemma*: a preliminary focus group, a Twitter dataset from the US and Denmark, and a sample of news media articles. The latter two datasets were limited to 1 September–15 November 2020, demarcating the period from the launch of the film to a point in time when the initial responses to it were ebbing. In this section, we describe our justification for the methods used and the datasets that they produced, as well as how the data collection was carried out. For the purposes of this chapter, we have translated any quotes not originally in English.

### Preliminary focus group

As a preliminary point of departure before our data collection began in earnest, we carried out a short survey and a focus-group interview with five last-year high-school students who had watched the film. We did this short pilot investigation to explore which themes we would start sampling for in the social media and news media datasets, and to contextualise the reactions found online. Since the dramatised elements of the film revolve around the social media use of two young people – the preteen Isla and the high-school student Ben – one of the main target audiences (or, at least, the group identified as most vulnerable) seems to be the younger generations. This is corroborated by a main theme of the documentary being the effect social media has on youth.

The immediate reactions of the high-school students we interviewed in the focus group included that the film was “thought-provoking”, “scary”, “informational”, and “surprising”. In a short survey we sent to the students before the focus group, they all gave the film 4–5 stars on a 5-point scale and indicated that they agreed or highly agreed with the sentiment that the film made them uneasy about their social media use. With regard to negative reactions, the students commented on the dramatised elements of the film, remarking that they found it Americanised and “too much”, “propaganda-like”, and that it “took away from the seriousness of the topic”. However, they did report that the effect was nonetheless captivating and impactful. This is one of the critiques that distinguish reactions coming from the Danish context versus the American context (as shown later). Another critique brought forth by the

students was that the film only showed “one side” of the debate, touching upon the film’s predominant use of tech-dissidents. From these initial findings from the focus group, we compiled three themes that instructed our analysis of the Twitter posts and the news media articles: positive but frightened reactions, critiques of the film, and solutions outlined by the public.

## Twitter dataset

In moving towards gathering a larger body of data, we decided to focus solely on Twitter (now called X),<sup>1</sup> as this platform is designed to share posts publicly and therefore provides a point of departure for gaining an understanding of public responses to the film. It should be noted that each social media platform has a specific demographic of users, and therefore one platform cannot be said to represent public opinion, as such (Rafail, 2018). The demographic on Twitter tends to be educated and urban-based and the platform facilitates a short-text style of posting (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Further, Twitter is known for attracting opinion-makers. We therefore take the reactions of users on Twitter as a tentative proxy of the reactions of opinion-makers and a group of social media users to the film’s critique of social media platforms.

A Twitter dataset was created, containing reactions from Denmark and the US. While we focus on the Danish context throughout and across the different datasets, in the Twitter dataset, we downloaded American tweets as well to gauge the differences and similarities between Denmark and the US, where the film was produced and takes place. The data was downloaded through Twitter’s API, using a Python script to automate the download. It consists of tweets either mentioning “social dilemma”, using the hashtag “#socialdilemma”, or tagging the official Twitter profile of the film, “@SocialDilemma”. The dataset includes posts between 1 September and 15 November 2020, thus spanning from one week before until two months after the launch of the film on 9 September 2020. Tweets were excluded from analysis if they were not written in Danish or English, using Twitter’s own language detector. The dataset was created by using American and Danish location tags on user profiles and, in the case of Denmark, additional tweets written in Danish by users without a location tag were included. This resulted in a dataset of 34,912 tweets from the US and 357 tweets from Denmark.

## Danish news media articles

The final dataset consists of Danish news media articles that either reviewed or reported on *The Social Dilemma*. As traditionally powerful agenda-setting institutions when it comes to public discourse, we deemed it important to include news media articles. We identified and downloaded a total of 22 articles mentioning *The Social Dilemma* from 1 September–15 November 2020. We excluded articles where the mention of the film was part of to-watch lists

with no further commentary. Table 4.1 shows the distribution of the articles among genres.

**TABLE 4.1.** Number and type of news media articles analysed

| Type of article                                                   | N  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Review                                                            | 6  |
| Opinion piece                                                     | 7  |
| Article about the film with expert commentary                     | 1  |
| Other mentions (e.g., reports on Facebook’s response to the film) | 8  |
| Total                                                             | 22 |

**Discourse analysis approach**

In analysing and interpreting the responses to *The Social Dilemma* across these disparate datasets, we employ a discourse analysis approach. We are interested in dissecting (Johnstone, 2017) statements, posts, and comments about the film to understand how individual words come to portray the film in specific ways in public discourse. In doing so, we are particularly interested in those aspects of discourse analysis that focus on word associations (which words appear together) and the sentiments of particular words – positive, negative, or neutral. Word associations guided our readings of the Twitter posts: Tweets containing particular words of interest were randomly sampled and read until no new themes emerged. In this way, we aim to provide a relatively simple, but broad content analysis which applies to both the Twitter data and the newspaper articles and which analyses how individual words and groups of words express specific opinions regarding the film.

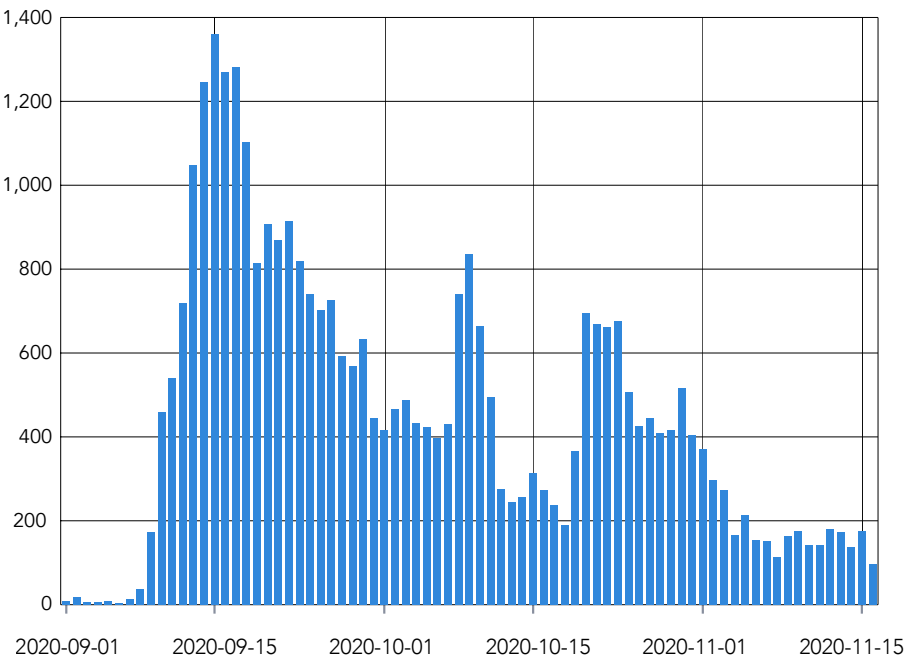
**Responses on Twitter**

In this main section, we outline the results from our analysis of the Twitter dataset we compiled, focusing on three overall types of reactions: positive responses, negative responses, and discussions of solutions to the problem of social media, smartphones, and the crisis of attention. The distribution of tweets in the US and Denmark that we downloaded via the API can be seen in Figures 4.1a and 4.1b. As shown, Twitter attention on the topic peaked around the release of the film in early September, and then waned, with two smaller peaks in the beginning and end of October. This tendency is clearest among the American tweets, which there are more of, but can be seen mirrored in the Danish tweets. As Danish researchers, we were interested in exploring how reactions differed in Denmark versus the US. However, there were far fewer Danish tweets, making substantial comparisons difficult.

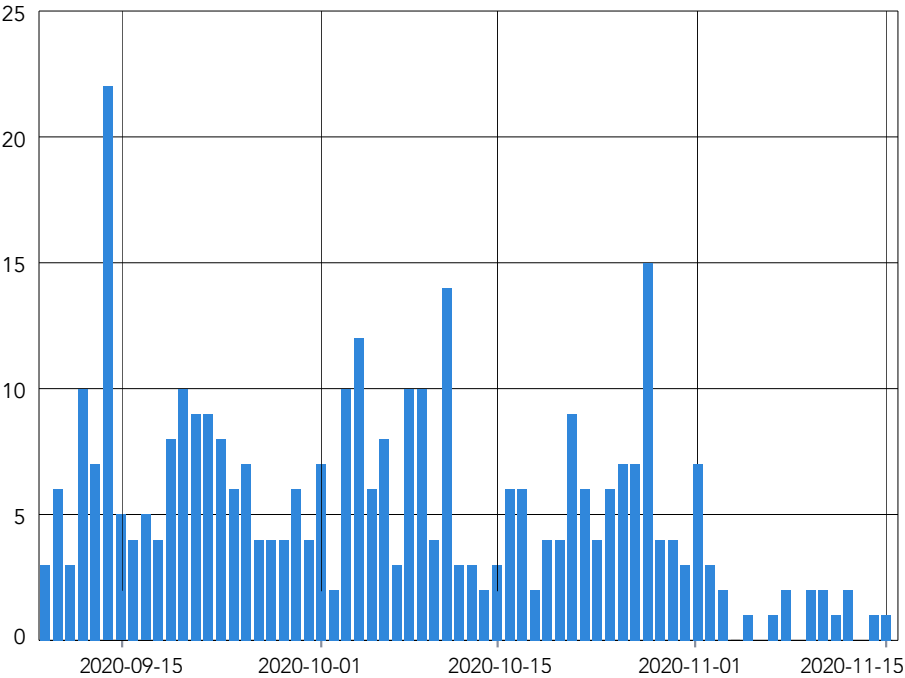


Throughout the analysis, we comment on notable differences, but, as many similarities were also found, the bulk of the analysis is made across tweets from both Denmark and the US.

**FIGURE 4.1A** Number of tweets about *The Social Dilemma* originating in the US



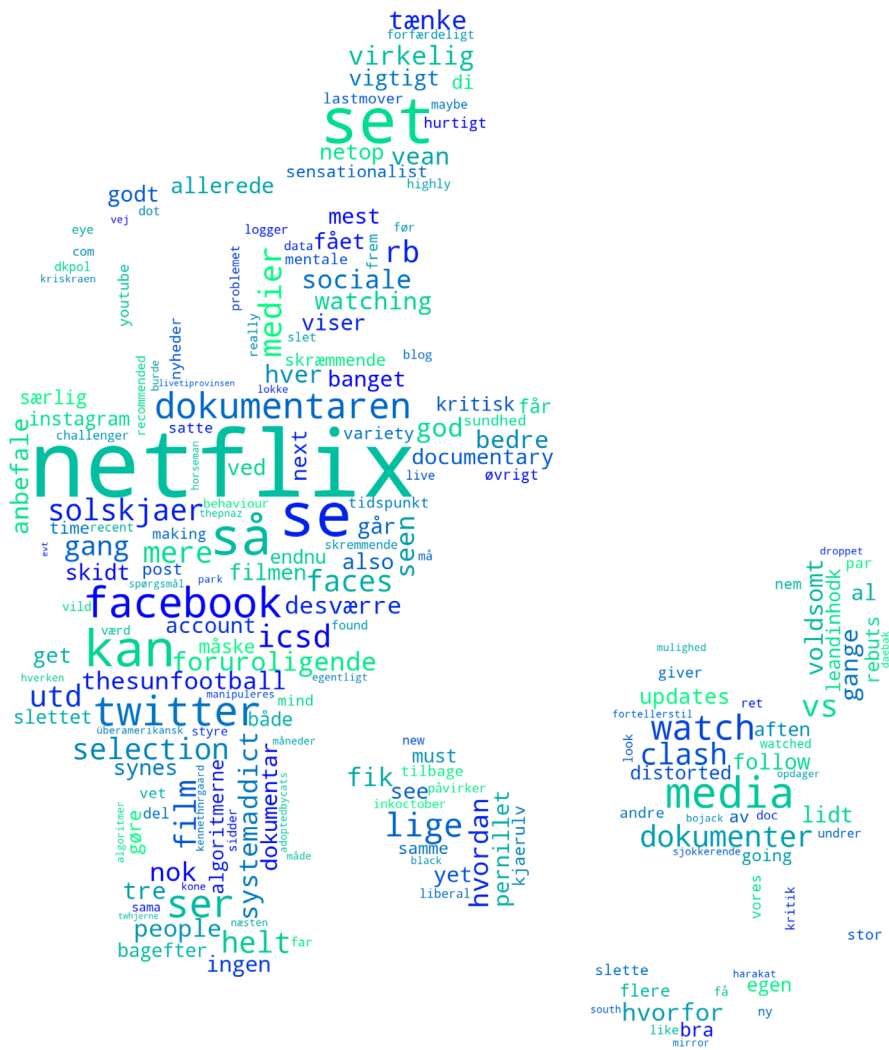
**FIGURE 4.1B** Number of tweets about *The Social Dilemma* originating in Denmark



In doing the analysis, we employed simple word frequency methods to isolate and examine themes in the Twitter dataset, primarily by qualitatively investigating random samples of tweets using the most frequent words or other words we deemed interesting based on our preliminary work with the focus group. While such focused reading of samples drawn from the dataset does not ensure complete representativeness of the data, it does ensure a satisfactory degree of confidence in the validity of the content analysis. Figures 4.2a and 4.2b show the most frequently tweeted words (with common words such as “the” and “and” removed). Retweets are included, meaning that if a tweet has been retweeted many times, the words used will have a higher frequency. We found this to be most representative of the reception, since retweets are often a sign of agreement with or acknowledgement of a sentiment.



**FIGURE 4.2B** The most frequent words in the Danish Twitter dataset



**Comments:** The words used in the frequency analysis of Danish tweets were not stemmed since the number of tweets were too few. The placements of the words do not reflect geographical differences within Denmark.

## Positive responses: Liking the film, fearful of the future

Most reactions on Twitter were positive towards the film. As seen in Figures 4.2a and 4.2b, the most frequent words are, as expected, words like “watch”, “Netflix”, and “social media”. Moving past such generic words, the word “recommend” is the fifteenth most frequently used word among the American tweets, featuring in 1,309 tweets. Reading a sample of tweets using the word “recommend” reveals that most tweeters are either “highly”, “really”, or “10/10”<sup>2</sup> recommending others to watch *The Social Dilemma*. The film is also described as “eye-opening” and “thought-provoking”, and hashtagged as #mustwatch. The word “good” is also a frequent word, used in 1,100 tweets. These tweets comment that *The Social Dilemma* was a “good documentary” or reflect on feeling “good” after deleting social media. On the other hand, some tweets using the word “good” specifically comment that they do *not* think the film was good; however, reading a sample of the tweets using the word “good” suggests this is the minority. Finally, the seventh most frequent word among the American tweets, “everyone”, used 1,662 times, also describes mainly positive reactions. While this word is not as obviously positive as “recommend” and “good”, investigating tweets using this word shows that the majority are recommending “everyone” to watch *The Social Dilemma*, especially expressed in sentiments such as “everyone should watch”, “everyone NEEDS to watch”, and “everyone please watch” the film.

A dystopian perspective is also detectable in the dataset through expressions of alarm. The film is described as “scary” and “disturbing”, or is called a “horror movie” and likened to a “black mirror episode” (a science fiction anthology series that explores potential high-tech dystopian futures for humanity). An experienced loss of authenticity and presence due to the prevalence of social media is lamented, calling social media a “false world” and “not real life”, while quotes from the film are shared along with comments disapproving of what is experienced as superficial attitudes, where things are done “JUST to show it on social media”.

The film also prompted a backlash toward social media companies such as Facebook (mentioned 1,311 times in total in the American and Danish tweets) and Twitter (mentioned 1,201 times). Instagram and YouTube feature as well, although less frequently. Most tweets referencing these platforms are negative and, for instance, encourage people to “deactivate” Facebook along with the hashtag #deletefacebook. Since the dataset is from Twitter, many tweets mentioning Twitter are aimed at not being able to “take the leap with Twitter” (meaning, deleting Twitter) or comment on the irony of posting about a social media-critical film like *The Social Dilemma* on a platform like Twitter – a category of responses we return to later. The overwhelmingly positive – and alarmed – reception of the documentary can be considered an example of how strongly the digital backlash has shaped public discussion. Literature on digital disconnection has shown how the backlash has resulted

in self-help books focused on unplugging as well as digital detox retreats (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). *The Social Dilemma* is also an instantiation of the digital backlash, cementing fear of a world with uncontrolled social media technologies. Further, while digital detox retreats may be for the few, *The Social Dilemma* reached a wide audience as the second most watched documentary on Netflix.

### **Negative responses: Liking the message, disliking the film**

Negative reactions on Twitter are primarily directed not toward the main messages of *The Social Dilemma*, but rather toward the timing of release, the cinematic effects, and the people and the company behind the film. Concerning the timing of the release, the hashtag #lastmover, used in Danish tweets, encapsulates the reaction well. Critical Twitter users comment that they do not understand the hype, given that the messages presented in the film have been widely known for a long time.

Many also criticise the dramatisation of the documentary's message through the fictional storyline. These critiques are especially prominent among Danish tweets, but also appear in American tweets. In general, the Danish Twitter reactions, while limited, are characterised by being more critical of the film than the reactions coming from the US. The critiques centre on the dramatisation “cheapening the narrative” and doing a “disservice to the cause”, and that Netflix, through using a dramatised storyline, is “emotionally manipulating people” with misinformation, which, ironically, is exactly what the film denounces social media for doing.

Critiques of the contributing former tech executives and of Netflix, the company behind the film, focus, among other things, on capitalism as the real root of the negative turn of social media, and they criticise the film and its makers for not highlighting this more. Furthermore, the tech-dissidents featured in the film are called out as also using ads on social media for their companies (such as Asana, co-founded by interviewee Justin Rosenstein) and mocked for their vast fortunes – another not-so-subtle capitalism critique. Moreover, Twitter users point out that the film never mentions or critiques Netflix itself, which is flaunted as a double standard, since Netflix can be considered a Big Tech company in its own right. While these criticisms are much less frequent than the predominantly positive reactions the film received, they reveal a group of reactions in which the tech-dissidents' turn from Silicon Valley entrepreneur to ethical thinker is not accepted, and their tech crimes are not forgiven – at least not until they address the root problem of the system, which from this perspective is considered to be capitalism.

A few critiques centre on the message of *The Social Dilemma* as being a new moral panic seen before with other technologies or types of entertainment. For instance, two Twitter users latch onto a throw-away comment made by Tristan Harris on the lack of moral panic when bicycles became mainstream,

citing this as historically inaccurate. However, these critiques seem to be few and far between, with most users posting about the film – both positively and negatively – accepting its general message of social media as a major societal problem. What is mainly critiqued is the presentation of the message, not the message itself.

## Discussing solutions: Delete, regulate, and joke

As we point out above, some academic reviewers critiqued *The Social Dilemma* for not discussing structural solutions to the problems presented, only urging that social media users should turn off notifications (e.g., Du, 2021). This type of critique can also be found on Twitter (e.g., the 140 tweets using the word “solution” mostly consist of people pointing to this exact issue) but is much less common than posts presenting individual attempts at solutions. In this section, we analyse the public reception of the solutions presented in *The Social Dilemma* and consider actions promoted by social media users themselves.

The two types of solutions presented in the film concern structural, collective action, such as political-level regulation (only mentioned very briefly), and individual action, such as turning off notifications. To investigate how these were received on Twitter, we sampled words used by the actors in the film when discussing each type of solution along with subsequent snowball sampling of related words used concurrently with these in social media posts. Considering only the frequency of these words, we quickly observe that posts concerning individual action are more common than structural, collective actions. Words associated with individual action – the most frequent of which are “delete” (grammatical variations of “delete” and the Danish equivalent “slet” are used 868 times combined), “notification” (261 times), “get off” social media (60 times), and “deactivate” (55 times) – are much more common than words associated with collective action, such as “reform” (78 times), “regulation” (49 times), “tax” (30 times), and “congress” (20 times). This is in line with the concept of responsibilisation, a term used by Syvertsen, Karlsen, and Bolling (2019) to denote the general societal focus on self-regulation of digital use as opposed to placing responsibility with tech companies or political actors (see also Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). The relative proportion of responses concerning individual action versus collective action suggests that Twitter users subscribe to the idea of the individual as mainly responsible for their own digital practices. However, as also noted by Mansell (2020), there is a contradiction between portraying the individual as powerless in the face of social media manipulation, as is done in the fictional storyline of *The Social Dilemma*, and nevertheless placing responsibility for management of social media use in the hands of the same individual.

We now take a closer look at the reactions on social media that refer to different forms of individual action. On Twitter, many present individual

attempts or wishes to combat the problems of social media discussed in the documentary, including quitting accounts, deleting apps, and turning off notifications. The words “delete”, and “notifications” appear in tweets where users express strong reactions of alarm, and where they indicate that they either have deleted or want to delete apps, turn off notifications, and limit their own (and their children’s) screen time. As mentioned previously, Facebook is especially targeted as a platform that social media users (on Twitter) have deleted. Reactions such as “Watched *The Social Dilemma* and turned off all my notifications” and “I’m literally going to delete everything”, or milder versions thereof – such as, “I haven’t deactivated my account, but I deleted the app off my phone” – are common. Those claiming to have acted in this direction call the experience “liberating”, “refreshing”, “peaceful”, and often encourage others to do the same.

Considering mentions of collective action, we find that Danish tweets are characterised by a larger proportion of suggestions aimed at political restrictions of advertisements and tech companies compared with American tweets, followed by the Twitter hashtag #dkpol (used to flag Danish political topics). One post that sparked debate in the comments section promotes the opinion that the public should have real insight into all algorithms used by Big Tech companies in order to make informed decisions. The following commentary includes both marketing people putting forward the idea that knowledge of social media users benefits small business owners, and others suggesting, for example, the prohibition of advertisements targeted at children under the age of 16.

Going through reactions on Twitter, humour plays a big part in the response of Twitter users toward the film. The majority of humorous comments centre on the irony of going on social media to warn about social media (but do so anyway). An example is: “*The Social Dilemma* on Netflix. Watch it. It is scary. (He said in a post on Twitter)”. Humorous comments especially centre on lack of willpower, such as the many posts in the form of “me, also me” memes, where the first “me” watches *The Social Dilemma* and swears off all social media, and the second “also me” immediately checks the Twitter news feed. This type of humour can be considered a reaction to the feeling of being “trapped” (as one Twitter user comments), which the film seems to have induced in many. Moreover, humorous posts like these speak to the contradictory messaging that *The Social Dilemma* has been critiqued for: While individual persons may try to delete Twitter, they soon find themselves right back on the platform, tweeting about exactly that.



## Responses in Danish news media articles

The article dataset from Danish news media consists of both reviews and opinion pieces, as well as other mentions of the film in news articles, for instance, news reports on how Facebook responded to its messages (Jørgensen, 2020; Stisen, 2020).

The six reviews of *The Social Dilemma* in news media are overall positive, giving the film three–five stars out of six (Bjernemose, 2020; Christensen, C.D., 2020; Ernst, 2020; Høeg, 2020; Lund, 2020; Ravn, 2020). The dramatised elements of the film receive some negative comments in reviews, especially that they make the film “too easy” (Ravn, 2020), but the reviewers in most cases think that dramatisation is a necessary (if, perhaps, overly pedagogical) tool for getting the “important” message across (Bjernemose, 2020; Lund, 2020).

The seven opinion pieces in various ways frame *The Social Dilemma* as an important contribution to the public debate around technology use (Calvin, 2020; Mathiesen, 2020; Olsen, 2020; Overgaard, 2020; Pind, 2020; Poulsgaard, 2020).

All types of news media articles seem to accept the overall message of *The Social Dilemma*: that social media has become a severe threat to society affecting democracy, mental health, and individual behaviour in negative ways. The articles reinforce the dystopian view of the present and future with sentences such as “the end of the world suddenly seems like a terrifyingly probable outcome” (Bjernemose, 2020), “We are already in a dystopia” (Høeg, 2020), and “we have only seen the beginning of the violent changes to our society these new technologies can – and will – bring with them” (Poulsgaard, 2020). The main message of the film is also accepted in articles merely referring to the film, where *The Social Dilemma* is used as a reference point to various concurrent political situations, such as political polarisation (Bech-Nielsen, 2020; Vuorela, 2020), Covid-19 misinformation (Türker, 2020), and potential political regulations toward Big Tech monopolisation (Degn, 2020; Haslund, 2020). In these cases, *The Social Dilemma* is highlighted as explaining these trends.

The articles in the news media dataset are also a continuation of the responsabilisation discourse recognised by Syvertsen and colleagues (Syvertsen et al., 2019; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). This is particularly apparent in the closing argument of an opinion piece from the newspaper *Berlingske*:

If a break on the acceleration-society exists, it may be in your hands. It is you who can choose to leave the phone a little more often and recover some of the lost time. [...] But of course, you can also scroll absent-mindedly through life and become a yet more stressed, self-absorbed, and ignorant version of the human you could have been. The choice is yours. (Overgaard, 2020: n.p.)

In another article – a review – the user is first described as “manipulated” and “defenceless” in the face of tech companies’ overwhelming knowledge of addiction behaviour, while, simultaneously, the only hope is to be found in this same user setting boundaries (C. D. Christensen, 2020). In these examples, the discrepancy between the individual as simultaneously helpless and primary agent of change also becomes apparent in the media articles.

The film’s proposed solutions for collective action are appraised in a few of the news media articles. In one, the author considers the suggestions to be promising but only vaguely elaborated on (Lund, 2020), while another author expresses hope that either politicians or the tech companies themselves will “free us from the digital prison” (Olsen, 2020). The most prominent example of a suggestion for collective action is found in the opinion piece by Danish centre-right politician Søren Pind, who expresses worry over the situation and calls for “the common effort of the community, from an evidence-based foundation, to find out how we together can clarify these things and fight a mercantile interest that, at its base, is not in the interest of democracy” (Pind, 2020: n.p.). His call to action is, however, as unspecified as those heard in the film itself. Finally, there are comments in the news media articles that awareness of issues around social media is in itself a solution, indicating a belief, for instance, that being aware of manipulation can help the individual to avoid it (J. K. Christensen, 2020).

The responses to the film in the news media articles – both reviews and opinion pieces – do not voice any substantial critiques of the film itself. While we do observe some criticism in the Twitter dataset, there is a noticeable lack of critical stance towards the framing of the film and the people appearing in the film in the news media articles. The contrasts between the two datasets may be related to the genre difference of social media vis-à-vis news media articles as well as differences in the intended audience. Nevertheless, the lack of critique and debate in opinion-making news articles mentioning the film is striking.

## Concluding discussion

In this chapter, we have discussed how *The Social Dilemma* film has been received – positively and negatively – by academic scholars, in news media reviews and opinion pieces, and on Twitter. We have done so through surveying and analysing the material we have collected in the form of scholarly and media reviews, and data from Twitter as indicative of public responses to the film, backed up by a preliminary focus group of Danish high-school students, from which we gained an initial understanding of the issues and critiques that could be examined in the film.

While critics of the film have acknowledged that it adds important insights to the public conversation around the power of social media platforms (e.g., Mansell, 2020), academic critics seem to suggest that it fails on several fronts in communicating its messages: first, in terms of sending contradictory messages

(e.g., whether anyone knows who is in control of social media platforms); second, by overlooking central issues (such as conditions of workers in the tech industry); third, by not suggesting serious and systemic solutions to the issues it raises; and finally, that the agency of users is belittled in favour of the ethical design thinking of former executives turned tech-dissidents, who were part of designing these systems in the first place.

The public responses collected from Twitter were predominantly very positive towards the film. While the aesthetics of the film were found to be scary to some, it was also seen as positive in terms of being a welcome alarm and awareness-raiser against the evils of surveillance capitalism and the power of social media platforms. A limited number of the public responses were also critical of the film's tendency to place responsibility onto the individual users of platforms, rather than addressing structural issues. In conjunction with this point, some online comments also questioned whether the so-called "tech bros" were the people best suited to propose any solutions to the problem, as they (in the case of Justin Rosenstein) were still making use of online ads and benefitting from the wealth gained in their current and former tech jobs. This point to some extent mirrors the academic critiques. Finally, some online commentators used irony to respond to the film, as an affective way to deal with what can only be taken to be a form of apathy: that the messages of the film are real and serious, but that in commenting on the film, they are further being active on Twitter, and therefore still engulfed in the world of social media.

The news media reviews and opinion pieces were almost entirely positive towards the film, accepting its messages concerning the problems of social media and Big Tech companies. The lack of critical reflections about the framing of the film and its stylistic choices stands in contrast – at least to a certain extent – to the more varied types of responses found on Twitter, and what we gleaned from the preliminary focus group with the high-school students.

In conclusion, we might say that as a case of tech criticism, *The Social Dilemma* serves as an example of critique turned into a socio-public dramatisation, placing former tech culprits in the role of saviour against the rampant surveillance capitalism that Silicon Valley continues to spew. The film's messages were indeed seen as being on point and accepted across Twitter and news media outlets. A few responses from scholars, and some responses on Twitter, do indicate that the film is considered a problematic instance of the techlash, since its main protagonists were culprits in creating the many problems facing us in this current moment in time. And, it might be added in a more paraphrased manner, that some members of the public consider the self-proclaimed (big) tech-dissidents as also leveraging a dystopian portrayal of all things related to online platforms to promote their own messages (see also Karppi & Nieborg, 2021). Yet, these critiques were few and sparse compared to how audiences in general welcomed the film's messages. Taking

the fear and the backlash toward social media platforms that currently exist in society into account, the exaggerated drama was accepted and even embraced by the general public as a welcome warning. As an example of how social media platforms and surveillance capitalism exist as a general societal matter of concern (Latour, 2004), *The Social Dilemma* shows how public stances towards these issues are responsive to alarms about the dangers of online platforms, yet with a detectable public scepticism about who delivers these messages and how they do so.

## Acknowledgements

The research underpinning this chapter was carried out at the Copenhagen Center for Social Data Science (SODAS) at the University of Copenhagen as part of the project “The Political Economy of Distraction in Digitized Denmark (DISTRACT)”, which has received funding through a H2020 European Research Council grant (no. 834540).

## References

- Bech-Nielsen, P. C. (2020, October 11). Peter Christian Bech-Nielsen: Algoritmerne er som steroider for både den venstre- og højreorienterede identitetspolitik [Peter Christian Bech-Nielsen: The algorithms are like steroids for both the left and right-wing identity politics]. *RÆSON*. <https://www.raeson.dk/2020/peter-christian-bech-nielsen-algoritmerne-er-som-steroider-for-bade-den-venstre-og-hojreorienterede-identitetspolitik/>
- Bjernemose, M. S. (2020, September 29). Netflixdokumentaren 'The Social Dilemma' viser, hvordan techvirksomhederne udnytter vores hjerner [The Netflix documentary 'The Social Dilemma' shows how tech companies exploit our brains]. *Information*. <https://www.information.dk/kultur/anmeldelse/2020/09/netflixdokumentaren-the-social-dilemma-viser-hvordan-techvirksomhederne-udnytter-vores-hjerner>
- Calvin, B. (2020, November 18). Adm. direktør: Her er Bidens største udfordring [CEO: Here is Biden's biggest challenge]. *Politiken*. <https://politiken.dk/debat/art8002379/Her-er-Bidens-st%C3%B8rste-udfordring>
- Christensen, C. D. (2020, September 23). Derfor giver ny Netflix-dokumentar dig lyst til at smide din telefon ud ad vinduet [This is why a new Netflix documentary makes you want to throw your phone out of the window]. *TV2*. <https://underholdning.tv2.dk/viralt/2020-09-23-derfor-giver-ny-netflix-dokumentar-dig-lyst-til-at-smide-din-telefon-ud-ad-vinduet>
- Christensen, J. K. (2020, October 6). Netflix-dokumentar er et uhyggeligt indblik i techgiganternes maskinrum [Netflix documentary provides a scary insight into the control room of the tech industry]. *Kristeligt Dagblad*. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kultur/netflix-dokumentar-er-et-uhyggeigt-indblik-i-tech-giganternes-maskinrum>
- Couldry, N., & Mejias, U.A. (2019). *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford University Press.
- Degn, A. (2020, October 13). Rapport fra den amerikanske kongres skaber momentum for opgør med techgiganternes monopol [Report from the American Congress creates momentum for a revolt against the tech giants' monopoly]. *Information*. <https://www.information.dk/udland/2020/10/rapport-amerikanske-kongres-skaber-momentum-opgoer-techgiganternes-monopol>
- Du, S. (2021). Reimagining the future of technology: “The Social Dilemma” review. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 177, 213–215. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04816-1>

- Ernst, M. J. (2020, November 27). Filmanmeldelse – The Social Dilemma [Film review – The Social Dilemma]. *Version2*. <https://www.version2.dk/holdning/filmanmeldelse-social-dilemma>
- Haidt, J., & Lukianoff, G. (2018). *The coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. Penguin.
- Harris, T., & Raskin, A. (2019). *A new agenda for tech* [Video]. Center for Humane Technology. <https://humanetech.com/newagenda/>
- Haslund, A. (2020, October 19). Nyt EU-forslag vil begrænse sociale medie-giganter brug af algoritmer [New EU proposal will limit the social media giants' use of algorithms]. *Computerworld*. <https://www.computerworld.dk/art/253820/nyt-eu-forslag-vil-begraense-sociale-medie-giganter-brug-af-algoritmer-plattformene-skal-staa-til-ansvar-for-hvordan-de-udvaelger-og-praesenterer-indhold>
- Høeg, M. (2020, October 30). Ny dokumentar: De sociale medier har uhyggeligt meget på samvittigheden [New documentary: Social media have a scary amount of things on their conscience]. *Berlingske*. <https://www.berlingske.dk/content/item/1515967>
- Johnstone, B. (2017). *Discourse analysis*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Jørgensen, S. (2020, October 6). Facebook kritiserer Netflix-dokumentaren "The Social Dilemma" [Facebook criticizes the Netflix documentary "The Social Dilemma"]. Mobil.nu. <https://mobil.nu/it-tele/facebook-kritiserer-netflix-dokumentaren-the-social-dilemma-115001>
- Karppi, T., & Nieborg, D. B. (2021). Facebook confessions: Corporate abdication and Silicon Valley dystopianism. *New Media & Society*, 23(9), 2634–2649. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144482093354>
- Lanier J. (2018). *Ten arguments for deleting your social media accounts right now*. Henry Holt and Company.
- Latour, B. (2004). Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry*, 30(2), 225–248. <https://doi.org/10.1086/421123>
- Lund, J. (2020, September 22). Din Facebook styres af tre mand og en dukke [Your Facebook is controlled by three men and a doll]. *Kommunikationsforum*. [https://www.kommunikationsforum.dk/artikler/Drop-mobil-en-indfoer-dataskat-forbyd-koebt-personalisering?fb\\_comment\\_id=3669482659730714\\_3675937939085186](https://www.kommunikationsforum.dk/artikler/Drop-mobil-en-indfoer-dataskat-forbyd-koebt-personalisering?fb_comment_id=3669482659730714_3675937939085186)
- Mansell, R. (2020). The Social Dilemma: A contradictory narrative about platform power. *The Political Economy of Communication*, 8(2), 82–88. <https://www.polecom.org/index.php/polecom/issue/view/19>
- Mathiesen, J. (2020, October 7). Det sociale dilemma [The social dilemma]. *Ugeavisen Bramming*. <https://ugeavisen.dk/bramming/artikel/det-sociale-dilemma>
- McNamee, R. (2020). *Zucked: Waking up to the Facebook catastrophe*. Penguin.
- Murdock, G. (2020). Missing in action: Silences and evasions in The Social Dilemma. *The Political Economy of Communication*, 8(2), 89–92. <https://www.polecom.org/index.php/polecom/issue/view/19>
- Na, Y. (2021). The Social Dilemma's dilemma: Challenging and reproducing social media myths. *The Political Economy of Communication*, 8(2), 98–103. <https://www.polecom.org/index.php/polecom/issue/view/19>
- Olsen, N. B. (2020, November 6). Euroman weekend: "Jeg lider af det, man i folkemunde kalder 'digital paranoia'" [Euroman weekend: "I suffer from what one colloquially calls 'digital paranoia'"]. *Euroman*. <https://www.euroman.dk/blog/euroman-weekend-jeg-lider-af-det-man-i-folkemunde-kalder-digital-paranoia>
- O'Neil, C. (2016). *Weapons of math destruction: How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. Harvard University Press.
- Orlowski, J. (Director). (2020, September 9). *The Social Dilemma* [Film]. Exposure Labs; Agent Pictures; Agent Pictures; The Space Program.
- Overgaard, N. (2020, October 18). Du kan selvfølgelig også scrolle dig åndsfraværende gennem livet: Valget er dit [You can of course also scroll absent-mindedly through life: The choice is yours]. *Berlingske*. <https://www.berlingske.dk/content/item/1512143>
- Pedersen, M. A., Albris, K., & Seaver, N. (2021). The political economy of attention. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 50, 309–325. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-101819-110356>

- Phan, T., Goldenfein, J., Mann, M., & Kuch, D. (2022). Economies of virtue: The circulation of 'ethics' in big tech. *Science as Culture*, 31(1), 121–135.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2021.1990875>
- Pind, S. (2020, October 17). Jeg bruger timer på Facebook, Instagram og Twitter: Men jeg er i stigende grad bekymret [I spend hours on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter: But I am increasingly worried]. *Berlingske*. <https://www.berlingske.dk/content/item/1512372>
- Poulsgaard, K. P. (2020, October 11). Opråb fra unge tech-genier: Facebook, TikTok og Twitter er en trussel mod vores verden: [Alert from young tech-geniuses: Facebook, Tiktok and Twitter are a threat to our world]. *Dagbladet*. <https://dbrs.dk/artikel/opr%C3%A5b-fra-unge-tech-genier-facebook-tiktok-og-twitter-er-en-trussel-mod-vores-verden>
- Rafail, P. (2018). Nonprobability sampling and Twitter: Strategies for semibounded and bounded populations. *Social Science Computer Review*, 36(2), 195–211.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393177094>
- Ravn, D. F. (2020, September 16). 'The Social Dilemma': Denne Netflix-dokumentar kan få dig til at slette dine sociale medier ['The Social Dilemma': This Netflix documentary can make you delete your social media]. *Soundvenue*. <https://soundvenue.com/film/2020/09/the-social-dilemma-denne-netflix-dokumentar-kan-faa-dig-til-at-slette-dine-sociale-medier-421298>
- Smith, A., & Anderson, M. (2018, March 1). *Social media use in 2018, Appendix A: Detailed table*. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/03/01/social-media-use-2018-appendix-a-detailed-table/>
- Stisen, H. (2020, October 5). Kritisk Netflix-dokumentar skaber debat og modangreb. [Critical Netflix documentary stirs debate and counter-attacks]. *DR*.  
<https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/kultur/kritisk-netflix-dokumentar-skaber-debat-og-modangreb-den-giver-et-forvraenget-billede>
- Syvrtsen, T., & Enli, G. (2019). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Syvrtsen, T., Karlsen, F., & Bolling, J. (2019). Digital detox på norsk [Digital Detox in Norwegian]. *Norsk Medietidsskrift*, 26(2), 1–18.  
<https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN.0805-9535-2019-02-02>
- Türker, S. (2020, September 26). Et nyt fænomen følger med coronavirus – og det er næsten lige så farligt som sygdommen selv [A new phenomenon follows the coronavirus – and it is almost as dangerous as the disease itself]. *Berlingske*.  
<https://www.berlingske.dk/content/item/1506565>
- Vuorela, M. (2020, October 31). Valg i Midtimellemstrup [Election in Inbetweenville]. *Information*, 6.
- Williams, J. (2018). *Stand out of our light: Freedom and resistance in the attention economy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Public Affairs.

## Endnotes

1. Since the posts we analyse were made on the platform X while it was called Twitter (the shift happened July 2023), we refer to the platform as Twitter in this chapter.
2. All citations from Twitter are condensed or paraphrased versions of the original posts to protect the identity of the Twitter account owners.

# Detoxing the brain

*Understanding digital backlash in the context of the media effects tradition*

INGRID FORSLER,<sup>1</sup> CARINA GUYARD,<sup>1</sup> & LINUS ANDERSSON<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> SCHOOL OF CULTURE AND EDUCATION, SÖDERTÖRN UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

<sup>11</sup> SCHOOL OF HEALTH AND WELFARE, HALMSTAD UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

## ABSTRACT

In the public debate, problems due to excessive use of digital media are often explained with reference to neurological functions and addressed through calls for self-regulation. This digital backlash and the desire to disconnect from the digital environment can be understood as the latest expression of the perennial concern with adverse media effects. For decades, media and communication research has dealt with the question of what the media do to us, pointing out the complex entanglement of social, psychological, technological, political, cultural, and economic aspects that are part of the question. The difficulties involved in reaching any absolute conclusions have motivated critical media studies to formulate different research problems and thus risking missing the opportunity to make an important contribution in one of the more pressing public debates of our time. Drawing on Latour's distinctions between "matters of facts" and "matters of concern", in this chapter, we suggest that critical media and communication scholars ought to treat media effects as a matter of concern to remain a relevant actor in the public debate about problematic media use.

**KEYWORDS:** media effects, digital backlash, pop neuroscience, Latour, screen time

---

Forsler, I., Guyard, C., & Andersson, L. (2024). Detoxing the brain: Understanding digital backlash in the context of the media effects tradition. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 91–108). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-5>



## Introduction

In May 2023, the Swedish government decided to halt the proposal for a new national digitalisation strategy for schools in Sweden. This marked a paradigm shift in the official education policy: In 2017, the strategy declared that Swedish schools should be world-leading in facilitating the opportunities of digitalisation (Ljungqvist & Sonesson, 2022), and the proposal for the following strategy continued in the same spirit. According to Swedish school minister Lotta Edholm, a central argument for stopping the new strategy was that the immense criticism from paediatricians and brain scientists had not been considered in the development of the strategy. This motivated a second round of consultation and, based on the comments from 52 institutions and organisations, it was withdrawn. While some universities, as well as the Swedish Media Council, were invited to comment on the strategy, the call specifically asked for input on “the cognitive development, health, and well-being of students” in relation to digital tools (Government Offices of Sweden: 1). Institutions related to neuroscience, paediatrics, and psychology were hence regarded as “the most important consultation bodies” in this process (Letmark, 2023). In addition to the official comments from the consulting organisations, two researchers in neuro and cognitive sciences, together with the head of a brain research institute, published an op-ed where they deemed the proposed strategy a “risky experiment” (Thorell et al., 2023). Following the withdrawal of the strategy, representatives from these fields are frequently interviewed, while arguments from other consulting bodies, which addressed the lack of perspectives on media literacy and children’s digital rights in the strategy, are not even mentioned in the coverage.

Why are critical media studies researchers not more visible in the public debate about school digitalisation? Are they not invited? Or are they not interested in the topic? In this chapter, we discuss how neuropsychologists, rather than media scholars, have become the go-to public experts on digital media use and important actors in what can be described as a digital backlash, at least when young people are considered. We further relate this shift to the tradition of media effects research by suggesting that the arguments underpinning the current concerns regarding media use are rooted in the premise that exposure to media can have an adverse impact on an individual’s behaviour or beliefs. Here, the insights from critical media studies could help nuance and avoid simplistic notions of media effects, but media researchers could also take notice of how pop neuroscience is able to seriously engage with public concern over digital media use, and thus make itself relevant.

In this chapter, we focus on the media debate in Sweden, where representatives from neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and medicine (referred here to as pop neuroscience) have come to dominate the public discourse about digital media use. Even though our examples are from Sweden, the debate is an indicator of a global phenomenon, namely the widespread concerns about the

negative effects of constant connectivity and availability afforded by online media, particularly smartphones (see, e.g., Korte, 2020). The current “screen time panic” (Forsler & Guyard, 2020) is often self-perceived and encompasses anyone with an assumed problematic media use (although children and adolescents, with developing brains, are the main objects of concern; see, e.g., Choudhury & McKinney, 2013; Mills, 2014). People are worried about their own, and others’, almost compulsive use of online media, and psychological research in this area maintains that in extreme cases, problematic Internet use may result in symptoms associated with substance-related addictions (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). While clinical diagnoses are rare, the notion of smartphone addiction has become common in public debate (Kardefelt Winther, 2017; Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021), along with concerns regarding impoverished sociality, diverse health problems (both physical and mental), and shortfalls in cognition, such as procrastination and attention deficit (Meier, 2022; Syvertsen, 2017).

### **Pop neuroscience and media effects – the case of Sweden**

One of the first cases in Sweden where brain researchers entered the public debate over problematic media use was in 2012, when a group of neuroscientists from Karolinska Institute criticised a report from The Swedish Media Council that argued that although aggressive behaviour and gaming might correlate, there is no evidence that videogames alone cause aggression (Statens medieråd, 2011). In the report, the media researchers highlighted the weaknesses of previous studies conducted in this area, for instance, that they have excluded control variables such as sociodemographic or other contextual factors that might contribute to aggressive behaviour. In an op-ed article (Olsson et al., 2012), the Karolinska Institute scientists accused the report of being biased and that the Swedish Media Council adapted to the interests of the gaming industry. In contrast to the arguments presented in the report from the Media Council, the Karolinska Institute scientists claimed that there is in fact strong evidence that playing violent videogames affects the brains of young people and might cause aggression.

A few years later, the concerns about the effects of media on young people shifted focus from aggressive behaviour to cognition and the question of school digitalisation. In 2017, the liberal politician and writer Isak Skogstad argued, with reference to findings from neuroscience, that we should “throw the computers out of the classroom”. In the article, he maintained that the part of the brain that regulates children’s ability to plan ahead and consider consequences is not fully developed, and therefore, it is “rational to assume that children always will prefer Snapchat over algebra” (Skogstad, 2017). Also, Torkel Klingberg, professor of cognitive neuroscience and one of the most prominent voices of criticism against the new school digitalisation strategy, compared school digitalisation with the introduction of pharmaceuticals

and stated that while the latter is subject to rigorous testing, the introduction of computers in schools is proceeding “blindly” (Klingberg, 2019). His main concern, which he repeated in a number of debate articles, is that the use of digital technologies in the classroom might cause an information overload that harms the working memory capacity of students (e.g., Lerner, 2019).

School digitalisation is, however, not the only threat to the brains of young people. Their private media use is also a source of concern for parents, teachers, policymakers, and other interest groups, since excessive screen time is believed to have a negative impact on well-being and mental health. This idea has resulted in a growing market for self-help literature providing brain-based strategies to handle unhealthy media use, for children as well as adults. Without doubt, psychiatrist Anders Hansen has established himself as the most prominent expert in this area in Sweden. In 2019, he published a book about “the screen brain”, *Skärmbjärnan*, which became first a national and then an international bestseller, translated to over 20 languages. Throughout the book, he warns about digital media, particularly mobile phones, that he claims are addictive and have negative effects on well-being, sleep, physical activity, concentration, memory, self-esteem, and learning abilities. That same year, he hosted the first of three seasons of a popular television series about the brain on SVT, the Swedish public service broadcaster, which, among other topics, addressed the effects of digital media use on the brain (ITV Studios Sweden, 2019–2023). In 2021, Hansen’s book *Skärmbjärnan* was adapted for a younger audience, and all schools in Sweden are offered free copies of this book through a collaboration with an organisation promoting healthy living for children (SCRIIN, 2023).

Another digital media self-help expert with a strong media presence is Sissela Nutley, a cognitive neuroscientist who in 2019 published a bestselling book about digital distractions. The book made her a recurring guest on television sofas around the country, where she warned against the dangers of too much screen time. Like Hansen, she is concerned about the addictive behaviour especially young people are developing in relation to smartphones, but she also discusses harmful *content*, such as violence and pornography. Nutley is also one of the initiators of the organisation Arts & Hearts, which aims to improve mental well-being among youth through culture and entertainment, and which was one of the institutions invited to comment on the digitalisation strategy. Arts & Hearts offers online learning material about how to balance digital media use with regard to mental well-being and schoolwork, consisting of short fictional video stories, filmed interviews, and classroom exercises. The organisation has also developed an app where users can self-assess how much time they spend online and receive “strategies for well-being and productivity in school and at work” and a musical aimed at school children. The latter was promoted as a “contemporary reflection over how our analogue lives and relations become digitalised and how this affects the brain” (Arts & Hearts, 2023).

As described in the introduction to this chapter, the concerns about how digital media affects the growing brain have also had an impact on education policy in Sweden. In addition to the withdrawal of the digitalisation strategy, the national Education Act was rewritten in 2022 to allow schools to prohibit smartphones in the classroom, in order to “prevent disruptions in teaching [translated]” (Swedish Code of Statutes: §4b). What we are witnessing is an upcoming digital backlash, at least when children and adolescents are considered. This digital backlash is, as described above, motivated with reference to neuroscience research that illustrates the position of brain-based perspectives in the public debate about potential harms with digital life. With few exceptions, official institutions, from the Ministry of Education to public service television, turn to brain science for guidance on matters otherwise categorised as social or cultural. Furthermore, when representatives from the social sciences are indeed consulted, as in the report from the Swedish Media Council, these actors tend to downplay the question of the relationship between media exposure and negative behaviour by exposing the methodological shortcomings of much of this research. In the following, we develop further how media effects have been treated in media research.

## **Media effects – a contested concept**

It is well-documented how media research in the twentieth century was primarily characterised by an effects-oriented approach, which involved conducting experimental studies within controlled laboratory environments. This approach often adhered to a linear model of the communication process (see, e.g., Livingstone, 1996; McQuail, 2000). However, as the assumptions about stimulus-response models were subjected to empirical observations in natural settings, it turned out to be difficult to detect effects on individuals caused by media exposure (Couldry, 2019; McGuire, 1986). Studies found “intervening factors” between media and the receiver, thereby questioning the influencing role of the media, suggesting, for example, that an individual’s previous knowledge and psychological predispositions may modify the intended meaning of a media message (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This led to a critique against effects research within critical media studies, and this previously dominant paradigm was gradually supplemented with other, more constructivist and critical, approaches.

The status of effects research in contemporary media studies can be understood as either an epistemological or an ontological problem. For media researchers who find it relevant to discuss media effects, the main question is epistemological and concerns the development of methods to measure media exposure. As Valkenburg and Peter (2013) have argued, to be able to evaluate media effects, it is crucial that the measurement of media exposure is reliable and valid. However, most of these studies rely on self-reported data that tend to be imprecise due to cognitive or motivational reasons. On top of that, the

proliferation of ubiquitous and mobile media technologies has made it almost impossible to estimate the degree of media exposure.

The media-saturated society of today can also be framed as an ontological problem that departs from the question of whether specific media effects are a relevant topic of study at all. Following the past decade's interest in "mediatisation" within media studies (e.g., Couldry & Hepp, 2016; Hjarvard, 2013; Lundby, 2009), it has become common to deny possibilities to separate specific individual responses to media exposure or use. Mediatisation theory perceives contemporary societies as "permeated by the media, to the extent that the media may no longer be conceived as being separate from cultural and social institutions", and therefore, the media cannot be "considered to be the independent variable that affects the dependent variable: the individual" (Lundby, 2009: 2). The implication here is not the need for methodological advancements to study media effects, as when epistemological issues are raised, but rather a dismissal of the very idea that media have direct effects that *can* be studied.

In academia, according to John Durham Peters (2017: 11), it is "a regular sport to contrive doctrines that nobody believes and attribute them to one's enemies", and effects research has become one such slur that is used to indicate a naïve understanding of media as having the power to directly influence the behaviour or beliefs of an audience. Indeed, as Sonia Livingstone has argued, the term "effect" is seldom used within most contemporary media research because of its association with a research tradition based on laboratory experiments and behaviouristic methods that "presumes the public to be a gullible mass, cultural dopes, vulnerable to an ideological hypodermic needle" (Livingstone, 1996: 2).

Instead of framing media effects as a problem for the individual, media researchers have rather addressed "digital entanglement" as simultaneously a personal and a social problem (Karlsen, 2013; Syvertsen, 2020). These works have provided valuable insights by putting the contemporary situation in a historical context, comparing concerns over digital media overuse with previous media panics (e.g., Drotner, 1999), while at the same time pointing out what might be historically unique with the dominant media technologies of our time.

## **Reframing media effects as "matters of concern"**

One way to approach critical media studies' hesitancy to engage with issues related to harmful media effects is to use a distinction made by Bruno Latour (2004) between matters of fact and matters of concern. According to Latour, the way in which academic expertise has developed in the humanities and social sciences, especially those branches that derive from critical theory, has made it unfit to address questions of general concern. Instead, it has developed into a critical position that aims to lift "the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers" (Latour, 2004: 246). Undoubtedly, the scientific project has

from the start always emphasised the importance of building knowledge about the world “as it is”, to establish facts beyond appearances. However, as Latour pointed out, reality is more than “matters of fact”. Matters of concern, then, is the gathering of separate facts put into context in ways that resonate with the lived experience of people. Even if decades of media research have failed to establish any clear facts about the nature of media effects, it does not mean that *experiences* of media effects are not real. If negative media effects are “matters of concern” for many people today, they deserve to be taken seriously. Latour warned that if the social sciences and humanities fail to take on such challenges, the public will turn to other authorities for answers and advice. This has also been the case when it comes to questions about the negative effects of digital media, where popular renditions of neuropsychology have been far more successful than critical media studies in addressing public concerns about media overuse.

The tendency in critical media studies to avoid questions of media effects; leaving the public arena to experts from other sciences is, however, only one side of the coin. The other side is a growing confidence in neuroscientific thinking in current public debate. In the following, we discuss how pop neuroscience has secured this position by considering media effects as “matters of concern”. For the sake of the argument, we focus on how media effects are framed within popular scientific accounts of neuropsychology, not the academic discipline, since it is in this accessible and straightforward form that the wider audience is reached by neuropsychological ideas of problematic media usage. Popularised accounts of brain science are nowadays widely found in mainstream news outlets and science journalism, as well as in other more popular media, such as websites, trade books, and tabloids (Choudhury & McKinney, 2013; Pitts-Taylor, 2010; Rose, 2013). Our ambition is thus not to undermine the validity of neuropsychology as an academic discipline, but to discuss the allure of its popular renditions that have contributed to the widespread acceptance of brain-based explanations of what is, in fact, a social phenomenon – that is, human communication.

Based on an analysis of the rhetoric found in popular neuroscience (Jack & Appelbaum, 2010), we suggest that the privileged position of pop neuroscience in public debates over negative media effects can be understood through its ability to maintain a sense of concern and to convincingly show that 1) the problem with excessive digital media use is *real* (objectivity claims), 2) this problem *can* be fixed (self-improvement claims), and 3) it *should* be fixed in order to maintain well-being in a world that is no longer suited for human biology (authenticity claims).

## Objectivity claims

A first rhetorical asset employed in pop neuroscience is the aura of objectivity surrounding brain research. The public trust in neuroscience has been

referred to as “a cultural revolution” (Mora, 2015) where human behaviour is increasingly considered a result of brain functions rather than socially shaped mental capacities (Choudhury & McKinney, 2013; Pitts-Taylor, 2010; Rose, 2007, 2013). According to Nikolas Rose, this represents a shift in human ontology, where we do not think of ourselves as having a brain *and* a mind (or soul). Rather, the brain is conceived as foundational to understanding human nature and social life while the “mind is simply what the brain does” (Rose, 2007: 192; see also Mora, 2015). The public fascination with neuroscience also means that methods from neuroscience have found their way into research fields outside neurobiology, often used as a way to combine neurological approaches with cultural and social theory. One such example is neuropsychology, which combines psychology with neuroscience to explain how cognition and behaviour relate to neural systems (Damasio, 2006; Fiske & Taylor, 2008).

In these explanations, visuals play an important role, and Weisberg and colleagues (2008: 1) argued that the “seductive allure of neuroscience explanations” is connected to the emergence of neuroimaging technologies used to visualise activities in the brain (e.g., fMRI, EEG, PET, SPECT). These images, highlighting active areas in the brain with vibrant colours, can be employed to offer perspicuous and trustworthy explanations of how the brain works (see also Pitts-Taylor, 2010; Sandoboe & Berent, 2021). Even if an image or model of the brain contains the same information or data as the associated text, the image is typically perceived by a lay audience as more trustworthy and objective than the text alone: “Seeing is believing”, as McCabe and Castel (2008) put it in their study of how brain imaging shapes the reception and judgement of scientific reasoning. The rhetorical power of these images as direct representations of reality can also be explained through the long-standing use of technologies such as camera and x-ray machines in science and medicine (Daston & Galison, 1992).

The aura of objectivity that follows the use of images has, however, been criticised as simplified and “grounded in the belief that fMRI enables us to capture a ‘visual proof’ of brain activity, despite the enormous complexities of data acquisition and image processing” (Racine et al., 2005: 160). It is important to note that images produced through neuroimaging techniques are by no means direct reflections of an objective reality, but rather “visualized arguments or enhancements” (Gruber, 2021: 20). Still, the rhetorical function is persuasive and has an advantage compared with more abstract arguments about media use and its potential effects. By showing what “happens to the brain”, visualisations can put facts into context and provide concrete explanations, despite them being complex renderings of data, manipulated to communicate certain results through, for instance, photo-editing techniques such as adding colour and contrast, cropping, and other digital effects (Jack & Appelbaum, 2010; McCabe & Castel, 2008).

The idea that changes in the brain structure is proof of direct effects of, for example, media, is expressed not only in images. One of the paediatricians who voiced their concern over the afore-mentioned strategy for school digitalisation is Hugo Lagercrantz, who wrote in an op-ed about the concrete effects on the brain when books are replaced by a screen:

In a more current American study (Hutton et al., *Acta Paediatrica* 2020), it has been found that the brain develops better in children who grow up in homes with many books and a lot of time for reading aloud, compared to those who mostly watch screens. In the former, more white matter is formed in the brain structures involved in reading and writing. This indicates that the nerves become thicker and thus conduct the nerve impulses faster [translated]. (Lagercrantz, 2022)

Arguably, white matter and neural connections are real, tangible things that can be observed and measured, which help to build a convincing argument about adverse effects. The brain itself has become a symbol for human thinking and creativity that lends its credibility also to non-scientific images and narratives (Andreu-Sánchez & Martín-Pascual, 2014), not least in self-help genres like the mindfulness movement (Betancourt & Labbé, 2014). We find examples of this casual use of brain images in Swedish mainstream media reporting about brain health as well as in pop psychology books, video lectures, and online material. One example is educational material about the effects on digital media on the brain produced by the above-mentioned initiative Arts & Hearts (2023), which includes an animation with a spinning brain with neurons lightning up in different colours, shown when the voice talks about the importance of experience in learning, but with no explicit reference to the image.

A limitation with the objectivity claims outlined above is that they could come off as deterministic, and in the next section, we discuss how the question of biological determinism versus change and improvement is handled within pop neuroscience.

## **Self-improvement claims**

The second rhetorical asset that we want to highlight is the argument that the brain is adaptable, that it is possible to “train” the brain for behavioural change and improvement of mental well-being. This approach is commonly referred to as brain plasticity, or “the capacity of the brain to modify itself in response to changes in its functioning or environment” (Pitts-Taylor, 2010: 636). In the context of adverse media effects, the brain plasticity argument has two functions: On the one hand, excessive use of digital media leads to compulsive behaviour where the brain has become accustomed to quick dopamine doses, while on the other hand, if we understand how the brain works, we can use techniques to circumvent and correct our behaviour.



The increasing prominence of the brain in the public debate on human behaviour has sparked apprehensions concerning biological determinism and essentialism, especially within the domains of social and human sciences. The idea that our behaviours are determined by neural processes within the brain fits badly with contemporary understandings of human life, where change and individual development are vital ingredients (Pitts-Taylor, 2010; Rose, 2007, 2013). This means that neuroscience supports two opposing viewpoints at the same time: Our ways of thinking and acting are certainly steered by the brain, but since our brains are alterable and capable of modification, we are not determined by our genes or by automatic brain reactions. Rhetorically, neuroscience has thus managed to nuance the meaning of what biology is about through the notion of the plastic brain, which has been crucial to gain acceptance among the public. It has been argued that the huge influence of popular neuroscience is dependent on the simultaneous existence and mutual reinforcement of these contradictory perspectives: “It is because we are so convinced that our brain totally determines our lives that techniques promising to optimise it are so persuasive” (Zivkovic, 2015: 412).

A consequence of the popularisation of the concept of brain plasticity is encouraging individuals to improve with medical or other brain-enhancing interventions physically or psychologically (Choudhury & McKinney, 2013; Pitts-Taylor, 2010; Rose, 2007, 2013). As Nikolas Rose (2013: 5) explained: “Today, to deem something biological is not to assert destiny or fatalism, but opportunity”.

Plasticity is thus generally viewed as a positive thing. It is possible to “learn, change or recover”, although, as is often emphasised when “compulsive teenage media users” are discussed, this demands discipline, which is more likely found among adults than among children and adolescents (Choudhury & McKinney, 2013: 206, 195). In relation to the question of screen time and the difficulties in resisting digital media, the idea of neuroplasticity fuels anxieties of what a distracting online environment might do to the vulnerable brain, as well as hopes of gaining a strengthened and resilient brain (Forsler & Guyard, 2020). In “the rise of a self-regulation society, where individuals are expected to take personal responsibility for balancing risks and pressures” (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020: 1270), regulating one’s media overuse and thereby improving brain function is both a promise and an expectation which have given rise to a new industry of “digital well-being interventions” including digital detox programmes, self-help guides, and software applications that block or limit certain content (Biedermann et al., 2021; Vanden Abeele, 2021).

In this context, pop neuroscience experts constitute an important group of self-help coaches (Madsen, 2015), offering guidance on how individuals can take responsibility for their own lives and well-being by disciplining themselves and moderating their media consumption. The guidance provided is often simple and practical, akin to other self-help recommendations, such as

refraining from constantly checking e-mails, disabling notifications, ensuring sufficient sleep, and so on (see, e.g., Levitin, 2016). Typically, these instructions are presented in the form of checklists that emphasise self-regulation and strategies for resisting temptations, and both Nutley (2019) and Hansen (2019) included such lists on how to handle digital distractions in everyday life in their bestselling books.

Aside from tangible advice and technical interventions, pop neuroscience approaches to compulsive media use typically endorse mind-enhancing techniques, such as when individuals are taught to change a negative mindset or behaviour, thereby learning how to be in control of negative thoughts (see, e.g., Greenfield, 2014). This strategy of altering the attitude (instead of removing the cause) takes inspiration from “positive psychology”, a movement that encourages positive attitudes as a buffer against weakness. Positive psychology, whose influence has spread across numerous institutional and cultural settings, is described as “the scientific study of optimal human functioning” (Binkley, 2014: 6). Positive thinking is an efficient supplement to the brain-training discourse that is stressed by neuropsychologists. The strategy of altering thoughts to cope with unwanted behaviour is also visible in mindfulness-based practices, which is applied in many schools today “for improving attentional, socio-emotional and regulatory skills among youth” (Choudhury & Wannyn, 2022: 48), but also in various sources that promote digital detox (Morrison & Gomez, 2014; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). The mindfulness movement has also inspired the digital detox camps that emerged in the early 2010s and were “spin-offs from the healthy holiday market of spirituality, yoga and mindfulness” (Syvertsen, 2020: 8; see also Syvertsen & Karlsen, Chapter 15 in this volume).

We believe that the capacity of pop neuroscience to explain, caution, and propose solutions to problematic media use – often through tangible advice, digital self-control interventions, and mindfulness practices – helps explain its popularity. Above all, the promise that improvement is possible is a desirable idea. In the final section, we develop the accessible and persuasive language of neuropsychology experts by discussing their use of familiar metaphors and narratives that play on people’s longing for a true and authentic life.

## **Authenticity claims**

A third rhetorical asset in pop neuroscience is the use of metaphor-rich language that invokes notions of authenticity and origin. These metaphors imbue the debate on negative media effects with a normative or prescriptive element, suggesting that these effects are not only real and curable, but that compulsive media use is fundamentally at odds with human biology and psychology, thus necessitating correction. One example of a recurrent theme found in pop neuroscience is the reference to our common origin as nomadic tribes on the African savannah. Satoshi Kanazawa (2004) has described this

rhetoric as “the savanna principle”, a narrative trope that uses evolutionary theory to state that the human brain has difficulty adapting to the modern world and situations that did not exist in the ancestral environment. According to this claim, early humans lived on the African savannah for over 2.5 million years during the geological epoch named the Pleistocene, and that this setting serves as the default mode for our physical and psychological constitution (Kanazawa, 2004). In essence, it suggests that our brains are adapted for a different era and environment, leading to difficulties in coping with the complexities of the contemporary world. This rhetoric reinforces the notion that excessive or problematic media use is a detachment from our evolutionary heritage, making it appear as if our biology is ill-suited to handle the challenges posed by modern digital media. Consequently, it frames the issue of media effects as a problem to be solved, aligning with calls for corrective action to realign human behaviour with this purported ancestral norm.

Another example of a frequently invoked narrative is that of expanded social interactions. Neurobiologist Martin Korte (2020), for instance, highlighted the dramatically increased complexity of our social interactions in today’s crowded and busy societies. He drew attention to the fact that our brains were not designed for such extensive social engagement and argued that the maximum group size with which humans can maintain stable social relationships is around 150 individuals, and he raised concerns about the potential consequences of subjecting our brains to what he termed “cortical overtaxing” (Korte, 2020: 108–109). In other words, he questioned how our brains will adapt and cope with the strain of navigating the intricate and multifaceted social environments that modern society presents. This perspective often serves as a warning about the potential negative effects of excessive connectivity and information overload on our cognitive well-being.

A third form of authenticity claims assumes an existentialist perspective, pondering the essence of being present and genuine in a world increasingly shaped by online interactions and accelerated activities. In these discussions, the use of digital technologies, particularly when excessive, is sometimes portrayed as inauthentic and trivial. This perspective questions whether our digital interactions and the pace of online life allow for truly authentic and meaningful moments of existence. As Syvertsen and Enli (2020: 1272) have maintained, in “the age of constant connectivity, a key question in media research is to what degree real and authentic communication is possible online and to what degree only face-to-face interactions are to be considered as authentic”. Digital detox texts idealise authentic living, “where you are grounded in a sense of ‘hereness’ and belonging” (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020: 1280). The call for (temporary) disconnection is thus often framed as reclaiming “real” social interaction with your “real” self and other “real” people. This rhetoric, although not explicitly referring to the human brain,

alludes to heritage, belonging, and authenticity (Sutton, 2017; Syvertsen, 2017; see also Jansson, Chapter 17 in this volume).

The rhetoric used within pop neuroscience is furthermore marked by metaphors that are used to vivify and criticise excessive media use by comparing it to unhealthy food. Theodora Sutton (2017: Discussion section, para. 5) explains how this is used to imply value judgments about digital media use by claiming that “online life is indulgent and unhealthy, while off-line experiences are more demanding but ultimately better for you, like a McDonald’s burger versus a hearty home-cooked meal”. When a brain perspective is added, the narrative is usually that online media, just like sugar, feeds the reward system of the brain and leads to addiction (Forsler & Guyard, 2023). As with the savannah narrative, the lesson is that our brains are not made for a life where neither food nor impressions are available in abundance.

A concrete example of how the food metaphor is used in pop neuroscience can be found in the YouTube series “Anders Hansen’s screen school”, where the Swedish psychiatrist gives advice to children and parents about screen time. In the opening of one of the episodes, he compares the use of mobile phones with candy, and explains:

It [the phone] triggers a series of deeply inherited mechanisms that makes it hard to keep it away. It is the same with candy. It triggers our craving for fast calories, and we know that if we have candy laying around all over the house, we will eat it, it is impossible to resist. And in the same way as we don’t keep candy everywhere, we should not have our phones available at all times [translated]. (Generation Pep, 2020)

What Hansen described as “deeply inherited mechanisms” is rooted in the notion of authenticity, that humans are biologically predisposed for a life on the savannah, where their primary concern was finding food and staying alert to potential threats from wild animals. By drawing parallels between human biology and notions of authenticity, these metaphors frame aspects of the modern digital world, such as excessive screen time and constant notifications, as disruptive to the core of human nature. This framing suggests that these behaviours are unnatural and potentially harmful, encouraging individuals to limit their exposure to such distractions in the interest of well-being and a return to a more authentic way of living. When the material is directed towards children and their parents, as in the example above, it is particularly illustrative of how these metaphors are used as pedagogical tools to explain science to a lay audience.

## Concluding discussion

In this chapter, we have explored how pop neuroscience addresses the question of harmful media effects, which is a matter of concern to many people

today. We have argued that the success of neuropsychological explanatory models in the public debate on media effects can be explained by their rhetorical qualities along with a general trust in brain research. To begin with, pop neuroscience actors acknowledge that negative effects of media use is a real problem. New technologies for neuroimaging offer a kind of visual proof that media effects are real and cannot be whitewashed by social science theories. Underpinned by an understanding of the human mind as a mere extension of the brain, these images promise not only proof but also an explanation of why we experience media as having effects by, for example, showing how media activates the reward pathways in the brain in a similar way as drugs and other addictive substances.

In addition to these explanations, pop neuroscience offers hope that the problem can be fixed. Drawing on theories of brain plasticity, it comes with the promise that, despite the constraints of our biological brains, we can train them to become more efficient and stress-resistant. This is especially important for children and young people, whose brains are not only described as more vulnerable than the adult brain, but also more malleable, meaning that it is easier to create new neuron pathways, and thus optimise the function of the brain at a young age. The promise is made attainable through concrete advice and self-training methods for managing negative effects of media, such as checklists and digital detox approaches, offered by experts from pop neuroscience that have come to constitute a core group of the rapidly expanding self-help industry.

Finally, pop neuroscience actors provide arguments for why problems related to media use should be fixed. By referring to the biological evolution of the human body and brain, they convincingly explain how our brains were not designed for this society of abundance and hypermediation. A recurring trope in this narrative is the savannah as a place of origin where humans had to be on constant lookout for wild animals (which makes us easily distracted) or hunting for food (which has shaped the reward system of our brains to constantly crave kicks). Similar metaphors are used in pop neuroscience self-help literature, where smartphones are compared with candy or drugs, something almost irresistible that we must learn to consume moderately. Digital communication is further contrasted with face-to-face interactions in the “real world”, suggesting that the latter is a more authentic form of connection. This use of familiar examples and narratives assists concerned users in why it is urgent to deal with the problems.

Like all popular science, these pop neuroscience explanations of media effects have their limitations, but have nonetheless managed to capture and create engagement around a shared experience of media as shaping our thinking and behaviour in ways that are not always desirable. What is missing from the explanatory models offered by pop neuroscience is an account of how the social plays into this dynamic, as well as a more nuanced understanding

of digital technologies than just “screens”. Digital media use cannot be reduced to an individual choice, but must also address how media is embedded in social relations, institutions, and everyday practices. Is it even possible to disconnect when most social small talk and planning today takes place online? What kind of media use do people experience as problematic, and what do they want to keep on doing? Which media practices are necessary for work, studies, or civic engagement? These are questions that are already well-researched in media studies and which would be beneficial to address in the public debate about media overuse.

However, media effects are, in Latour’s (2004) terms, often treated as a “fetish” in critical media studies. As discussed above, the methodological limitations in early effects research – combined with a historicising perspective that reveals the recurring nature of “media panics” (Drotner, 1999) – have led to a view on media effects as popular myths that lack proper empirical proof. This has in turn motivated critical media studies to formulate different research problems and thus risk missing out on the opportunity to make an important contribution to one of the more pressing public debates of our time. If critical media studies are to be relevant in the public debate, we need to acknowledge these experiences instead of focusing on the limitations of media effects research. Following Latour, it is only when we approach things as matters of concern, rather than deconstructing them or taking it as an indisputable fact, that we truly come close to our object of study. “The critic”, he wrote, “is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles [and who] offers the participants arenas in which to gather” (Latour, 2004: 246). By reframing media effects as matters of concern, we can approach self-perceived media overuse and addiction as an experience that includes – and to some extent is shaped by – the explanatory models offered in pop neuroscience.

## References

- Andreu-Sánchez, C., & Martín-Pascual, M. Á. (2014). Selling the brain: Representation of neuroscience in advertising. In M. Grabowski (Ed.), *Neuroscience and media: New understandings and representations* (pp. 203–213). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315749235>
- Arts & Hearts. (2023). *Det syns inte* [You can’t see it]. <https://detsynsinte.se/>
- Betancourt, A. E., & Labbé, E. E. (2014). Mindful media: Representations of the effects of mindfulness on the brain in YouTube videos. In M. Grabowski (Ed.), *Neuroscience and media: New understandings and representations* (pp. 189–202). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315749235>
- Biedermann, D., Schneider, J., & Drachler, H. (2021). Digital self-control interventions for distracting media multitasking-A systematic review. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 37(5), 1217–1231. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12581>
- Binkley, S. (2014). *Happiness as enterprise: An essay on neoliberal life*. State University of New York Press.
- Choudhury, S., & McKinney, K. (2013). Digital media, the developing brain and the interpretive plasticity of neuroplasticity. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 50(2), 192–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461512474623>

- Choudhury, S., & Wannyn, W. (2022). Politics of plasticity: Implications of the new science of the “teen brain” for education. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 46(1), 31–58.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-021-09731-8>
- Couldry, N. (2019). *Media: Why it matters*. Polity Press.
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2016). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity Press.
- Damasio, A. R. (2006). *Descartes’ error: Emotion, reason and the human brain*. Vintage.
- Daston, L., & Galison, P. (1992). The image of objectivity. *Representations*, 40, 81–128.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2928741>
- Drotner, K. (1999). Dangerous media? Panic discourses and dilemmas of modernity. *Paedagogica Historica*, 35(3), 593–619. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0030923990350303>
- Fiske, S., & Taylor, S. (2008). *Social cognition: From brains to culture* (1st ed.). McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- Forsler, I., & Guyard, C. (2020). Screen time and the young brain: A contemporary moral panic? In A. Kaun, C. Pentzold, & C. Lohmeier (Eds.), *Making time for digital lives: Beyond chronotopia* (pp. 25–43). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Forsler, I., & Guyard, C. (2023). Screens, teens and their brains: Discourses about digital media, learning and cognitive development in popular science neuroeducation. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2023.2230893>
- Generation Pep. (2020, August 13). *Anders Hansens skärmskola – Vad är det bästa tipset för att minska sin stillasittande skärmtid?* [Anders Hansen’s brain school – What can you do to limit your sedentary screentime?] [Video]. YouTube.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4GPv-qYiSw>
- Government Offices of Sweden. (2023, March 2). *Remiss av Statens skolverks förslag till nationell digitaliseringsstrategi för skolväsendet 2023–2027* [Committee report of the the national agency for education’s national digitalisation strategy for schools 2023–2027]. [www.regeringen.se/contentassets/d818e658071b49cbb1a75a6b11fa725d/remiss-av-statens-skolverks-forslag-till-nationell-digitaliseringsstrategi-for-skolvasendet-20232027.pdf](http://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/d818e658071b49cbb1a75a6b11fa725d/remiss-av-statens-skolverks-forslag-till-nationell-digitaliseringsstrategi-for-skolvasendet-20232027.pdf)
- Greenfield, S. (2014). *Mind change – How 21st century technology is leaving its mark on the brain*. Rider Books.
- Gruber, D. (2021). Neurons in sparkling space: Scientific objectivity and ‘blurry’ images in neuroscience. *Journal of Science Communication*, 20(1), A02. <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.20010202>
- Hansen, A. (2019). *Skärmbjärnan: Hur en hjärna i osynk med sin tid kan göra oss stressade deprimerade och ångestfyllda* [The screen brain: How a brain out of sync with its time can make us stressed, depressed, and anxious]. Bonnier Fakta.
- Hjarvard, S. (2013). *The mediatization of culture and society*. Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203155363>
- ITV Studios Sweden (Producer). (2019–2023). *Din hjärna* [Your brain]. [TV series]. SVT.
- Jack, J., & Appelbaum, L. (2010). “This is your brain on rhetoric”: Research directions for neuro rhetorics. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 40(5), 411–437.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2010.516303>
- Kanazawa, S. (2004). The savanna principle. *Managerial and Decision Economics*, 25(1), 41–54. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mde.1130>
- Kardefelt Winther, D. (2017). Conceptualizing Internet use disorders: Addiction or coping process? *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 71(7), 459–466.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/pcn.12413>
- Karlsen, F. (2013). *A world of excesses: Online games and excessive playing*. Ashgate.
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. The Free Press.
- Klingberg, T. (2019, February 23). Hjärnforskare varnar: Skolan digitaliseras i blindo [Brain researchers warn: Schools are blindly digitalised]. *Svenska Dagbladet*.  
<https://www.svd.se/a/OnxRKK/hjarnforskare-varnar-skolan-digitaliseras-i-blindo>
- Korte, M. (2020). The impact of the digital revolution on human brain and behavior: Where do we stand? *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 22(2), 101–111.  
<https://doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2020.22.2/mkorte>

- Kuss, D. J., & Griffiths, M. D. (2017). Social networking sites and addiction: Ten lessons learned. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 14(3), 311. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14030311>
- Lagercrantz, H. (2022). Skolverket verkar ha glömt bort hjärnan [The national agency for education seems to have forgotten the brain]. *Svenska Dagbladet*, December 29. <https://www.svd.se/a/kE8KoX/hugo-lagercrantz-skolverket-verkar-ha-glomt-bort-hjarnan>
- Latour, B. (2004). Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry*, 30(2), 225–248. <https://doi.org/10.1086/421123>
- Lerner, T. (2019, August 21). Forskare: Datorn i klassrummet blir ännu en distraktion [Researchers: Computers in the classroom are yet another distraction]. *Dagens Nyheter*. <https://www.dn.se/insidan/forskare-datorn-i-klassrummet-blir-annu-en-distraktion/>
- Letmark, P. (2023, May 14). Regeringen river upp Skolverkets plan för digitalisering i skolan [The government overturns national school digitalisation policy]. *Dagens Nyheter*. <https://www.dn.se/sverige/regeringen-river-upp-skolverkets-plan-for-digitalisering-i-skolan/>
- Levitin, D. J. (2016). *The organized mind: Thinking straight in the age of information overload*. Viking.
- Livingstone, S. (1996). On the continuing problems of media effects research. *LSE Research Online*. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/21503/>. Originally published in J. Curran, & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass media and society*, (2nd ed.) (pp. 305–324). Arnold.
- Ljungqvist, M., & Sonesson, A. (2022). Selling out education in the name of digitalization: A critical analysis of Swedish policy. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 8(2), 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2021.2004665>
- Lundby, K. (Ed.). (2009). *Mediatization: Concept, changes, consequences*. Peter Lang.
- Madsen, O. J. (2015). *Optimizing the self: Social representations of self-help*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315693866>
- McCabe, D., & Castel, A. (2008). Seeing is believing: The effect of brain images on judgments of scientific reasoning. *Cognition*, 107, 343–352. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2007.07.017>
- McGuire, W. J. (1986). The myth of massive media impact: Savagings and salvagings. In G. Comstock (Ed.), *Public communication and behaviour* (Vol. 1) (pp. 173–257). Academic Press.
- McQuail, D. (2000). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Meier, A. (2022). Studying problems, not problematic usage: Do mobile checking habits increase procrastination and decrease well-being? *Mobile Media & Communication*, 10(2), 272–293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20501579211029326>
- Mills, K. L. (2014). Effects of internet use on the adolescent brain: Despite popular claims, experimental evidence remains scarce. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 18(8), 385–387. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2014.04.011>
- Mora, F. (2015). Neuroculture: A new cultural revolution? In J. P. Huston, M. Nadal, F. Mora, L. F. Agnati, & C. J. C. Conde (Eds.), *Art, aesthetics and the brain* (pp. 3–18). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199670000.003.0001>
- Morrison, S., & Gomez, R. (2014). Pushback: Expressions of resistance to the ‘vertime’ of constant online connectivity. *First Monday*, 19(8). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i8.4902>
- Nutley, S. (2019). *Distraherad: Hjärnan, skärmen och krafterna bakom* [Distraided: The brain, the screen, and the forces behind]. Natur & Kultur.
- Olsson, A., Petrovic, P., & Ingvar, M. (2012, January 1). ”Våldsamma datorspel kan visst påverka ungas hjärnor” [“Violent video games can certainly affect the brains of young people”] *Dagens Nyheter*. <https://www.dn.se/arkiv/debatt/valdsamma-datorspel-kan-visst-paverka-ungas-hjarnor/>
- Peters, J. D. (2017). ‘You mean my whole fallacy is wrong’: On technological determinism. *Representations*, 140(1), 10–26. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2017.140.1.10>
- Pitts-Taylor, V. (2010). The plastic brain: Neoliberalism and the neuronal self. *Health*, 14(6), 635–652. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459309360796>
- Racine, E., Bar-Ilan, O., & Illes, J. (2005). fMRI in the public eye. *Nature Reviews, Neuroscience*, 6(2), 159–164. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn1609>
- Rose, N. (2007). *The politics of life itself: Biomedicine, power, and subjectivity in the twenty-first century*. Princeton University Press.



- Rose, N. (2013). The human sciences in a biological age. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30(1), 3–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276412456569>
- Sandoboe, G., & Berent, I. (2021). The seductive allure of the brain: dualism and lay perceptions of neuroscience. *Cognitive Neuropsychology*, 38(3), 205–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643294.2021.1976127>
- SCRIIN. (2023). *Skärmhjärnan till Sveriges alla skolor [The screen brain to all schools in Sweden]*. <https://www.scriin.org/skarmhjarnan.html>
- Skogstad, I. (2017, June 18). Isak Skogstad: ”Kasta ut datorerna från klassrummen” [Isak Skogstad: “Throw the computers out of the classroom”]. *Göteborgs-Posten*. <https://www.gp.se/ledare/isak-skogstad-kasta-ut-datorerna-fr%C3%A5n-klassrummen-1.4369549>
- Statens medieråd. (2011). *Väldsammas datorspel och aggression: En översikt av forskningen 2000–2011 [Violent video games and aggression: A literature review 2000–2011]*. <https://www.statensmedierad.se/download/18.1ecdaa0017633a0d6667a60/1607612937134/Valdsamma-datorspel-och-aggression.pdf>
- Sutton, T. (2017). Disconnect to reconnect: The food/technology metaphor in digital detoxing. *First Monday*, 22(6). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i6.7561>
- Swedish Code of Statutes. (2022, June 22). *Lag om ändring i skollagen (2010:800) [Revisions of the National educational act (2010:800)]*. <https://svenskförfattningssamling.se/sites/default/files/sfs/2022-06/SFS2022-940.pdf>
- Syvetsen, T. (2017). *Media resistance: Protest, dislike, abstention*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46499-2>
- Syvetsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The politics of disconnecting*. Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787693395>
- Syvetsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5–6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Thorell, L., Klingberg, T., & Hemlin, A. (2023, April 24). ”Skolverkets förslag ett riskabelt experiment” [The national agency for education’s proposal a risky experiment]. *Svenska Dagbladet*. <https://www.svd.se/a/764VzB/skolverkets-forslag-ett-riskabelt-experiment-skriver-thorell-klingberg-och-hemlin>
- Valkenburg, P., & Peter, J. (2013). Five challenges for the future of media-effects research. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 197–215. <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/download/1962/849>
- Vanden Abeele, M. (2021). Digital wellbeing as a dynamic construct. *Communication Theory*, 31(4), 932–955. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa024>
- Vanden Abeele, M., & Mohr, V. (2021). Media addictions as Apparatchik: What discourse on TV and smartphone addiction reveals about society. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1536–1557. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211038539>
- Weisberg, D. S., Keil, F. C., Goodstein, J., Rawson, E., & Gray, J. R. (2008). The seductive allure of neuroscience explanations. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 20(3), 470–477. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jocn.2008.20040>
- Zivkovic, M. (2015). Brain culture: Neuroscience and popular media. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 40(4), 409–417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03080188.2016.1165457>

# A decade of digital disconnection research in review

*Where, what, how, and who?*

CHRISTOFFER BAGGER

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

## ABSTRACT

The backlash against digital media usage has manifested in everyday practices of digital disconnection, or deliberate non-use of media. This chapter provides an overview of the last decade of empirical disconnection research, tracing both its overarching tendencies and its boundaries. This is done through an analysis of 346 empirical studies on digital disconnection. For the purposes of this chapter, digital disconnection research is defined by a research ethos which does not consider the act of media non-use or restricted media use as something to be remedied. In review, the typical interest of the research has been in studying the disconnection of relatively young and individualised agents from social media, a disconnection which is often temporary or partial. Therefore, in the discussion portion of the chapter, I consider the opportunity for the openness of digital disconnection studies to extend even further, with particular emphasis on structures and contexts where disconnection may not only be problematised by the imperatives of “always on” communication, specifically in working life and other organised contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** digital disconnection, systematic literature review, social media, problematising review, disconnection turn

---

Bagger, C. (2024). A decade of digital disconnection research in review: Where, what, how, and who? In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 109–128). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-6>

## Introduction

Over the past decade, media and communication studies have witnessed increased scholarly attention to the ambivalences and resistance encountered in everyday media and communication usage. This phenomenon has been coined the “disconnection turn” (Fast, 2021), leading to the emergence of a new field of research. Beyond academic debates, resistance against popular media has also found its way into broader cultural discussions and popular expressions (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). While there is ongoing terminological debate, I contend that digital disconnection studies, the term encompassing most of the disconnection turn, are characterised by a prevailing research ethos. In this ethos, non-use or restricted use of digital media is regarded neutrally or even positively, rather than as a problem requiring a solution (Syvertsen, 2017). Consequently, this research embraces the possibility that abstaining from media use may be deemed both “meaningful and necessary” by those involved (Bucher, 2020: 612), while still maintaining the capacity to critique the limitations of such disconnection (Sutton, 2020). “Digital disconnection” is thus a research ethos for studying “on the ground” manifestations of the backlash against digital media.

The question then arises as to the extent of this normativity surrounding digital disconnection during its initial decade or so of existence. To what domains has this openness extended, and where is it yet to emerge? To answer these questions, I utilise this chapter to summarise and analyse the past decade or so of studies on digital disconnection. I accomplish this through an analysis of a systematically collected sample of 346 empirical studies focused on real experiences of disconnection. I approach this literature review with both a scoping and problematising perspective (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020; Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

The review is scoping in the sense that it delineates the existing boundaries and research interests within disconnection studies over the past decade. In this review, I explore *where* disconnection has been studied globally, *what* media and technologies people have been disconnecting from in existing research, *how* this disconnection is executed, and *who* is depicted as capable of disconnecting. This reveals the dominant narrative in disconnection studies, portraying a responsible individual in a highly digitalised country temporarily disconnecting from digital media.

Following this, the review is then problematising, as it questions why the normativity of disconnection has not been explored more extensively thus far. Here, I place particular emphasis on the potential for digital disconnection to extend beyond the individual media user and consider the organisations and institutions that shape daily life (Perrow, 1991). Recognising the pivotal role these contexts play in determining what one can or cannot disconnect from, I discuss this in the context of media-dependent and -entangled working life (Bagger, 2021b; Fast, 2021) as a prime example of such a structuring

context, though it is far from the only domain where digital disconnection research has room to grow. In summary, I argue that the openness of digital disconnection studies has the potential to expand even further.

## **Background: Digital disconnection studies and the disconnection turn**

Whether one starts the story with worries about television addicts (Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021), concerns about landline telephones eroding privacy (Rymarczuk, 2016), or all the way back at Socrates' alleged dismissal of the writing (Peters, 1999), resistance, and criticism of media is hardly a new phenomenon. However, the last decade or so has witnessed a steep increase in the interest, from both researchers and the general public, in resisting or refusing the use of digital technologies. The beginning of this turn can be marked by a few well-cited key texts (e.g., Baumer et al., 2013; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). The last few years have seen an increased interest in the topic, which has manifested in several anthologies and journal special issues (Chia et al., 2021; Jansson & Adams, 2021; Karsay & Vandenbosch, 2021; Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021).

Digital disconnection exists alongside several other terms related to the digital backlash. The distinguishing feature of digital disconnection studies is that acts of resistance towards media usage are not *a priori* considered the result of technophobia or “media panics” among the population (Drotner, 1999), nor as a “digital divide” that must be bridged for the betterment of society (van Dijk, 2006). If the non-use or restriction of media is imposed from above, for instance, at the level of governments, this is also something which is usually studied as an element of “digital dictatorships” and outside the scope of digital disconnection studies (although, see Rohman & Ang, 2021). If terms like techlash cover the mass media and news discourse of disillusionment with digital media (Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume; Jespersen & Albris, Chapter 4 in this volume; Weiss-Blatt, 2021), then digital disconnection is the on-the-ground expression of such distrust or disappointment. In contrast, digital disconnection denotes a non-use of media which is voluntary or consensual on the part of the non-user and is not viewed as a problem by the researcher.

The underlying assumption of the emerging research agenda of digital disconnection is thus that the refusal, restricted use, and non-use of digital media and communication tools may be something valuable and worthwhile rather than a technical or social gap which must be bridged (Syvertsen, 2017). Although rarely explicitly stated, it seems this line of research tacitly accepts that treating the refusal to communicate digitally with suspicion is ultimately untenable (see Peters, 1999). Digital disconnection can thus be both “meaningful and necessary” (Bucher, 2020) – at least to the people involved.

Notably, this does not preclude researchers from critically examining both the usefulness and feasibility of disconnection. In the final discussion portion of this chapter, I return to how the potential further study of disconnection bumps up against the boundaries of these other key terms.

While the term digital disconnection may have its origin within media studies, the interest in non-use of digital media is present across a variety of research disciplines (e.g., Biedermann et al., 2021; Ozdemir & Goktas, 2021), and the urge to disconnect is evidently present within broader social trends (Moe & Madsen, 2021). This all corroborates that we are in the middle of a “disconnection turn” (Fast, 2021) which is seen across several scholarly disciplines. While we are turning, then, we should make sure we have a good lay of the land: What ground has the body of disconnection research covered thus far, and which areas of the map are still underexplored? I explore this not by discussing the *whys* of digital disconnection in terms of motivations and outcomes, which have been extensively discussed elsewhere; in contrast, my purpose in this chapter is to make clear *where* disconnection has been studied, *what* the subjects of study are disconnecting from, *how* they are disconnecting, and *who* is being studied as disconnecting agents.

## Review method

### Sampling process: Finding existing disconnection

The aim of the sampling for the present review was to locate empirical studies of *existing* disconnection. In other words, the studies included had to be based on an empirical inquiry into people disconnecting from digital media. Primarily theoretical interventions and critiques were thus excluded from the sample. Additionally, the disconnection practices under study had to be treated within the normative scope of “digital disconnection”, as discussed above. This meant that the non-use of media could not be viewed as an *a priori* problem to be solved by the researchers.

The sampling proceeded by a process of hand-picking the broadest possible sample of relevant studies through citation chain analysis (Levy & Ellis, 2006). I deemed sampling via citations preferable to the otherwise commonly used methods of sampling via a keyword search for two major reasons. First, digital disconnection research has a large degree of terminological contestation (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021), with scholars using terms as broad as disentangling, non-use, unplugging, and detoxing, all of which have a myriad of other uses. Second, keyword searches did not provide a reliable way of distinguishing between empirical and non-empirical studies. An extensive hand-selection procedure would thus have to be called for in any case.

My chain of search started from two points, one being key empirical texts on digital disconnection and the other being existing subdiscipline-specific research reviews of digital disconnection (both listed in Table 6.1). First, the

citation lists of these texts were screened for relevant studies. Second, if any relevant studies citing these initial studies were found, studies citing these newly included studies were then in turn screened for inclusion. This strategy followed from an assumption that empirical studies tend to cite other relevant empirical studies.

In the first prong, the search started from eight existing systematic reviews on disconnection research or related phenomena. All these reviews tended to be domain-specific and generally emphasised quantitative studies. As such, there was virtually no overlap between the texts they each reviewed. The texts analysed in these review articles were then individually screened for inclusion in my study before proceeding further. In the second prong, nine key empirical studies (> 100 citations) on disconnection were identified and selected as starting points.

In each prong, articles, monographs, anthology chapters, and theses in these citation networks were individually screened – including their title, abstract, and keywords – to ascertain whether they built upon an empirical study of disconnection from one or more media and communication technologies. “Disconnection” was understood as any type of non-use, whether temporary or indefinite, provided this non-use happened with the consent of the disconnecting agent. The media which people disconnected from were likewise broadly defined as anything that enabled and expanded communication capabilities either interpersonally or intrapersonally (Jensen & Helles, 2011; Lomborg & Frandsen, 2016). Any technology was considered a medium if it enabled communication on a many-to-many (e.g., social media, collectively used information systems), one-to-many (mass communication devices such as television, radio), one-to-one (e.g., texting), or self-to-self (e.g., self-tracking apps, smart devices) basis.

**TABLE 6.1** Key texts and reviews in digital disconnection studies

| Text                         | Type     | Discipline                 | Summary                                                        |
|------------------------------|----------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Biederman et al., 2021       | Review   | Computer science           | Review of digital self-control interventions                   |
| Eriksen, 2020                | Review   | Psychology                 | Review of social media restrictions and subjective well-being  |
| Huang et al., 2021           | Review   | Science studies            | Review of research on consumer “innovation resistance”         |
| Kania-Lundholm, 2021         | Review   | Media studies              | Review and call for a critical research agenda                 |
| Ozdemir & Goktas, 2021       | Review   | Business and trade studies | Review of the research on “digital detox holidays”             |
| Radtke et al., 2021          | Review   | Media studies              | Review of the effectiveness of digital detox on smartphone use |
| Soliman & Rinta-Kahila, 2020 | Review   | Information systems        | Review of “discontinuance” in information technology studies   |
| Soliman & Tuunainen, 2021    | Review   | Information systems        | Review and study of “volitional” information systems rejection |
| Baumer et al., 2013          | Key text | Computer science           | Exploration of Facebook non-use                                |
| Brubaker et al., 2016        | Key text | Media and communication    | Users leaving the app Grindr                                   |
| Dickinson et al., 2016       | Key text | Business and trade studies | The desire for mobile disconnection among tourists             |
| Epstein et al., 2016         | Key text | Computer science           | Discontinuance of self-tracking devices                        |
| Hakkarainen, 2012            | Key text | Media and communication    | Older computer non-users                                       |
| Light, 2014                  | Key text | Media and communication    | Disconnection from and with social networking sites            |
| Pearce & Gretzel, 2012       | Key text | Business and trade studies | “Technology dead zones” in tourism                             |
| Portwood-Stacer, 2013        | Key text | Media and communication    | Quitting Facebook and “media refusal”                          |
| Selwyn, 2006                 | Key text | Cultural studies           | “Non- and low-users” of computers                              |
| Stieger et al., 2013         | Key text | Psychology                 | Contrasting users and quitters of Facebook                     |

## Scope and limitations of final sample

The final sample consisted of 346 texts on digital disconnection. These included 220 research articles, 17 book chapters, 86 conference papers, 4 monographs, 7 doctoral dissertations, and 12 master's theses. The oldest studies were published in 2010, with most studies (86%) being from 2015 or later, thus lending credence to the idea of the “disconnection turn” as a genuine recent development covering the last decade or so (Fast, 2021). The present overview thus stands as a scoping of the first decade of concerted research into existing digital disconnection, as well as a problematisation of some of the limitations of this research.

As discussed above, texts which studied non-consensual disconnection, or which viewed disconnection as a problem, were excluded. For related reasons, studies on the adjacent phenomenon of “news avoidance” were also excluded from this review, as there is some controversy about whether they fit the normative framework of “digital disconnection”, with some scholars describing such avoidance as “an increasing problem for the news industry and democracy at large” (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020: 459). For similar reasons, research on the non-use of communication technologies in telemedicine were also excluded from the search (for a review, see Reinhardt et al., 2021), as this is also a field where non-use of the relevant technologies is viewed as problematic first and foremost (although, see Klausen, Chapter 8 in this volume). For my present purposes, disconnecting from one's Internet provider and disconnecting from one's healthcare provider are thus not comparable.

A notable limitation of the present review is that it can only describe how digital disconnection has been *studied*. Therefore, it can offer few insights about where digital disconnection might *happen*. A second limitation of the sample is that it cannot account for studies which have no interaction, first-, second-, or third-hand, with the central texts or reviews mentioned above. In this way, the studies represent the only the dominant or overarching ways in which disconnection has been studied but cannot account for the whole picture. There may be disconnection texts unaccounted for which have yet to enter dialogue with the main body of research.

During the revision process of this chapter, additional reviews on disconnection were published (e.g., Figuerias et al., 2023; Nassen et al., 2023). Notably, these studies did not cite or review any eligible texts that were not already included in my sample. I thus considered the original sample to have been adequately saturated and did not proceed to subject any of the newer reviews to the systematic chain search described above.

## Coding process

With the final sample in hand, I proceeded to ask the four basic questions of the body of disconnection research:

1. Where have these studies been located nationally?

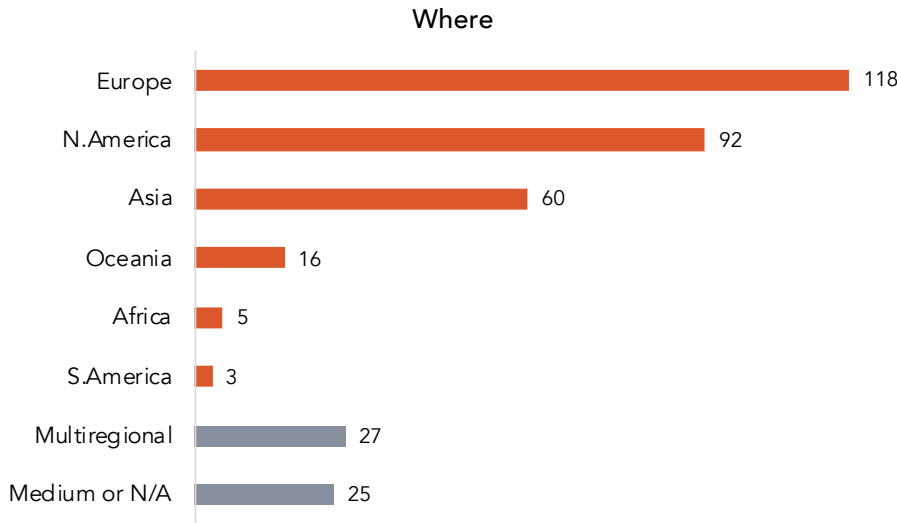


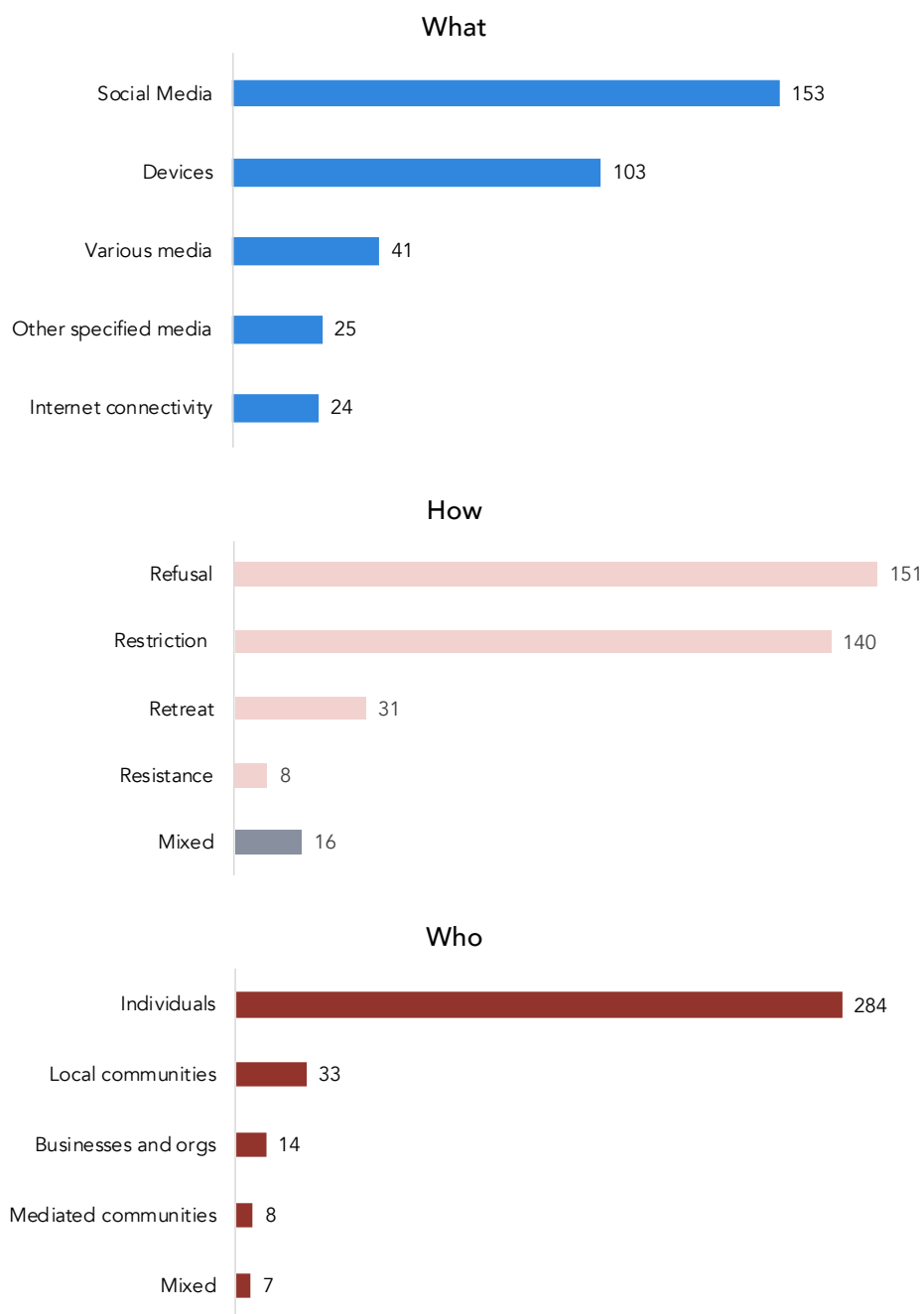
2. What people are being studied as disconnecting from (i.e., how are the targets of disconnection delineated within the given study)?
3. How is this process of disconnection taking place (is it caused by the researcher or not, is it temporary or indefinite)?
4. Who is being studied as doing this disconnection (i.e., who is constructed as having the agency to disconnect, and are they sampled according to any specific demographic characteristics)?

This process first entailed an open coding: a consolidating round of coding categories before a final selection of relevant codes and categories. In the ultimate consolidation, variables which were clearly identifiable across most studies were emphasised. Ultimately, this emphasis on consolidation and comparability means that several variables about the demographics of disconnectors (e.g., gender, racial, and class background) are left out of the final comparison, as these were far from consistently reported. Ultimately, this resulted in a coding which accounted for the broadest strokes of disconnection research.

## Findings

**FIGURE 6.1** Overview of content of digital disconnection studies





*Comments:*  $n = 346$ . Overview according to the location of the study (where), the target of disconnection (what), the method of disconnection (how), and the disconnecting population being studied (who).

## Where is disconnection being studied?

As might be expected, disconnection is largely a phenomenon under study among populations in nations which are highly digitalised and datafied. It must be noted that the sample reveals little about the overall disconnective intentions of *most* nations as a whole, with a handful of exceptions (e.g., Fast et al., 2021). Most empirical studies are set within nations designated as “frontrunners” in digitalisation (Huawei, 2020), mainly located within Europe (118 studies) and North America (92 studies). Asian nations are found at a distant third on the list (60), with mainland China (20) accounting for the bulk portion of studies outside the traditional “West”. Only a small handful of studies buck this trend, focusing on nations in Africa (5 studies) or South America (3 studies).

In one exceptional study looking at rural Kenya, Wildermuth (2021) deliberately attempted to discuss digital disconnection outside the usual normative scope of digital divides. Here, the author lambasted the “assigned normative superiority of polymedia repertoires as found amongst urban elites in Kenya and majorities of the Global North” which hinders “recognition of the diverse and pluralistic character of less privileged, media practices” (Wildermuth, 2021: 449). What this study illustrates is that while the normativity of digital disconnection still needs to justify itself in Western and highly digitalised or privileged contexts (Syvertsen, 2020; Portwood-Stacer, 2013), there seems to be even more work to do in justifying it outside these contexts.

A comprehensive discussion of the reasons why disconnection is more likely to be studied in a broadly Western context are beyond the scope of this review. However, it bears noting that digital disconnection is not exceptional within media studies for being focused on Western nations (Waisbord, 2022). For now, it is worth noting that this geographic specificity may have had some influence on how the phenomenon has been studied and constructed. First and foremost, it may have led to a focus on certain media over others, as I discuss further below.

## What is being disconnected from?

What characterises the targets of studied disconnections *overall* is that they are media which are characterised by being accessible across spatial and temporal boundaries, “always on” and “always happening” (Helles, 2013). The most obvious example of this is social media, which are the largest single target of digital disconnection (133 studies), with Facebook being the most frequently named example (90 studies). Building on the point about geographic parochialism from the previous section, we can perhaps highlight that only four studies in the sample studied resistance to the Chinese platform WeChat, despite its billion-strong userbase. The paradigmatic study of disconnection is thus perhaps Portwood-Stacer’s (2013) foundational text on “media refusal”, in which we meet principled non-users taking a stand against Facebook.

Next to social media, digital devices themselves are the biggest category of resisted media (103 studies). These media are usually also categorised by their mobility and ubiquity (Helles, 2013), as only half a dozen studies have looked at resistance to the comparably more stationary laptop or desktop computers. Even the few digital games that were studied were characterised by their perpetuity and open-endedness (Debus et al., 2020). This is not to say that older media (most notably television) are completely absent from the sample, but rather that digital disconnection studies seem to have developed in tandem with these popular “always on” media. This is worth bearing in mind, since criticism of mobile media often emphasise self-governance strategies, as opposed to structural solutions (Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021).

Another vital aspect of Portwood-Stacer’s (2013) foundational study is that of “conspicuous non-consumption”. This suggests another crucial aspect of the media that are being disconnected from: They are largely understood as being popular enough that disconnection is the exception rather than the norm. Furthermore, the media being disconnected from largely have not gone anywhere at time of writing. This includes social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X), devices such as smartphones, the Internet, as such, and (although less widely adopted) wearable digital devices. In the problematising part of this chapter, I discuss how it is unclear whether this is an incidental or necessary part of digital disconnection studies. Perhaps in part due to this, digital devices and platforms are characterised by being extremely difficult for users to actually *quit* (Karppi, 2018). This difficulty in exiting also becomes apparent when we look at *how* people are able (or not able) to disconnect.

## How is disconnection being done?

Most of the disconnection under study does *not* owe its existence to a researcher intervening. This corroborates the assertion that disconnection is a prominent cultural phenomenon (Moe & Madsen, 2021), in addition to being an emerging research topic (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). Even so, the most prevalent form of disconnection is one which is distinctly temporary, which I have labelled *refusal* (151 studies) in Figure 6.1. This pattern is perhaps best described in a foundational study by Baumer and colleagues (2013) as a cycle of “leaving and relapsing”, at least when it comes to social media. The category of non-use which rivals this one is that of *restriction* (140 studies), where users continue their usage of a given medium, but with certain self-inflicted restrictions in place. Often such self-restrictions may be supported by digital apps (see also You, Chapter 9 in this volume). The study of digital disconnection is thus mainly the study of partial or temporary disconnection.

A less widespread, but nonetheless prevalent form of disconnection from social media involves a *retreat* from the rhythms of everyday life, either on a holiday with media restrictions or in a camp setting for media non-users (31

studies). Disconnection may be more comprehensive in these contexts, but they are by their very nature temporary retreats from the rhythms of everyday life and are thus limited in their applicability to how digital disconnection can have a larger impact. I highlight this because it represents an explicit link between the retreat from media *and* the retreat from the routines and structures of daily life. Here, researchers have stressed both the commitment of such retreats while also pointing out that they come with problems of their own. For instance, an in-depth inquiry by Sutton (2020: 265) stressed that the preconception of such camps might be tied up with goals “highly specific to Western and American values” while at the same time repeating “long-held colonial, primitivist narratives” in what they offer as alternatives to a highly digitalised world.

A small handful of studies investigated religious communities where media usage is frowned upon, most notably Amish communities and ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities (Shahar, 2017). These communities are not temporary in the same way that digital detox holidays or camp retreats are, and they thus demonstrate a more enduring resistance towards digital media. Notably, the search uncovered no examples of religious institutions and locations as such (e.g., churches, mosques, and temples) being exceptional sites or zones of digital disconnection.

A final category of disconnection is what I have termed *resistance* (8 studies). This denotes studies where participants refused to adopt the given medium at all. These studies usually target specific new technologies under the conceptual banner of “innovation resistance” (Huang et al., 2021). While these technologies are not the targets of “conspicuous non-consumption” discussed in terms of *how* disconnection is done (Portwood-Stacer, 2013), this does not mean that these innovations have been scrapped.

## Who is doing the disconnection?

Finally, I touch upon the disconnection agent: *who*. Here, most studies were concerned with an individual and atomised agent disconnecting (284 studies). Studies were coded as individualising resistance if the disconnecting agent was not constructed as a group of people or an organisation, such as a community or a group. In contrast, 33 studies looked at local communities (including school classes, camps, and households) as agents of resistance, while 8 studies looked at mediated or online communities performing acts of disconnection. Only 14 studies looked at businesses or similar organisations disconnecting, a point which I return to in the discussion.

Judging by the research, disconnection is seemingly something one goes about alone. This is congruent with the linking of digital disconnection with broader cultural trends of responsibilisation, as noted by other scholars (Fast, 2021; Moe & Madsen, 2021). This individualising and responsibilising discourse is prevalent in the “how to” literature and other popular discourses on disconnection (Enli & Syvertsen, 2021; Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021).

Characteristically, the disconnecting agent is also relatively young, broadly defined as being in the 18–35 age range. Hence, the default picture painted by disconnection studies is of an overconnected youth in need of a digital break, with only a small sliver of studies looking at adults or older adults meaningfully disconnecting. Although rarely stated explicitly, the frequent focus on students may also be due to particularities of research approval practices across different nations, where American studies of social media in particular favour college students (for a discussion, see Jensen & Bechmann, 2021).

In some cases, the choice of young and individualised agents as the object of study is something that scholars do reflect upon. For instance, Kim and colleagues (2017: 18), in their study mainly focusing on college students and digital interruptions, reflected: “Unlike employees in a company, graduate students [...] do not have strict working hours”. Here, Kim and colleagues were indirectly alluding to some of the empirical limitations of digital disconnection studies as a whole: how duties and responsibilities from other contexts may impact the feasibility to disconnect. This is a point I return to in the discussion.

Thus, if one were to draw a caricature of the dominant focus of digital disconnection studies from the present sample, it would go something like this: Disconnection would take place within a highly digitalised nation (the *where*), be concerned with a young person in the 18–35 age bracket (the *who*), probably a college student, who attempts limit their use of a social medium (usually Facebook) or at the very least to use their smartphone less (the *what*). Sometimes, they would be doing this because they had signed up for some experiment in their college setting, but usually this disconnection would be of their own volition, independent of any research participation. This would either come in the form of taking brief periods of absence from these media, or restricting the time of their usage on these apps (the *how*).

## Disconnecting further

To summarise the scoping portion of this review: Digital disconnection has mainly been focused on in highly digitalised nations in the West, has mainly been concerned with resisting social media, and has mostly found restricted usage or temporary abstentions to be the preferred strategy for doing this disconnection, leaving little hope for disconnection to be an impactful strategy for resisting social media (Lomborg, 2020). Finally, the disconnecting agent has largely been constructed as an isolated and atomised individual.

In this problematising discussion, I argue that each of these four tendencies within digital disconnection studies present their own problems: 1) The focus on highly digitalised countries might implicitly reproduce the notion that disconnection is only a viable option in the most digitalised contexts, 2) the focus on social media comes at the expense of other technologies with similar characteristics, 3) the focus on non-permanent means of resistance might inadvertently close off the debate to actual closures or disappearances

of digital media, and 4) the focus on individualised disconnectors might inadvertently reproduce the individualising tendencies of popular literature on media resistance (Enli & Syvertsen, 2021; Gregg, 2018).

First, if digital disconnection is to be understood as an ethos of openness towards the non-use of media, then there is no reason this openness should only be limited to the most digitalised contexts. Many of the related concepts (digital divides, digital dictatorships, or news avoidance) discussed in the opening of this chapter take as their point of assumption that people are not communicating enough, or at least are not able to. As a side effect of this, we might expect digital disconnection and these other concepts to not only be *theoretically* distinct, but also to concern themselves with entirely different *empirical* settings. However, as a few trailblazing studies have shown (Udende et al., 2020; Wildermuth, 2021), there is nothing that mandates that this must be the case.

Second, while social media have been both a preferred target of media and communications scholarship in general, and digital disconnection scholarship in particular, they need not be sole targets of disconnection. One argument against including one-to-many media under the purview of disconnection studies is that the field should be concerned with resisting particularly intrusive media (e.g., Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021). Here, the obvious counterargument is that social media are far from the only intrusive media technologies, nor are private corporations the only agents with the ability to exert communicative demands upon the public (Bagger et al., 2024).

Third, disconnection scholars have generally stressed the futility of disconnection (Lomborg, 2020). This is reflected in how the disconnection under study is usually temporary or partial. Ironically, this leaves digital disconnection studies without many insights about what happens when media *do* disappear. Despite this, there is a growing research interest in the death and stagnation of digital platforms (Corry, 2021; McCammon & Lingel, 2022), which has thus far had little exchange with disconnection studies. Similarly, digital disconnection studies have thus far been able to tell us little about how a lack of adoption of new or much-hyped media may lead such media to disappear (e.g., Samson, 2023; Zitron, 2023), studies of “innovation resistance” notwithstanding (Huang et al., 2021). Such instructive counterexamples may be rare, but they can act as a refutation of the received wisdom that digital disconnection is indeed futile.

Fourth and finally, an attention to such counterexamples would also need to at least in part revolve around an acknowledgement of non-individualised resistance. In the caricature I sketched above, the young person or college student is seen as the paradigmatic example of a disconnective agent insofar as they were able to voluntarily abstain from social media or smartphones. However, the college experience is arguably also a zone of exception for those who experience it, as they are often unfettered by care and professional

responsibilities. Hence, we seem to know comparatively little about how such duties might affect a wish for disconnection (although, see Andelsman Alvarez, Chapter 12 in this volume).

Although recent studies have begun to emphasise the roles organisations play in digital disconnection (e.g., Syvertsen, 2023), this is the exception rather than the rule. We should keep in mind that most of us live in societies permeated by organisations and institutions (Perrow, 1991), and that these may both constrain and enable people's abilities to disconnect. Here, a highly instructive context is working life, which has largely been neglected by digital disconnection studies. In this context, individual agency is highly restrained (Anderson, 2017), and ubiquitous digital technologies play a huge role (Plesner & Husted, 2020). These are sites where workers ultimately cede much of their power in technology choice (Bagger, 2021a, 2023). Workplaces may be places where both certain popular media are restricted by order of management and leadership (North, 2010; Guyard & Kaun, 2018), and where workers may attempt to restrict certain media within temporal and spatial boundaries of work (Waller & Ragsdell, 2012).

As pointed out by Fast (2021: 1616), studies of working life “seem more inclined to use connectivity rather than *dis*-connectivity as a point of entry”. Accordingly, studies of non-adoption of work-specific media tend to view such non-use as a problem to be solved, thus falling outside the scope of disconnection studies included here. Hence, the “gray media” (Conrad, 2019) of working life are thus mainly absent from the study of disconnection, and the existing studies usually only focus on a selection of non-widespread platforms (e.g., Bagger & Lomborg, 2021). Nothing perhaps illustrates better the absence of disconnection studies from working life than the fact that when media for person- and body-tracking are studied, it is within a non-work context, even though such media have been codified in working life (Gregg, 2018; but see also Scott Hansen, Chapter 10 in this volume).

Some studies tacitly acknowledge the impact it would have if organisations were to withdraw from popular media (Pelletier et al., 2021), although empirical examples remain scarce. Perhaps the explanation can in part be found by looking at which professional contexts disconnection has been studied within. Here, the focus has been on creative workers and knowledge workers (e.g., Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2022), and to a lesser extent on marginalised workers (e.g., Chib et al., 2021). In contrast, we know very little about the disconnection practices of people with high amounts of political or economic capital by virtue of their working life (although see Fast & Enli, Chapter 7 in this volume). This also serves as an indication that disconnection is not widely studied in organisational settings, where such disconnection might be the most impactful, or agenda-setting, such as among elite populations and lawmakers. For instance, a Enli and Fast (2023) have suggested that politicians are reluctant to perform political interventions in aid of digital



disconnection, preferring instead to cede responsibility to users and platform owners. The tenets of responsibilisation and self-governance thus seem hard to get rid of.

In summary, if digital disconnection as a field is to fully embrace its ethos of openness towards the meaningfulness or necessity of refusing media use, then there are several considerations. This includes looking at new empirical settings (outside the most digitalised nations), new objects of disconnection (outside commercial social media), and new phenomena (such as the disappearance or shutdown of media), as well as considering the disconnecting agent in new ways (embedded in organisational settings which may both hinder or help disconnection). Otherwise, the emerging field risks rendering the allegedly futile nature of digital disconnection into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## Concluding discussion

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the empirical studies produced within the broader wake of the “disconnection turn” (Fast, 2021) and under the ethos of openness to the meaningfulness of digital disconnection (Bucher, 2020; Syvertsen, 2020). My operative question has been how far this ethos has extended itself and which avenues it has yet to extend into. In my mapping the first decade of disconnection research, I have emphasised that digital disconnection has thus far been documented as a Western, social media-centric, temporary, and individualised phenomenon, although a few outlier studies have indicated that this might change. I argue that there is still much room for meaningful expansion into new venues of empirical research. The futility of digital disconnection may be both more deep-set and far more surmountable than has been previously proclaimed, depending on where we choose to look. For now, the present state of research leaves this as an open question.

The story of digital disconnection may begin with ambivalences towards social media, but it need not end there. Instead, the open interest in disconnection could fruitfully extend to all the aspects of life in which media may play a role. I argue that we should bear this openness in mind whenever new media appear on the scene. Additionally, I argue we should be curious about which social contexts and structures media are already embedded in, and which might aid or constrain disconnective possibilities. Insofar as there is a digital backlash occurring, then digital disconnection studies are a prime venue for making sense of it, and I argue that this emerging field has far from reached its full potential.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Salla-Maaria Laaksonen, Jens Sjöberg, Stine Lomborg, Nils S. Borchers, Carina Guyard, Faltin Karlsen, Hallvard Moe, Brita Ytre-Arne, Ana Jorge, and Trine Syvertsen for helpful feedback and encouragement on previous versions of this chapter. I also thank Magdalena Kania-Lundholm for graciously providing the list of her surveyed studies (Kania-Lundholm, 2021).

This research is part of the project “Personalizing the Professional: Changing genres at the work/life intersection”, funded by the Independent Research Council of Denmark (grant no. 8018-00113B).

## References

- Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2020). The problematizing review: A counterpoint to Elsbach and Van Knippenberg's argument for integrative reviews. *Journal of Management Studies*, 57(6), 1290–1304. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12582>
- Anderson, E. (2017). *Private Government: How employers rule our lives (and why we don't talk about it)*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400887781>
- Arksey, H., & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(1), 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>
- Bagger, C. (2021a). An organisational cultivation of digital resignation? Enterprise social media, privacy and autonomy. *Nordicom Review*, 42(S4), 185–198. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0049>
- Bagger, C. (2021b). Social media and work: A framework of eight intersections. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 2027–2046. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/16003>
- Bagger, C. (2023). Professional transmedia selves: Finding a place for enterprise social media. In J. Dalby, & M. Freeman (Eds.) *Transmedia selves: Identity and persona creation in the age of mobile and multiplatform media* (pp. 39–51). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003134015>
- Bagger, C., Einarsson, A. M., Andelsman Alvarez, V., Klausen, M., & Lomborg, S. (2024). Digital resignation and the datafied welfare state. *Big Data & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517231206806>
- Bagger, C., & Lomborg, S. (2021). Overcoming forced disconnection: Disentangling the professional and the personal in pandemic times. In A. Chia, A. Jorge, & T. Karppi (Eds.), *Reckoning with social media* (pp. 167–188). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Baumer, E. P. S., Adams, P., Khovanskaya, V. D., Liao, T. C., Smith, M. E., Schwanda Sosik, V., & Williams, K. (2013). Limiting, leaving, and (re)lapsing: An exploration of Facebook non-use practices and experiences. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 3257–3266. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2470654.2466446>
- Biedermann, D., Schneider, J., & Drachsler, H. (2021). Digital self-control interventions for distracting media multitasking-A systematic review. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 37(5), 1217–1231. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12581>
- Brubaker, J. R., Ananny, M., & Crawford, K. (2016). Departing glances: A sociotechnical account of ‘leaving’ Grindr. *New Media & Society*, 18(3), 373–390. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814542311>
- Bucher, T. (2020). Nothing to disconnect from? Being singular plural in an age of machine learning. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(4), 610–617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720914028>
- Chia, A., Jorge, A., & Karppi, T. (2021). *Reckoning with social media*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Chib, A., Ang, M. W., Ibasco, G. C., & Nguyen, H. (2021). Mobile media (non-)use as expression of agency. *Mass Communication and Society*, 24(6), 818–842. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2021.1970187>

- Conrad, L. (2019). Organization is the message: Gray media. In T. Beyes, L. Conrad, & R. Martin (Eds.), *Organize* (pp. 63–87). University of Minnesota Press.
- Corry, F. (2021). Why does a platform die? Diagnosing platform death at friendster's end. *Internet Histories*, 6(1-2), 31–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2021.1985360>
- Debus, M. S., Zagal, J. P., & Cardona-Rivera, R. E. (2020). A typology of imperative game goals. *Game Studies*, 20(3).
- Dickinson, J. E., Hibbert, J. F., & Filimonau, V. (2016). Mobile technology and the tourist experience: (Dis)connection at the campsite. *Tourism Management*, 57, 193–201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.06.005>
- Drotner, K. (1999). Dangerous media? Panic discourses and dilemmas of modernity. *Paedagogica Historica*, 35(3), 593–619. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0030923990350303>
- Enli, G., & Fast, K. (2023). Political solutions or user responsabilization? How politicians understand problems connected to digital overload. *Convergence*, 29(3), 675–689. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565231160618>
- Enli, G., & Syvertsen, T. (2021). Disconnect to reconnect! Self-help to regain an authentic sense of space through digital detoxing. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 227–252). Oxford University Press.
- Epstein, D. A., Caraway, M., Johnston, C., Ping, A., Fogarty, J., & Munson, S. A. (2016). Beyond abandonment to next steps: Understanding and designing for life after personal informatics tool use. *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1109–1113. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858045>
- Eriksen, R. (2020). *The effects of restricting social media use on subjective well-being: A systematic review* [Master's thesis, University of Bergen, Norway].
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnective work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Fast, K., Lindell, J., & Jansson, A. (2021). Disconnection as distinction: A Bourdieusian study of *where* people withdraw from digital media. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 61–90). Oxford University Press.
- Figueiras, R., Brites, M. J., & Schröder, K. C. (2023). Media resistance and digital disconnection in Western literature. *Matrizes*, 17(2), 171–190.
- Gregg, M. (2018). *Counterproductive: Time management in the knowledge economy*. Duke University Press.
- Guyard, C., & Kaun, A. (2018). Workfulness: Governing the disobedient brain. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 11(6), 535–548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2018.1481877>
- Hakkarainen, P. (2012). 'No good for shovelling snow and carrying firewood': Social representations of computers and the internet by elderly Finnish non-users. *New Media & Society*, 14(7), 1198–1215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812442663>
- Helles, R. (2013). Mobile communication and intermediality. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 1(1), 14–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157912459496>
- Huang, D., Jin, X., & Coghlán, A. (2021). Advances in consumer innovation resistance research: A review and research agenda. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 166, 120594. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.120594>
- Huawei. (2020). *2020 global connectivity index*. <https://www.huawei.com/minisite/gci/en/>
- Jansson, A., & Adams, P. C. (Eds.). (2021). *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection*. Oxford University Press.
- Jensen, J. L., & Bechmann, A. (2021). Sociale medier og big data [Social media and big data]. In M. F. Eskjær, & M. Mortensen (Eds.), *Klassisk og moderne medieteorier* [Classical and modern media theory] (pp. 565–584). Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Jensen, K. B., & Helles, R. (2011). The internet as a cultural forum: Implications for research. *New Media & Society*, 13(4), 517–533. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810373531>
- Kania-Lundholm, M. (2021). Why disconnecting matters. In A. Chia, A. Jorge, & T. Karppi (Eds.), *Reckoning with social media* (p. 13). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Karlsen, F., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2022). Intrusive media and knowledge work: How knowledge workers negotiate digital media norms in the pursuit of focused work. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(15), 2174–2189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1933561>
- Karppi, T. (2018). *Disconnect: Facebook's affective bonds*. University of Minnesota Press.

- Karsay, K., & Vandenbosch, L. (2021). Endlessly connected: Moving forward with agentic perspectives of mobile media (non-)use. *Mass Communication and Society*, 24(6), 779–794. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2021.1974785>
- Kim, J., Cho, C., & Lee, U. (2017). Technology supported behavior restriction for mitigating self-interruptions in multi-device environments. *Proceedings of the ACM on Interactive, Mobile, Wearable and Ubiquitous Technologies*, 1(3), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3130932>
- Levy, Y., & Ellis, T. J. (2006). A systems approach to conduct an effective literature review in support of information systems research. *Informing Science*, 9, 181–212.
- Light, B. (2014). *Disconnecting with social networking sites*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lomborg, S. (2020). Disconnection is futile: Theorizing resistance and human flourishing in an age of datafication. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(3), 301–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120922094>
- Lomborg, S., & Frandsen, K. (2016). Self-tracking as communication. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(7), 1015–1027. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1067710>
- Lomborg, S., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Advancing digital disconnection research: Introduction to the special issue. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27(6), 1529–1535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211057518>
- McCammon, M., & Lingel, J. (2022). Situating dead-and-dying platforms: Technological failure, infrastructural precarity, and digital decline. *Internet Histories*, 6(1-2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2022.2071395>
- Moe, H., & Madsen, O. J. (2021). Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1584–1598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211048969>
- Nassen, L.-M., Vandebosch, H., Poels, K., & Karsay, K. (2023). Opt-out, abstain, unplug: A systematic review of the voluntary digital disconnection literature. *Telematics and Informatics*, 81, 101980. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2023.101980>
- North, M. (2010). An evaluation of employees' attitudes toward social networking in the workplace. *Issues in Information Systems*, 11(1), 192–197. [https://doi.org/10.48009/1\\_iis\\_2010\\_192-197](https://doi.org/10.48009/1_iis_2010_192-197)
- Ozdemir, M. A., & Goktas, L. S. (2021). Research trends on digital detox holiday: A bibliometric analysis, 2012–2020. *Tourism & Management Studies*, 17(3), 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.18089/tms.2021.170302>
- Pearce, P. L., & Gretzel, U. (2012). Tourism in technology dead zones: Documenting experiential dimensions. *International Journal of Tourism Sciences*, 12(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15980634.2012.11434656>
- Pelletier, M. J., Horky, A. B., & Fox, A. K. (2021). Fexit: The effect of political and promotional communication from friends and family on Facebook exiting intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 122, 321–334. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.09.008>
- Perrow, C. (1991). A society of organizations. *Theory & Society*, 20(6), 725–762.
- Peters, J. D. (1999). *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication*. University of Chicago Press.
- Plesner, U., & Husted, E. (2020). *Digital organizing: Revisiting themes in organization studies*. Red Globe Press.
- Portwood-Stacer, L. (2013). Media refusal and conspicuous non-consumption: The performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention. *New Media & Society*, 15(7), 1041–1057. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812465139>
- Radtke, T., Apel, T., Schenkel, K., Keller, J., & von Lindern, E. (2021). Digital detox: An effective solution in the smartphone era? A systematic literature review. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 10(2), 190–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20501579211028647>
- Reinhardt, G., Schwarz, P. E., & Harst, L. (2021). Non-use of telemedicine: A scoping review. *Health Informatics Journal*, 27(4), 1–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14604582211043147>
- Rohman, A., & Ang, P. H. (2021). Disconnection for protection (D4P): An addition to the disconnection repertoire. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(6), 1147–1157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211022689>
- Rymarczuk, R. (2016). Same old story: On non-use and resistance to the telephone and social media. *Technology in Society*, 45, 40–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2016.02.003>

- Samson, A. (2023, March 16). Google glass is dead. Again. *Tom's Guide*.  
<https://www.tomsguide.com/news/google-glass-is-a-failure-again>
- Selwyn, N. (2006). Digital division or digital decision? A study of non-users and low-users of computers. *Poetics*, 34(4-5), 273–292. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2006.05.003>
- Shahar, R. N.-B. (2017). Negotiating agency: Amish and ultra-Orthodox women's responses to the Internet. *New Media & Society*, 19(1), 81–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816649920>
- Skovsgaard, M., & Andersen, K. (2020). Conceptualizing news avoidance: Towards a shared understanding of different causes and potential solutions. *Journalism Studies*, 21(4), 459–476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1686410>
- Soliman, W., & Rinta-Kahila, T. (2020). Toward a refined conceptualization of IS discontinuance: Reflection on the past and a way forward. *Information & Management*, 57(2), 103167. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2019.05.002>
- Soliman, W., & Tuunainen, V. K. (2021). A tale of two frames: Exploring the role of framing in the use discontinuance of volitionally adopted technology. *Information Systems Journal*, 32(3), 473–519. <https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12355>
- Stieger, S., Burger, C., Bohn, M., & Voracek, M. (2013). Who commits virtual identity suicide? Differences in privacy concerns, internet addiction, and personality between Facebook users and quitters. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 16(9), 629–634. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2012.0323>
- Sutton, T. (2020). *Digital re-enchantment: Tribal belonging, new age science and the search for happiness in a digital detoxing community* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, UK].
- Syvertsen, T. (2017). *Media resistance: Dislike, protest, abstention*. Springer.
- Syvertsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The politics of disconnecting*. Emerald.
- Syvertsen, T. (2023). Framing digital disconnection: Problem definitions, values, and actions among digital detox organisers. *Convergence*, 29(3), 658–674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221122910>
- Udende, P. A., Kaior, S., Samuel. Adisa, K., Adisa, R. M., & Ottah, P. (2020). Dormancy of social media sites among Nigerian youths. *Albukhary Social Business Journal*, 1(1), 86–103. <https://doi.org/10.55862/asbjV1I1a008>
- Vanden Abeele, M. M., & Mohr, V. (2021). Media addictions as Apparatchik: What discourse on TV and smartphone addiction reveals about society. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1536–1557. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211038539>
- van Dijk, J. A. G. M. (2006). Digital divide research, achievements and shortcomings. *Poetics*, 34(4-5), 221–235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2006.05.004>
- Waisbord, S. (2022). What is next for de-westernizing communication studies? *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 17(1), 26–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2022.2041645>
- Waller, A. D., & Ragsdell, G. (2012). The impact of e-mail on work-life balance. *Aslib Proceedings*, 64(2), 154–177. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00012531211215178>
- Weiss-Blatt, N. (2021). *The techlash and tech crisis communication* (1st ed.). Emerald.
- Wildermuth, N. (2021). 'Restricted' digital/media repertoires in rural Kenya: A constructive critique. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(3), 438–454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1853791>
- Zitron, E. (2023, May 8). RIP Metaverse, we hardly knew ye. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/metaverse-dead-obituary-facebook-mark-zuckerberg-tech-fad-ai-chatgpt-2023-5>

## PART II

# Work and productivity

We learned from Christoffer Bagger’s review of disconnection research in Part 1 that work is still an understudied theme in digital disconnection studies. Thus, we have only just begun to understand the many ways in which digital disconnection and the digital backlash relate to work and productivity. The chapters in Part II point to three key observations.

### **Disconnection changes how we (think about) work**

First, we learn from the chapters in Part II that digital disconnection ideals and practices transform how we work, as well as how we conceive of work. As Karin Fast and Gunn Enli (Chapter 7) argue with respect to politicians’ daily technology dilemmas, the post-digital society comes with new moralities and demands in terms of how we ought to work with digital media. As “post-digital experts”, political workers productively navigate between different user-modes to cope with problems tied to media overuse, such as digital distraction. For distracted workers seeking support to disconnect, there is help. Yukun You (Chapter 9) provides insights into digital detox apps that promise to amplify users’ productivity. Through a case study of Forest, You dismantles how disconnection – or, by effect, work focus – is cultivated through attractive game elements.

## **(Dis)connection is hard work**

Second, the chapters in Part II bear witness to the fact that navigating between connected and disconnected user-modes is hard work in and of itself. Whereas certain workers – like “always on” politicians – must work hard to reduce digital media use, other professional groups struggle to maintain connectivity during moments of involuntary disconnection. The latter goes for the delivery couriers that appear in Sne Scott Hansen’s chapter (Chapter 10). As Scott Hansen shows, these and other digitally tracked workers must engage in invisibilised “repair work” to maintain a productive amount of connectivity. Similarly, Maja Klausen (Chapter 8) testifies to the efforts that user self-regulation demands in the realm of digital patienthood. To simply disconnect from digital care infrastructures, or “e-health”, is not easy, especially if you are a chronically sick patient who relies on digital technology for treatment.

## **The “good life” is not only about disconnection**

Many of the chapters in Part II feature narratives that essentially (albeit perhaps not explicitly) identify digital disconnection as key to the “good life” in times of digital overload. Narratives entailing such an outlook are visible in, for example, Fast and Enli’s conversations with political workers, in Klausen’s vignettes of digitalised patienthood, and – not least – in the promotional app discourse analysed by You. However, disconnection does not necessarily make it into every story about the “good life”. Scrutinising the public debate around the so-called south working movement, Alessandro Gandini (Chapter 11) reminds us that approaches to technology are context specific. In moderately digitalised Italy, during the Covid-19 pandemic, issues of (dis)connection and digital work lifestyles were largely missing from the debate. Instead, the “good life” surfacing in representations of south working revolved around work–life balance conditioned by hyperconnectivity, and health more generally.

# Political work under post-digital conditions

*Or, how politicians endure digital entrapment and distraction in daily life*

KARIN FAST<sup>I</sup> & GUNN ENLI<sup>II</sup>

<sup>I</sup> DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, KARLSTAD UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN; DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO, NORWAY

<sup>II</sup> DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO, NORWAY

## ABSTRACT

Political workers represent a category of workers whose professional reliance on social media is well-documented. However, while many studies inquire about the role of social media in politics per se, ours is designed to capture political workers' subjective experiences of what it is like to live and work in the post-digital society. This involves asking to what extent – and at what perceived cost – political workers intentionally seek to self-regulate their media use in the direction of disconnection. Qualitative interviews with 14 Norwegian politicians serve as our window into personal experiences of political work under post-digital conditions and into daily, morally induced dilemmas pertaining to work-related use of digital, connective technology. Our results suggest that today's political workers are “post-digital experts”, which is required to learn how to endure the entrapping and distracting mechanisms of the post-digital society.

**KEYWORDS:** political work, post-digital, digital mundane, (dis)connectivity imperative, morality

---

Fast, K., & Enli, G. (2024). Political work under post-digital conditions: Or, how politicians endure digital entrapment and distraction in daily life. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 131–152). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-7>



## Introduction

I think that it is important that we do not end up in a sort of online coercion. That people should be allowed to decide for themselves how connected they want to be. But at the same time, I think that it sometimes tips over into digital shaming. That it becomes ideal to be disconnected, sit in a yoga position, and think about life. (Tomas, politician)

This chapter departs from the observation that the post-digital condition (see also Fast & Syvertsen, Chapter 3 in this volume) comes with new norms about how we ought to live and work with mundane media. As digital media become ordinary and ubiquitous, people like Tomas find themselves having to think about what constitutes appropriate amounts and forms of connectivity in daily life. Apparently, Tomas believes that today's post-digital ideals – “to be disconnected” – may produce what he calls “digital shaming”. At the same time, he is concerned that contemporary society enforces high levels of connectivity, or “online coercion”.

In this chapter, we inquire how individuals, like Tomas, navigate the complex technological and moral environment that signifies the post-digital society. This involves asking to what extent people whose work is inherently reliant on digital media intentionally seek to limit, or think they should limit, their use of these technologies, or “disconnect”. Contrary to what the word post-digital might connote, it does not refer to the ending of the digital age but rather to a specific phase of mediatisation when the digital is both normalised and “disenchanted”, at the same time as analogue, retro, or “disconnected” media or contexts are increasingly valued (Cramer, 2015; Thorén et al., 2019).

Being a politician, Tomas is certainly one of those workers whose job requires high-level use of digital, Internet-based tools (Jost, 2023). Yet, being a politician in Norway, where digital media are increasingly problematised for their perceived harmful effects (Syvertsen, 2020), Tomas is also, as the quote suggests, subjected to repeated public messages about the benefits of disconnecting. How does it feel to live and work under such conditions? What dilemmas do today's political workers face because of their reliance on digital media, in a society where we are constantly told to use our digital devices less? How do they regulate their digital media use when “opting out” completely is not an option?

Politicians' reliance on digital media – notably social media – is well documented (see, e.g., Enli, 2015; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Graham et al., 2016; Jost, 2023; Larsson, 2019). However, unlike most studies inquiring about digital technology in relation to the political field, ours is not primarily interested in the consequences of digital connectivity for campaigning, politics, or even democracy. Rather, our goal is to study subjective experiences of political work under post-digital conditions in order to learn about dilemmas

pertaining to workers' daily use of digital technology and connectivity. We argue that the politicians' profound dependency on digital media makes them a particularly interesting group to study in order to learn about the tensions and paradoxes that signify the post-digital society in general, and post-political working lives in particular.

## **Study rationale and previous research on political work**

Per its focus on contemporary digitalised work conditions, our study aligns with the subdivision of mediatisation research that theorises the digital mundane, or the “banal” entanglements of media and daily life (Wilson & Yochim, 2017; see also, e.g., Leszczynski, 2020; Pink et al., 2017). As such, it bears more resemblance with, for example, Maltby and Thornham's (2016) study of the digital mundane in the military than it does with studies of the influence of digitalisation on political communication per se. Hitherto, however, in their worthwhile quest to inquire how digital media “become familiar, less strange and habituated” (Pink et al., 2017: 2), scholars researching the digital mundane have largely neglected, or treated as secondary, the topic of disconnectivity. This is not the case with the burgeoning field of post-digital studies, where recent research recognises digital disconnection as a key response to technological “disenchantment” (see, e.g., Adams & Jansson, 2023; Fast, 2021; Thorén et al., 2019). Our study contributes to this theory-laden research field by empirically displaying how post-digital sensibilities, tactics, and virtues express themselves in and mould contemporary working lives.

Now, politicians are far from the only group of professionals whose daily doings are preconditioned by ubiquitous digital media and connectivity. Rather, new technology changes the prerequisites for workers across diverse work sectors (see, e.g., Fast & Jansson, 2019; Schaefer et al., 2018), including the broader category of knowledge work to which political work can be referred (Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2022). However, we argue that political workers represent a particularly interesting group to study in relation to digital media and (dis)connectivity for three main reasons.

First, and as argued above, political work (in post-digital Norway) makes a valuable empirical context because of its profound dependency on digital, connective technology. Politics have always relied on media (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Schulz, 2014), and as early adopters of new digital media – including social media (Jost, 2023; Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014) – politicians arguably represent the “avant-garde” of mediatised work sectors. Digital technology has had a paradigmatic impact on how political work – such as campaigning, press contacts, civic interaction, or internal organisation – is done (Chadwick, 2017), and ubiquitous connectivity has accentuated already

extraordinary work conditions, including diffuse, long, and unconventional working hours (Brichzin, 2020; Hoffmann & Suphan, 2017), constant exposure to public scrutiny (Thompson, 1995, 2018), and demands of keeping a continuous dialogue with the public, notably voters and potential voters (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; McGregor, 2018). Social media, which is the focal point of most “mediatisation of politics” research, has been embraced by politicians worldwide as an instrument for, among other things, visibility and authenticity (Enli, 2015; Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Graham et al., 2016; Larsson, 2019; Larsson & Moe, 2012; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). They have also triggered a personalisation of political communication (Bennett, 2012; McGregor, 2018), even in party-centred systems (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013); although some Scandinavian politicians delegate social media management to political advisors or communication officers, many also carry out such work tasks themselves (Enli & Naper, 2016). For some time now, social media maintenance has been “routine” political work (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014: 655), enforcing political work’s character as an ongoing endeavour (Brichzin, 2020; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013).

Second, political workers constitute an interesting group to study because their job, straightforwardly put, is to solve societal problems. Hence, we might expect political workers to have reflected relatively more on societal dilemmas of different sorts, compared with other groups. As we further explain in our methods section, our 14 respondents – local politicians, members of parliament, and ministers – were partly selected because of their professional engagement with precisely digitalisation matters. Hence, regardless of their individual stance towards digital media (they range from outspoken digitalisation advocates to sceptics known for their more critical outlooks on mundane technology), we expect the participants of this study to have reflected particularly on problems connected to digital media (over-)use and to be comparatively more familiar with contemporary technology discourse. The fact that our participants are more or less specialised in digitalisation matters brings us, in turn, to the third reason why they make a relevant research population: They are opinion leaders and norm-setters (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021), with extraordinary potential to dictate the societal dialogue about digital technology and connectivity and, in continuation of this, to influence people’s minds about what it means to lead a “good life” in the post-digital society.

Per its focus, then, on a powerful yet at the same time extraordinarily “entangled” category of workers, our study is well vested to bring questions of media-induced precarity and privilege to the fore. Also, by acknowledging the “digital undergrowth” that sustains political work beyond merely campaign platforms and social media (e.g., wardrobe apps), our study can contribute additional clues about why it seems so difficult – even for otherwise goal-oriented, resourceful, and knowledgeable individuals – to fulfil post-digital desires of digital disconnection.

Aiming to unveil subjective experiences of what it is like to work as a politician in the contemporary, post-digital epoch, our study responds to recent calls for more research that studies mediatisation “from within”, which means recognising everyday life as an arena in which “media are not only present but also made meaningful [emphasis original]” (Jansson et al., 2020: 2). Thus, whereas a parallel study conducted by us (Enli & Fast, 2023) inquires about politicians as agents of power with a unique potential to shape media society “from above” (see Andersson, 2017), our present study approaches them first and foremost as (extra)ordinary media users. They are extraordinary for the reasons detailed above, yet also ordinary in their roles as partners, parents, citizens, consumers, and so on, who – just like many of us – struggle daily to lead a “good life” with digital media. This approach also means that we, in this chapter, do not pay particular attention to our respondents’ political bias, in terms of, for example, position on a left–right continuum.

The chapter proceeds with an elaboration of our theoretical context, which evolves around the concepts of the “post-digital” and the “disconnectivity imperative”. Thereafter, we present the study’s empirical data and methodological approach. Our empirical section provides key insights into the prospects and perils of digital (dis)connectivity in the everyday working lives of politicians. The concluding section extrapolates our main findings and offers some forward-looking reflections on the social ramifications of the post-digital condition and its moral underpinnings.

## **Theoretical framework: Work and life under post-digital conditions**

### **The post-digital society and digital disenchantment**

Based on two key observations that correspond with post-digital theory (e.g., Adams & Jansson, 2023; Cramer, 2015; Fast, 2021), we here identify Norway as a post-digital society. First, as one of the world’s most digitalised societies (EU, 2022), Norway represents a context where digital connectivity is as ordinary as it is ubiquitous (Ytre-Arne, 2023). Thus, Norway meets what we could call the infrastructural criteria for qualifying as post-digital: The digital is, so to speak, hegemonic (Berry, 2015). Second, Norway – like the rest of Scandinavia – is currently the home of a public and popular debate about the harmful effects of digital media technology and connectivity. Thus, the digital is not only normalised but also increasingly “disenchanted” (Cramer, 2015), or problematised – another significant indicator of the post-digital condition (see also Thorén et al., 2019).

The politicians who participated in our study were clearly familiar with disconnection jargon and used expressions like “digital overload”, “invasive

media”, “popcorn brain”, and “screen addiction” when talking about contemporary media society. Equally so, they tended to voice typical post-digital desires of “escape” (Humayun & Belk, 2020) or “return” (Adams & Jansson, 2023) – to gadgets, places, or situations representing the analogue, non-digital, or disconnected. We detect in our data different versions of post-digital sensibility, which involves “not merely the hopeless and nostalgic attempt to return to the comfortable isolation of predigital life, but rather a strategic, geographical accommodation with digital society” (Adams & Jansson, 2023: 699).

Now, the fact that the post-digital condition is increasingly affecting working life (Fast, 2021) does not mean that the “connectivity imperative” (Gregg, 2011), which has structured knowledge work for years, has become obsolete. Certainly, digital, connective, and mobile technologies continue to afford and stimulate knowledge workers to be “always-on” and “available” (Fast & Jansson, 2019). Such work styles are further reinvigorated by neoliberally induced virtues like grit, entrepreneurialism, self-optimisation, busyness, and flexibility (see also, e.g., Gregg, 2018; Madsen, 2015; Pugh, 2016). However, in the post-digital society, knowledge workers are simultaneously also increasingly affected by a disconnectivity imperative – a commercially underpinned moral framework that promotes, or even makes obligatory, “sometimes-off” workstyles (Fast, 2021; see also Fast et al., 2021).

### **The disconnectivity imperative and post-digital tactics**

The disconnectivity imperative has many faces. Workers seeking protection from intrusive media may purchase various types of support to achieve “digital declutter” or “digital minimalism” (Newport, 2019). Such help comes in the form of, for example, disconnectivity apps, self-help literature, digital detox workshops, or digital-free tourism. In the last few years, some states and companies have also implemented regulations intended to protect workers’ “right to disconnect” (Secunda, 2019), and recent literature recognises the coming of the “post-digital workplace”, where disconnectivity is promoted through the interior or architecture (Fast, 2021; Tahsiri, 2023).

Moreover, digital disconnection research provides insights into what we refer to as post-digital tactics; initiatives undertaken to limit (perceived) digital connectivity. For example, Mannell (2019: 81) distinguished five ways in which the disconnective affordances of the mobile phone can be used for the sake of “disentanglement”, or the “loosening of ties to attention, where device and platform retreat in a person’s field of awareness”, while Kennedy and colleagues (2020) have suggested a typology including “partial use” (e.g., using a device only during specific hours), “active resistance” (e.g., not using social media), and “passive neglect” (e.g., not using an app because of disinterest).

For the purpose of our study, it is particularly relevant to recognise post-digital tactics as a tool for impeding the “spillover” of work into non-work domains, or vice versa (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Proof of the capacity

of media self-regulation to function as a form of “boundary work” (Kreiner et al., 2009) in favour of domain segmentation is provided in recent studies of knowledge workers. Fast and Jansson (2019: 109) identified “strategic border work” as an increasingly indispensable life-skill for workers who rely on connective media for both personal and professional purposes (see also Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2022). Moreover, several studies find evidence of boundary work in relation to social media specifically. Bossio and Holton (2019: 14) suggested that journalists turn to disconnectivity as a remedy for “social media fatigue” and as a coping mechanism for bearing “to live with connectivity”. Siegert and Löwstedt (2019: 29) similarly identified “scheduling technology-free time”, “deleting connections”, and “ignoring” Facebook notifications and messages as commonplace tactics amongst busy nongovernmental organisation workers.

In a previous publication, one of us referred to the work of (self-)regulating digital connectivity as “post-digital housekeeping” (Fast, 2021). To recognise disconnective practices as a form of invisible, mundane work is to acknowledge some of the ways in which such work may reproduce power relations, including gender norms and class privilege. Previous empirical studies (e.g., Fast et al., 2021) also suggest that post-digital sensibilities and tactics may be sources of social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) in and of themselves.

## **The post-digital and social distinction**

Sociological research has long been a source of insight into peoples’ conscious or unconscious ways of distancing themselves from others by way of non-consumption (e.g., Bellezza, 2023; Bourdieu, 1984; Wilk, 1997). In the realm of digital disconnection studies, Jorge (2019: 9) has shown that Instagram users promoting social media fasts tend to distance themselves from users who are deemed “too connected”. Furthermore, supporting Portwood-Stacer’s (2013) observation that “conspicuous” Facebook abstention may serve as a marker of status and distinction, Fast, Lindell, and Jansson (2021) identified digital disconnection as an “emergent symbolic battlefield”. They did so on the basis of a large-scale Bourdieusian study revealing that people with greater capital volumes, and the culturally rich especially (i.e., highly educated, culturally knowledgeable groups), are more inclined to express feelings of “digital unease” as well as post-digital desires to disconnect. Relatedly, Adams and Jansson (2023) pointed out that post-digital sensibility – and the possibility to voluntarily “disconnect” – is unevenly distributed across the population. As they remarked apropos of digital detox camps and other forms of spatial withdrawal, only “a small percentage of people in wealthy countries, and a smaller percent globally, can enjoy the privilege of being able to retreat to a cabin in the woods” (Adams & Jansson, 2023: 669) (see also Jansson, Chapter 17 in this volume).

Provided that digital disconnection is elevated to an “increasingly positive state that includes a higher and more cultured set of social expressions” (Hardey & Atkinson, 2018: 566), it is bound to become important for people “in the know” (e.g., tech-savvy and trend-sensitive politicians) to take the “right” stance against digital technology and connectivity as well as against *people* who are “too connected”. While a thorough, Bourdieusian, class analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter, perspectives like these should be kept in mind when investigating political workers’ statements about their digital media use and experiences with connectivity. We return to the moral underpinnings of the post-digital condition and its stratifying powers in the concluding section.

## Method and material

Our study involves qualitative semi-structured interviews with 14 Norwegian political workers, including local politicians, members of parliament, and ministers. Three main criteria guided our selection of informants. The first, representability, encouraged us to recruit respondents from all nine political parties represented in the Norwegian parliament at the time of data collection and, to the extent possible, balance the number of respondents according to the size of each party. Our second criterion, competence, directed us to politicians within each party whose experience or responsibility regarding digitalisation issues stood out, such as politicians who have been responsible for digitalisation strategies or have voiced opinions publicly about digital connectivity and its challenges. Our third key criterion, diversity, required us to consider gender balance (8 male, 6 female) as well as the ratio between national and local politicians (9 national, 5 local).

Our study departs from the notion that the post-digital condition requires people to constantly reflect upon and manoeuvre their media practices in relation to the norms of the (dis)connectivity imperative. The interview manual was adjusted to each individual respondent, but all were asked to 1) reflect on their own mundane use of digital, connective media, at work and in private contexts (e.g., “How and for what do you use your smartphone?”, “(How) do you use social media?”, “When do you check your e-mails?”, etc.), and 2) tell us about any practices or routines that they have developed (or not) for the sake of self-regulation (e.g., “Do you ever turn off your smartphone?”, “Have you ever visited or felt like visiting a digital detox camp?”, “Do you have rules in the family for when or how to use screens?”).

The period of data collection coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, which is why all interviews had to be conducted with consideration of social distancing regulations or recommendations. Most interviews employed a video-call platform, but a couple were regular telephone calls. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. They were all audio-recorded and transcribed in full length (by the company Semantix). Respondents were asked to sign a

consent form and were offered the chance to review their quotes for the sake of data validity and ethical correctness. The interview language was primarily Norwegian, and we have translated all quotes ourselves. With respect to respondents' integrity, we have assigned pseudonyms and we do not mention which political party a respondent represents.

Theoretically, our analysis is guided by the framework presented above. Methodologically, it is inspired by approaches enabling us to study "mediatisation from within" (Jansson et al., 2020). In developing such an "emic" approach to mediatisation, Jansson and colleagues (2020) used as one of their vantage points Pugh's (2013) model for reflexive interpretive analyses of interview data. In short, Pugh's (2013: 51) model encourages the researcher to be observant of not only what respondents explicitly say, but also of how they say things; of expressions of "meta-feelings" (i.e., "how we feel about how we feel"); and of statements potentially revealing what respondents believe is "honourable" to think or feel. We attend to the "how" aspect of our conversations with the politicians mainly in our concluding discussion.

## **Empirics**

The following section presents key observations from our empirical analysis and is structured along three themes that reflect our respondents' subjective experiences of working under post-digital conditions: trapped, distracted, and enduring.

### **Trapped**

Our study confirms previous research testifying to an ongoing platformisation of politics – that is, to an increased reliance on social media in the political field (e.g., Enli, 2017; Graham et al., 2016; Lilleker et al., 2019). Subsequently, it also testifies to a general platformisation of knowledge work (Richardson, 2021) through which social media and other "structured online spaces" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019: 25) become part of mundane workplace geographies (Bagger, 2021).

A recurrent interview trope is that political work demands visibility and ongoing digital communication with voters, news media, and key stakeholders. Many of our respondents were explicit about their appreciation of social media, describing them as tools that make political work both easier and more meaningful. This applies even for respondents who have been personally affected by online hatred and fake news circulated in social media, like Eivor. While criticising Facebook for operating by algorithms that premier affective content, she also appreciated the kind of "unfiltered" direct communication with voters that social media afford. Along similar lines of argument, Sissel said that social media provide "unprecedented opportunities to be visible, edit your own messages, and connect with voters that you otherwise would



have missed”. However, she was also concerned about the invasiveness of social media:

Social media are good for politicians. However, they do make you very vulnerable. Posts coming through your phone can feel very invasive. As an elected representative, you expose yourself and make yourself vulnerable to critique. But the problem is that this now happens around the clock.

Thus, many of our respondents have an ambivalent relationship with social media. Using social media is not so much a choice as it is an obligation. Facebook and Twitter were described as particularly indispensable tools for communicating political visions and for building a public reputation and profile. Richard explicitly said: “You almost don’t exist, if you aren’t present on Facebook”. The following utterances – testifying to the perceived indispensability of social media – can be regarded as variants of this statement:

In my job as a politician, I need to be active on Facebook. [...] External communication is a part of my job, I need to build a profile, as a politician, for the party and our policies. (Grethe)

Social media is very important for every political party and organisation. (Olav)

We spent a lot of time to understand Facebook because political parties need to distribute their message. (Aksel)

We risk missing profiling opportunities if we take long breaks from social media. (Bente)

However, while social media seem essential to the daily work of our respondents and continuously reappear in our interview transcripts, they represent but one type of connective environment that today’s politicians dwell in. Eivor, for example, expressed that she uses digital media as a stylist in her post-digital everyday life as a high-profile politician:

I use an app called Stylebook. It looks like this [the respondent demonstrates the app via our video call platform]. I keep all my clothes here. So, if I, for example, want to wear a dress today, I can search for work dresses and find all my dresses here. And then I can just scroll down. [...] So, first you learn what’s in your closet. Secondly, you can plan what to wear. You can plan how to pack your luggage, and you can find out which clothes you use. If it has been a year since you wore that piece of clothing, then you might as well sell it.

Indeed, Eivor knows the value of smooth logistics and is keen to use smartphone services to facilitate her everyday life as a profiled politician and private person. Eivor’s enthusiastic demonstration of her wardrobe app reminded us that political work extends beyond the chores that we typically

associate with the term, such as campaigning, press contacts, civic interaction, or internal organisation (Chadwick, 2017). Politicians must pay a great deal of attention to their appearance: their clothes, their way of speaking, and their way of relating to others through mediated forms of interaction. In other words, they must put a lot of work into the “management of visibility” (Thompson, 2018: 23). To that end, apparently, logistical digital media are useful.

Continuing to explain her ordinary work routines, Eivor also told us how “the most fulfilling thing I know is to have empty inboxes”, which grants her a feeling of being “free”. On a follow-up question inquiring if this means that she checks her e-mails even during national holidays, she replied: “I don’t think I do it on Christmas Eve [laughter]. But I very rarely see any of those red icons [i.e., notifications of unread messages]. I practically have zero. So, yes...!”. The fact that Eivor laughed while saying this indicates that she was aware that, in the eyes of others, checking e-mails on Christmas Eve would constitute over-use.

Overall, our interview transcripts are rich in narratives about how work and non-work integrate due to the character of political work. Pinpointing this circumstance, Olav described political work as a lifestyle which demands that work spills over into other life domains: “My job as a politician does not stop when I am on my bike home from the town hall. Work infuses my whole life, and things happen in the evenings”. In slightly different words, Grethe declared that her work awards her smartphone something of a life companion status: “I need it for my work, and my work is 24/7”.

The convergence of work and non-work time or activity is not only explained with reference to the inherent infinity of political work (see Brichzin, 2020) but also as something caused by digital media affording constant connectivity. This goes especially for the smartphone, which all our respondents use daily, for both private and professional purposes. Nicklas, for example, said that he uses his smartphone during almost all his “awake leisure time”. And this is even though he is deeply critical of the prevalent role that the smartphone has come to play in people’s lives and fights a personal battle to curtail his own – in his words – “false need”. His experience was that any attempt to put away his phone was bound to fail, albeit with few negative consequences:

Every New Year, I have sort of a New Year’s resolution and that is to drink less, exercise more, and put away my phone more often. And that always fails, of course. That is how it is for most people, but I think that it is a struggle that very many must fight. But, as a principle, I do not carry my phone to the bedroom, and that is hard enough, right? But that is the only thing that I find working; that you do not bring your phone everywhere. That you leave it aside.

Shedding further light on what we could thus label the “smartphonisation” of political work, Sissel explained how a physical injury forced her to reduce her smartphone use. Due to excessive use – “six hours per day on average, and during certain periods it can be much more” – Sissel ended up suffering from smartphone hand pain:

My finger is almost well now. I took responsibility, went to the doctor, and stopped using my phone all the time. What I got was a “trigger finger”, which you get from overloading your tendon. [...] The fact that I used my mobile phone so much that I hurt myself physically served as an immediate reminder that it can be a good idea to break free also mentally.

Yet, as the next section makes evident, to “break free” from the entangling mechanisms of digital connective media is no easy task.

## **Distracted**

As indicated previously, some respondents expressed that they are fundamentally positive about technology, even though they too identified problems, such as “context collusion” (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). This optimistic position is reflected in a somewhat drastic statement left by Tomas:

I have a very optimistic and positive outlook on technology. The moment I get the offer, I will gladly operate a mobile chip into my body!

Like Tomas, many respondents embraced what we above identify as the platformisation and smartphonisation of political work and acknowledged how digital technologies “improve life quality for many people” (Hans). However, almost all respondents said they use their digital devices “too much” and that external pressures to be available and visible to others can create feelings of entanglement. Aksel, for example, articulated such sentiments:

I think that I am too much on my phone. Especially when I was the leader of [anonymised youth party]. I have recently resigned. Then, I felt that I always needed to be available. This was because I worked during the daytime, while other elective representatives were active in the evening, after school, and work. Then I had to work in the evening too. I felt that I had to be available all the time.

Most respondents talked about digital distractions as something that they must deal with on a daily basis, and which affect their work negatively. Olav’s everyday work tasks are – at least by format – like those of many knowledge workers: reading reports, writing documents, searching for information, participating in meetings, and making professional social media updates. Olav is one out of many respondents who talked about digital media as distracting, and he explained how he often falls for the temptation “to check this

or that”. Such behaviour, he testified, affects his concentration negatively:

Writing a document on my computer, I get distracted by the e-mail that is only a click away, and an always-full inbox that needs to be dealt with. I can always find something more fun to do than to write a speech or a commentary.

The phone is definitely destroying concentration. It destroys reading and writing, as well as watching TV, because social media makes us want to multitask.

Olav was concerned not only about his own inability to ignore social media notifications and other digital allures, but also about how the entire working life seems to change. Although recognising that digital tools might make us “more efficient”, he unhappily also observed how “the coffee break is being replaced with five minutes of Facebook and a coffee cup”.

The fuzzy media environment experienced by Olav was also shared by Anja, who reported habitually using her smartphone’s scrolling function when reading political documents, even though she acknowledged that this reading strategy takes away the deep focus that reviewing political documents requires. Relatedly, Richard, in his 50s, declared how digital texts made up of hyperlinks promote sporadic reading and “jumping” from one context to another. In a similar vein, Hans, who uses his smartphone around six hours daily, said that he sometimes feels as if he has a “popcorn brain” – a term popular amongst digital detox advocates and popularised in news media. He explained how he regularly finds himself aimlessly browsing Facebook only to remember, “15 minutes later – oh, that is what I was supposed to do!” Similar experiences were voiced by Eivor, who told us how she typically picks up her phone to “check if something has happened” and “45 minutes and countless Facebook images later” detecting that “I am still scrolling”.

Testimonies like these are reminiscent of Bengtsson’s (2012: 189) media morality study, which found that media are typically perceived as “time thieves” and “despots” that force us to do things we may not want to do. Some of our interviewees even employed a drug metaphor when accounting for the tempting powers of digital, connective media. Nicklas, who is generally deeply critical of the tech industry for its persuasive designs, compared the smartphone to cocaine:

If I should read a book because I am going to write about it, I cannot have the phone in the same room, because then I will constantly check my phone. But it is almost worse than cocaine. Mobile phone addiction is acute, and I think that it is designed by companies to be that way.

The phrase “mobile phone addiction” was also employed by Aksel, who pessimistically noted that: “we live in an age when we constantly steer into our screen”.

In aggregate, the digital mundane of political workers emerges as something of a “connectivity maze” that is hopelessly easy to get lost in. However, even though all our respondents testified to the entrapping and distracting nature of digital media, many of them had also developed tactics that help them endure post-digital work conditions.

## Enduring

Confirming Norway’s status as a post-digital society, where the digital is both hegemonic and disenchanted, many Norwegian tourism sites have begun to use their “off the grid” or “digital dead zone” character as a selling point (Syvertsen, 2022). In doing so, the Norwegian tourism sector surfs on a global wave of niche tourism, typically marketed as “digital-free”, “mobile-free”, or “Wi-Fi-free” vacationing (see Part IV of this volume). To concur with Adams and Jansson (2023), these sites constitute a form of post-digital territory in an otherwise digitally saturated world. One of our informants told us that she routinely travels to an Internet-free cabin for some relief:

I particularly enjoy the Easter holiday, when I stay at a Norwegian Trekking Association cabin without any access to the Internet. This is really good for me, and good for my family, because it is easier to unwind compared to a place where you constantly want to or have to digitally connect. (Tone)

Like Tone, most of our respondents creatively “exploit moments and spaces where the connective imperative is weakest” (Mannell, 2017: 44). For example, Anja described her Internet-free farmhouse as a crucial place in her life, one that helps her tolerate her hectic work in the Norwegian capital:

Every summer, I stay in a tiny farmhouse and totally unwind. No Internet, no shower, no water toilet, but simply being in nature. This space is very important for me, it makes it possible to work in Oslo the rest of the year.

Relatedly, Olav disclosed that while “never completely disconnected”, he enjoys the kind of “passive neglect” (Kennedy et al., 2020) of available technologies that outdoor activities like hiking, biking, or boating promote. Activities like these, he found, enforce a form of *inevitable* disconnectivity:

I am never completely disconnected, but when I, for example, visit our cottage in the summer I use my smartphone less. I do other things, which keep me from checking my phone constantly.

Other respondents’ post-digital tactics involve playing tennis (Tomas), baking bread (Sissel), or gardening (Sissel). However, Tomas receives notifications via his smartwatch and remains online while playing tennis, “in case something happens”. For Eivor, family situations are no-phone situations, or at least that is how she thinks it should be – if only the smartphone was not so necessary for “absolutely everything you do in life”:

Especially when I am with the children in the family, then I leave the phone be. If we don't need it for anything. But I do keep it close to me. I don't mean to suggest that I never use it. I always keep it close to me. But that's simply because you use it for absolutely everything you do in life.

In a similar vein, Sissel and Olav expressed a preference to put away their phones during family dinners and work meetings, while Nicklas and Richard considered that it is particularly important to not use the smartphone in the bedroom. When in need of concentration, Aksel preferably hides his smartphone, “behind the curtains or something”. When putting away or hiding their smartphones, the respondents practice what Mannell (2019) calls “disentanglement at device level”. Such practices exist next to “disentanglement at platform level” or “jamming”, which implies that connectivity is manipulated via the disconnective affordances of connected media (see Mannell, 2019). In our data, such tactics surface in statements like the following:

I removed my notifications two years ago. (Hans)

I use flight mode to protect myself, to be unavailable. (Nicklas)

I have turned off all sounds, because if you hear a sound, you must react. (Bente)

I always have the phone on soundless, including ringing. (Richard)

If I really need to focus, I sometimes turn off the Wi-Fi on my laptop, to avoid notifications in my side-sight all the time. (Tone)

Tactics like these afford a kind of post-digital “micro-territory” of media control (see Adams & Jansson, 2023; Bengtsson, 2018). Yet, connective media demand our attention even when removed or silenced (Bengtsson, 2018). Perhaps aware of this, some of our respondents choose to avoid certain media technologies altogether. Aksel, for example, told of how he practices a form of strategic avoidance on both device and platform levels. He rejects certain technology because he is afraid it would distract him too much – “I have chosen not to buy an Apple watch because I do not want to receive constant notifications” – and deliberately shuns social media after mediated debates because he knows “there is going to be negativity”.

However, dodging connective media or logging off for a longer period is very difficult for our respondents. Even if many of them expressed that they yearn for digital breaks, they still need to keep their connected devices within reach. Grethe uses Hold – a self-help app that promotes and awards offline periods. However, when asked if it is difficult to put away her smartphone altogether, she replied:

Yes, I cannot do that when I am at work. Then I would not be doing my job. But I can remove apps and all notifications. And I can try to put it

away during weekends, for a few hours. I can do things like that from time to time, but you must be rather stubborn to do so.

Johan too put his trust in the more mundane ways of disconnecting and dismissed what we might call “digital detox orthodoxy”:

I perfectly understand why people want to do a digital detox, but you do not have to cut your head off when all you want is to shave. What I mean is that there are far more convenient ways to avoid a lifestyle of being constantly connected. I have removed notifications from all my social media, I put away my phone, I do not carry my phone in the afternoons.

In sum, it seems as if the escalating mediatisation of political work and life – here surfacing mainly as processes of platformisation and smartphonisation – does leave our respondents tethered to their digital, connective technologies. Yet, by realising their desires to disconnect through mundane post-digital tactics, our respondents revealed themselves not only as “digital experts” (per their professional political profiles) but also as “*post*-digital experts” who have learned – or are learning – how to cope with the entangling affordances of digital, connective media.

## Concluding discussion

Designed to capture how political workers navigate the post-digital society and its moral underpinnings in the form of the ambiguous (dis)connectivity imperative, our study provides insights into political workers’ efforts to self-regulate their digital media use. On the one hand, such efforts do come across as rather futile, as our respondents recurrently must return to user modes that they themselves described as unpleasant or even harmful. As Adams and Jansson (2023: 667) maintained, they may succeed in temporarily “disconnecting” but can hardly completely disentangle from the socio-technical constraints of the post-digital society. A general perception amongst the respondents is that they use digital media “too much”. On the other hand, while our respondents neither can nor always want to escape digital connectivity altogether, they can at least make technology feel less intrusive through more or less mundane post-digital tactics.

This brings us to the first of two main conclusions that we may derive from our study: Political workers are post-digital experts who persistently self-regulate their daily media use to minimise feelings of entrapment and distraction. Notably, politicians’ post-digital expertise involves tactics that increase the physical or perceived distance between the user and their digital devices, such as leaving the smartphone behind when going outdoors. Similarly, muting a smartphone or removing noisy notifications can create a sense of withdrawal, even if the device remains physically close. Hence, our findings align with other researchers’ observations of digital disconnection

as essentially spatial practices that may generate (micro-)territories where digital media are not hegemonic (Adams & Jansson, 2023; Jansson & Adams, 2021; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). On this note, we can conclude that our respondents' tactics for regulating digital connectivity for the sake of, for example, work focus, are not unique per se; on the contrary, similar practices appear in studies of other professional groups, such as journalists or business workers (Bossio & Holton, 2019; Fast & Lindell, 2016; Maltby & Thornham, 2016; Siegert & Löwstedt, 2019). Thus, the fact that our research population constitutes an exceptionally entangled category of workers does not seem to have produced any incomparable "innovations" in terms of which kind of post-digital tactics they employ. Perhaps this finding is an indication that post-digital expertise is becoming obligatory in many realms of (working) life structured by the connectivity imperative (see Fast, 2021). Nonetheless, few other work sectors demand as high levels of ongoing mediated visibility, availability, and interaction as does political work, and this is possibly part of the explanation of why our respondents are so consistently concerned with boundaries and how to protect themselves – or their loved ones – from the downsides of digital media and connectivity. Disconnective work appears in our data as yet another constant task in political work, to be dealt with alongside other ongoing work responsibilities. Against this backdrop, we should ask what this might entail in terms of who is likely to become tomorrow's politician: Who is willing – and capable – of keeping up with the pressures of the connectivity imperative and still lead a "good life" with (or in) media, socially and privately?

Our second conclusion is that political workers readily employ post-digital discourse, thereby legitimising post-digital imaginaries and virtues. Most respondents used language that signifies either a disenchantment with the digital (e.g., testifying to its entrapping or distracting tendencies) or a valorisation of disconnectivity (e.g., talking fondly about Internet-free places or activities). The interviews were carried out at a time when the "digital backlash", in the form of big media scandals and debates (e.g., the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018; see Helles and Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume), was already in our collective consciousness, and the respondents effortlessly used jargon like "screen time", "dopamine", "information overload", "reward systems in the brain", "invasive", "addictive", "technological invasion", and "popcorn brain" when talking about their experiences with digital media and connectivity. Independently of our interview questions, the respondents also referred to public figures or texts that have come to shape public discourse, including, for example, the Swedish author and "screen time" debater Anders Hansen, and Nicholas Carr's popular book *The Shallows* (2010). In other words, they (re)produced a way of talking about digital media and connectivity that we recognise from the wider disconnection debate in society. This language, in turn, tends to reflect certain perceptions about not only the



nature of digital technology (e.g., being like “cocaine”), but also how we – as a society or individuals – ought to behave around mundane technology. This includes ideas about where or when technology use should be kept to a minimum. Regarding this, we can confirm that our respondents’ inclination to enact post-digital territoriality (Adams & Jansson, 2023), especially in social situations and intimate spaces (i.e., the bedroom), is in line with results from other studies inquiring about the moral geographies of disconnection (e.g., Fast et al., 2021). As a collective, then, the politicians in our study reproduce rather than challenge not only post-digital discourse but also post-digital sensibilities and virtues. Considering the normative power of language as well as politicians’ exceptional position as “authorised” opinion leaders and norm-setters, we need to ask ourselves how politicians’ legitimisation of post-digital imaginaries and virtues may influence how people in general think and feel about life in post-digital societies.

On this note, however, it is worthwhile to repeat that not all of our respondents unreservedly embrace post-digital ideals, and to conclude this chapter with some forward-looking perspectives, let us return to where we started – with Tomas and his concerns that post-digital moralities might tip over into “digital shaming”. Tomas seemed to be worried that people who refuse or fail to disconnect will be discredited and essentially misrecognises the ideal “to be disconnected, sit in a yoga position, and think about life”. Utterances of this kind are interesting in the light of previous literature’s recognition of the post-digital, or disconnectivity, as a moral high ground and source of social distinction (Fast et al., 2021; Hardey & Atkinson, 2018; Portwood-Stacer, 2013).

Sociological research suggests that the distinction-making powers of a cultural practice weaken gradually as more and more people begin to adopt it (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, per this reasoning, when digital disconnectivity shifts from being a lifestyle preference to becoming a necessity in post-digital (working) lives, we could expect that people also change their way of judging and talking about their own and other people’s use of digital technology. Therefore, we anticipate future research to keep track of how different people’s ways of acting around – and talking about – digital connective technology change over time, as post-digital desires, sensibilities, and tactics become mainstream (see also Fast & Syvertsen, Chapter 3 in this volume). Could it be that we are starting to see the contours of a societal disenchantment with the post-digital?

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge funding from the Norwegian Research Council (grant no. 287563) for the project “Intrusive media, ambivalent users and digital detox (DIGITOX)” (2019–2024).

## References

- Adams, P. C., & Jansson, A. (2023). Postdigital territoriality: Disentangling from digital media as a return to place. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 113(3), 658–674. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2022.2124147>
- Andersson, M. (2017). Mediatization from below. In O. Driessens, G. Bolin, & A. Hepp (Eds.), *Dynamics of mediatization: Institutional change and everyday transformations in a digital age* (pp. 35–56). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62983-4\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62983-4_3)
- Bagger, C. (2021). Social media and work: A framework of eight intersections. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 2027–2046. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/16003>
- Bellezza, S. (2023). Distance and alternative signals of status: A unifying framework. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 50, 322–342. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucac049>
- Bengtsson, S. (2012). Imagined user modes: Media morality in everyday life. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15(2), 181–196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877911416883>
- Bengtsson, S. (2018). Sensorial organization as an ethics of space: Digital media in everyday life. *Media and Communication*, 6(2), 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i2.1337>
- Bennett, W. L. (2012). The personalization of politics: Political identity, social media, and changing patterns of participation. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 20–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212451428>
- Berry, D. M. (2015). The postdigital constellation. In D. M. Berry, & M. Dieter (Eds.), *Postdigital aesthetics: Art, computation and design* (pp. 44–57). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137437204\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137437204_4)
- Bossio, D., & Holton, A. E. (2019). Burning out and turning off: Journalists' disconnection strategies on social media. *Journalism*, 22(10), 2475–2492. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919872076>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (new ed.). Routledge.
- Brichzin, J. (2020). Materializations through political work. *Social Studies of Science*, 50(2), 271–291. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312719891626>
- Carr, N. (2010). *The shallows: What the internet is doing to our brains*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190696726.001.0001>
- Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford University Press.
- Cramer, F. (2015). What is 'post-digital'? In D. M. Berry, & M. Dieter (Eds.), *Postdigital aesthetics: Art, computation and design* (pp. 12–26). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137437204\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137437204_2)
- Davis, J. L., & Jurgenson, N. (2014). Context collapse: Theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(4), 476–485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.888458>
- Edwards, J. R., & Rothbard, N. P. (2000). Mechanisms linking work and family: Clarifying the relationship between work and family constructs. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 178–199. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.2791609>
- Enli, G. (2015). *Mediated authenticity: How the media constructs reality*. Peter Lang.
- Enli, G. (2017). Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: Exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(1), 50–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323116682802>
- Enli, G., & Fast, K. (2023). Political solutions or user responsabilization? How politicians understand problems connected to digital overload. *Convergence*, 29(3), 675–689. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565231160618>
- Enli, G., & Naper, A. A. (2016). Social media incumbent advantage: Barack Obama's and Mitt Romney's tweets in the 2012 U.S. presidential election campaign. In A. Bruns, G. Enli, E. Skogerbo, A. O. Larsson, & C. Christensen (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to social media and politics* (pp. 364–378). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315716299>

- Enli, G., & Rosenberg, L. T. (2018). Trust in the age of social media: Populist politicians seem more authentic. *Social Media + Society*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118764430>
- Enli, G. S., & Skogerbø, E. (2013). Personalized campaigns in party-centred politics: Twitter and Facebook as arenas for political communication. *Information, Communication & Society*, 16(5), 757–774. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.782330>
- Esser, F., & Strömbäck, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Mediatization of politics: Understanding the transformation of Western democracies*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137275844>
- EU. (2022). *Norway in the digital economy and society index*. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi-norway>
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnective work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Fast, K., & Jansson, A. (2019). *Transmedia work: Privilege and precariousness in digital modernity*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203732748>
- Fast, K., & Lindell, J. (2016). The elastic mobility of business elites: Negotiating the ‘home’ and ‘away’ continuum. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19(5), 435–449. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415609329>
- Fast, K., Lindell, J., & Jansson, A. (2021). Disconnection as distinction: A Bourdieusian study of where people withdraw from digital media. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 61–90). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.001.0001>
- Graham, T., Jackson, D., & Broersma, M. (2016). New platform, old habits? Candidates’ use of Twitter during the 2010 British and Dutch general election campaigns. *New Media & Society*, 18(5), 765–783. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814546728>
- Gregg, M. (2011). *Work’s intimacy*. Polity Press.
- Gregg, M. (2018). *Counterproductive: Time management in the knowledge economy*. Duke University Press.
- Hardey, M., & Atkinson, R. (2018). Disconnected: Non-users of information communication technologies. *Sociological Research Online*, 23(3), 553–571. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418764736>
- Hoffmann, C. P., & Suphan, A. (2017). Stuck with ‘electronic brochures’? How boundary management strategies shape politicians’ social media use. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(4), 551–569. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1200646>
- Humayun, M., & Belk, R. (2020). The analogue diaries of postdigital consumption. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(7-8), 633–659. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2020.1724178>
- Jansson, A., & Adams, P. (2021). *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.001.0001>
- Jansson, A., Bengtsson, S., Fast, K., & Lindell, J. (2020). Mediatization from within: A plea for emic approaches to media-related social change. *Communication Theory*, 31(4), 956–977. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa021>
- Jorge, A. (2019). Social media, interrupted: Users recounting temporary disconnection on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119881691>
- Jost, P. (2023). How politicians adapt to new media logic: A longitudinal perspective on accommodation to user-engagement on Facebook. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 20(2), 184–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2022.2076271>
- Karlsen, F., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2022). Intrusive media and knowledge work: How knowledge workers negotiate digital media norms in the pursuit of focused work. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(15), 2174–2189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1933561>
- Kennedy, J., Arnold, M., Gibbs, M., Nansen, B., & Wilken, R. (2020). *Digital domesticity: Media, materiality, and home life*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190905781.001.0001>
- Kreiner, G. E., Hollensbe, E. C., & Sheep, M. L. (2009). Balancing borders and bridges: Negotiating the work-home interface via boundary work tactics. *Academy of Management Journal*, 52(4), 704–730. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2009.43669916>

- Larsson, A. O. (2019). Skiing all the way to the polls: Exploring the popularity of personalized posts on political Instagram accounts. *Convergence*, 25(5-6), 1096–1110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517741132>
- Larsson, A. O., & Kalsnes, B. (2014). ‘Of course we are on Facebook’: Use and non-use of social media among Swedish and Norwegian politicians. *European Journal of Communication*, 29(6), 653–667. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323114531383>
- Larsson, A. O., & Moe, H. (2012). Studying political microblogging: Twitter users in the 2010 Swedish election campaign. *New Media & Society*, 14(5), 729–747. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811422894>
- Leszczynski, A. (2020). Digital methods III: The digital mundane. *Progress in Human Geography*, 44(6), 1194–1201. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519888687>
- Lilleker, D. G., Koc-Michalska, K., Negrine, R., Gibson, R., Vedel, T., & Strudel, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Social media campaigning in Europe* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Madsen, O. J. (2015). *Optimizing the self: Social representations of self-help*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315693866>
- Maltby, S., & Thornham, H. (2016). The digital mundane: Social media and the military. *Media, Culture & Society*, 38(8), 1153–1168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716646173>
- Mannell, K. (2017). Technology resistance and de Certeau: Deceptive texting as a tactic of everyday life. *PLATFORM: Journal of Media & Communication*, 8(1), 40–55.
- Mannell, K. (2019). A typology of mobile messaging’s disconnective affordances. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 7(1), 76–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157918772864>
- McGregor, S. C. (2018). Personalization, social media, and voting: Effects of candidate self-personalization on vote intention. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 1139–1160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816686103>
- Newport, C. (2019). *Digital minimalism: Choosing a focused life in a noisy world*. Penguin.
- Pink, S., Sumartojo, S., Lupton, D., & Heyes La Bond, C. (2017). Mundane data: The routines, contingencies and accomplishments of digital living. *Big Data & Society*, 4(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717700924>
- Portwood-Stacer, L. (2013). Media refusal and conspicuous non-consumption: The performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention. *New Media & Society*, 15(7), 1041–1057. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812465139>
- Pugh, A. J. (2013). What good are interviews for thinking about culture? Demystifying interpretive analysis. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 1, 42–68. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ajcs.2012.4>
- Pugh, A. J. (Ed.). (2016). *Beyond the cubicle: Job insecurity, intimacy, and the flexible self*. Oxford University Press.
- Richardson, L. (2021). Coordinating office space: Digital technologies and the platformization of work. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 39(2), 347–365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775820959677>
- Schaefer, S., Andersson, M., Bjarnason, E., & Hansson, K. (2018). *Working and organizing in the digital age*. The Pufendorf Institute for Advanced Studies, Lund University.
- Schulz, W. (2014). Mediatization and new media. In F. Esser, & J. Strömbäck (Eds.), *Mediatization of politics: Understanding the transformation of Western democracies* (pp. 57–73). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137275844\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137275844_4)
- Secunda, P. M. (2019). The employee right to disconnect. *Notre Dame Journal of International & Comparative Law*, 9(1), 1–39.
- Siebert, S., & Löwstedt, J. (2019). Online boundary work tactics: An affordance perspective. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 34(1), 18–36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12126>
- Slothuus, R., & Bisgaard, M. (2021). How political parties shape public opinion in the real world. *American Journal of Political Science*, 65, 896–911. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12550>
- Stieglitz, S., & Dang-Xuan, L. (2013). Social media and political communication: A social media analytics framework. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 3(4), 1277–1291. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-012-0079-3>
- Syvrtsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The politics of disconnecting*. Emerald.

- Syvvertsen, T. (2022). Offline tourism: Digital and screen ambivalence in Norwegian mountain huts with no internet access. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 22(3), 195–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2022.2070540>
- Syvvertsen, T., & Enli, G. (2019). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Tahsiri, M. (2023). Towards designing for the postdigital hybrid workplace: A systematic literature review. *Enquiry: The ARCC Journal for Architectural Research*, 20(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.17831/enqarcc.v20i1.1140>
- Thompson, J. B. (1995). *Media and modernity: A social theory of the media*. Stanford University Press.
- Thompson, J. B. (2018). Mediated interaction in the digital age. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 37(1), 3–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418808592>
- Thorén, C., Edenius, M., Lundström, J. E., & Kitzmann, A. (2019). The hipster's dilemma: What is analogue or digital in the post-digital society? *Convergence*, 25(2), 324–339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517713139>
- Wilk, R. R. (1997). A critique of desire: Distaste and dislike in consumer behavior. *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 1(2), 175–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.1997.9670297>
- Wilson, J. A., & Yochim, E. C. (2017). *Mothering through precarity: Women's work and digital media*. Duke University Press.
- Ytre-Arne, B. (2023). *Media use in digital everyday life*. Emerald.

# Disconnective care

## *Chronic illness and digital patienthood*

MAJA KLAUSEN

DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN, MEDIA AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCE,  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN DENMARK

### ABSTRACT

As the development of new digital welfare solutions to an increasing extent is carried out in public–private innovative partnerships, the provision of care and the practice of patienthood are changing. In this chapter, I draw on a pilot study consisting of an expert interview with an employee at a global tech-pharma company and two patients with IBD (inflammatory bowel disease) to tease out ambivalences and ways that disengagement and disconnection emerge as “disconnective care” in digital patienthood. Two narrative vignettes are presented and illustrate 1) digital patienthood as reinforcing the need for “boundary work” within a moral economy of (health) data-sharing, and 2) how partial disconnection is negotiated when full disconnection is not an option because of the everyday management of illness being dependent on digital media technologies. I point to the need for an ethics of “response-ability” in relation to chronically ill patients navigating digital patienthood as part of everyday life.

**KEYWORDS:** digital patienthood, disconnective care, boundary work, moral economy, response-ability

## Introduction

They [the public sector] don't have the resources that we have in these matters and because of this, it has been a collaboration, also with patient organisations to make sure that they [the patients] are empowered to take responsibility themselves. And as you well know, the more information you have, the better off you are.

The above quote comes from an expert interview I conducted in May 2021 with an employee at a Danish subsidiary of an international company supplying pharmaceutical products and digital health technologies to the home market. The employee was describing the collaboration with the Danish public health sector concerning the development and implementation of Lev med IBD [Live with IBD], a health-tracking app launched in 2020 and directed at patients living with the chronic illness inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). In this chapter, I present two narrative vignettes made from qualitative interviews with two patients who have IBD. These vignettes draw the contours of an everyday life with digital technologies and chronic illness that do not fit easily with the notion of “the more information you have, the better off you are”. Rather, the vignettes respond to this statement in ways that show its inherent “techno solutionist” (Morozov, 2013) approach to the provision of healthcare. Techno solutionism, as Morozov framed it, combines a reductionist approach to complex and fluid social problems with whatever is envisioned to be the latest in technology – artificial intelligence, Big Data, machine learning, and so on. Over the last two decades, digital technologies have been assigned a key role in the public provision of healthcare when working towards enhancing time efficiency and lowering costs without compromising the quality of care provided (PLO, 2010; Swan, 2012; Topol, 2012, 2015). The techno-solutionism in the interview quote opening this chapter illustrates an approach to healthcare in which the problem in need of fixing is defined not as much a *health*-related matter as it is a *data*-related matter: The problem that patients want to avoid is being underinformed, the risk of lacking information, or data, and the health-related consequences this is suggested to potentially introduce. The solution, then, is for patients to produce, circulate, and engage with information, with data – “the more, the better”. As pointed out in the quote, this at the same time requires and produces *empowered* and *responsible* patients. These patients act in ways that enhance the amount of data generated and information obtained. Data is thus placed in the driver's seat when a digital technology like the app in question is developed and envisioned to assist patients and healthcare providers alike in managing a chronic illness like IBD.

With this chapter, I wish to present a small-scale intervention against this techno-solutionist assumption and the promises it assigns to digitally engaged patienthood. Through a pilot study consisting of qualitative interviews with

two patients who have IBD, I tease out some of the tensions and ambivalences arising as patients living with chronic illness in a highly digitalised public healthcare sector are being digitally disengaged or temporarily and partly disconnected. I speak of this as “disconnective care” practices carried out by patients within digital care infrastructures (Langstrup, 2013; Lomborg et al., 2020). By doing so, I follow Lomborg and Ytre-Arne’s (2021) call to consider disconnection research not as a distinct subfield but rather deploy it as a lens to examine core issues relating to media and communication. I hope to invite further empirical explorations of *how*, *why*, and *when* disconnection and chronic illness interweave (or clash) in the everyday lives of patients in the Danish healthcare sector. I continue the chapter by introducing the theoretical framework tying together the concept of informational medicine with transformations of contemporary patienthood and notions of care, more specifically caring for others through data “sharing”, as well as caring for self through disconnection. A brief methodology section leads to the analysis consisting of the two vignettes. I then discuss contemporary patienthood and the need for response-ability within digital care infrastructures. The chapter ends with concluding remarks summing up the arguments raised and calling for further empirical work bridging the fields of disconnection and critical digital health.

## **The turn to informational medicine and “digitally engaged patients”**

Whether framed as digital health, eHealth, mHealth, or Medicine 2.0, the interweaving of healthcare with digital technologies has created new ways for patients to manage, keep track of, become informed about, and communicate with healthcare professionals. Under these labels, digital technologies are envisioned as key actors, as the public health sector and private actors alike work towards delivering “time- and cost-efficient healthcare of high quality” (PLO, 2010). The interview quote in the beginning of this chapter speaks of a public–private collaboration where the different actors (the public health sector, patient organisations, and the private technology- and pharma-company) work together in developing digital healthcare products and services that will empower patients, and, through the production of nuanced health information and data (e.g., through use of tracking technologies) create participatory, responsible patients. Telemedicine-like e-consultation (Assing Hvidt et al., 2020; Atherton et al., 2018; Klausen & Grønning, 2021) and video consultation (Lüchau et al., 2021; Thiyagarajan et al., 2020) are implemented to provide easier, cost-efficient access to private health records, consultation booking or cancelling, and medical expertise. In 2009, it became mandatory for general practitioners in Denmark to offer e-consultation to their patients, and more recently, the uptake of video consultation rapidly gained pace during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (Jepsen et al., 2022).



Technologies such as implanted biosensors and a continuously expanding market of health-tracking apps (Kristensen & Ruckenstein, 2018; Lomborg et al., 2020, 2021; Lupton, 2017b) allow patients to monitor their health and illness and on the basis hereof engage in different practices of self-care. If we not only focus on health technologies as defined by the World Health Organization as being “the application of organized knowledge and skills in the form of medicines, medical devices, vaccines, procedures and systems developed to solve a health problem and improve quality of life” (WHO, 2024), but broaden the scope to also include the Internet and social media as digital health technologies, patients can seek information about health, illness, and treatments, as well as post or read stories about illness (McCosker, 2013; Stage, 2017) and share data visualisations (Kennedy & Hill, 2018). Running parallel with and supporting patients in becoming more digitally engaged is the turn towards “informational medicine” within healthcare. Sarah Nettleton (2004) coined this turn and pointed to a move away from “mechanical” to “informational” or “e-scaped medicine”. This turn involves a move from relying more on the haptic (touch) to relying on information generated by patients and healthcare providers alike and where “expert patients”, instead of doctors, manage their illness (Nettleton, 2004: 666). Informational medicine rests on the assumption that more information leads to both better healthcare and economic efficiencies. This is obtained partly through processes aiming at increasing patient participation and empowerment, as illustrated in the opening quote, and partly through providing healthcare services with data envisioned to improve service delivery and medical care (Dentzer, 2013; Swan, 2012; Topol, 2012, 2015). In this framework, the ideal patient responsibly takes part and is invested in self-care. More so than a *recipient* of treatment, the patient is scripted as a *participant* in treatment and placed “at the centre of action-taking in relation to health and healthcare” (Swan, 2012: 97). Viewed as “managers” (Greene & Hibbard, 2012) of health and healthcare, patients are encouraged to assume what Carsten Stage (2017) critically referred to as an “*entrepreneurial* attitude” to health and treatment. Within critical digital health studies, Deborah Lupton (2013) has discussed how “the digitally engaged patient” emerges at the intersection of discourse about patient engagement and informational medicine. Adopting the role of both consumer and citizen (Mol, 2008), the digitally engaged patient is envisioned as rationally assessing options and making choices (of general practitioner, medical products, procedures, and treatments), to become an active participant in treatment (Lupton, 2013: 258). As a part of the digital managing of health and illness, and communication with healthcare professionals, responsibility is to a growing extent bestowed on the patient.

Pushing back against the imaginary of the digitally engaged and empowered patient is everyday life with digital patienthood. In the everyday, technologies might not always be integrated as seamlessly in treatment as

promised. Experiences of empowerment might be countered with experiences of frustration when technologies function improperly or completely fail. Participation might be hampered by aching bodies requiring rest, and the need for rest may take many shapes: rest as in sleep and recovery, rest from being part of the public healthcare system, rest from the role and stigma of “patient” and “chronically ill”, and rest from the digital technologies which form part of the care infrastructure. Therefore, we need to empirically explore the perspectives of both patients and healthcare professionals in relation to dilemmas arising as the patient role becomes increasingly interlaced with digital technologies, responsibility, and active participation. The empowered, informed, and entrepreneurial patient role will of course be beneficial for some patients and in some treatments. For other patients, digitally engaged patienthood can compromise the opportunity to live a “good life” with chronic illness or to live an “authentic” life, which in our time, as Syvertsen and Enli have argued (2020), has come to include occasionally reflecting on and disconnecting from one’s media habits and repertoires. This points to a dilemma which is particularly pressing for patients living with one or multiple chronic illnesses. For these groups, the use of digital technologies as part of continuous treatment is crucial in the everyday management of life with a chronic illness – or even sometimes to stay alive, for example, implants such as glucose monitors or pacemakers. Patients with chronic illnesses thus do not have the same opportunity – or privilege – to opt out of using digital technology and disconnect or “detox”. The question of digital disconnection in relation to patienthood and the provision of care in the Danish healthcare sector is then charged with tensions – firstly because patients must be digitally connected in order to receive care, and secondly because of the vulnerability of the (chronically) ill body in need of care. There is a need to advance critical understandings of how disconnection – as well as the lack of opportunity to fully or even partially disconnect – is shaping contemporary patienthood: Which new responsibilities arise when patients desire and practice disconnection? And what might the reasons for disconnection be: Detoxing and self care? Avoidance of media or further digital labour? Activism? Through empirically informed understandings of how chronic illness and digital disconnection coincide or clash in contemporary patienthood, we can productively nuance techno-solutionist approaches to digital patienthood. What is at stake when digital disconnection can cause a patient to miss a hospital appointment sent to their eBooks,<sup>1</sup> to forget taking the correct medicine on the correct days because the notifications and alarms are set up on the smartphone, or to otherwise neglect elements in a treatment plan? And what does it feel like for patients to disconnect? Disconnection studies urge us to approach digital disconnection as norm and culture (instead of an individual practice and problem) (Moe & Madsen, 2021) within people’s everyday digital media habits and repertoires. I combine the above when

examining digital disconnection in contemporary patienthood. This pilot study outlines an agenda for critical digital health approaches (Lupton, 2014, 2017a) within disconnection studies (Fast, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020; Syvertsen, et al., 2019). Critical digital health approaches critique techno-solutionism in healthcare through sociological, anthropological, science and technology studies, and media and cultural studies frameworks and address the broader implications for how knowledge of the body, health, and illness is developed, and for issues relating to medical and public health practice, power relations and the doctor–patient relationship.

## Disconnective care

Common to all is that those who restrict their digital media use have goals that are important to them, beyond media. Digital detoxing is not just about self-optimisation but about fulfilling social roles and responsibilities and being in tune with ideological convictions or professional affiliations within a broader context. (Syvertsen, 2020: 120)

In her work on disconnection, Trine Syvertsen along with colleagues has drawn attention towards the politics and practices of disconnection (Syvertsen, 2020, 2023; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020; Syvertsen et al., 2019) placed within the broader context of neoliberal self-regulation. As mentioned, the provision of healthcare is becoming further tied up with digital infrastructures and new digital welfare solutions, hereby reinforcing the ideal of the digitally engaged patient. These “care infrastructures” (Lomborg et al., 2020; Prainsack, 2017; Schwennesen, 2019) allow treatment to travel and take place, and as argued by Henriette Langstrup (2013: 1010) in her conceptualisation of chronic care infrastructures, “they tend to be sunken into other structures and social arrangements”. Chronic care infrastructures consist of various elements – daily routines, scheduled control visits, medication, doses, and more – which to a growing extent are becoming embedded in the use of digital technologies. Returning to Syvertsen’s argument that people do not only disconnect *from* media, they also connect *to* something (roles, responsibilities, or ideological convictions), we then can ask what might disconnection from digital care infrastructures be about? What do patients wish to disconnect from, and what do they orient themselves towards by disconnecting? And how does it affect everyday life with chronic illness when patients wish to fully disconnect, but they cannot do so since disconnection from the care infrastructures is not always an option? Focusing on practices of (partial) disconnection and variants of digitally disengaged patienthood reveals something about struggles, desires, ideals, and routes or impediments to living a “good life” with chronic illness. I use both “disconnection” and “disengagement”, as the former entails a deliberate periodic disconnection from social or online

media or strategies to reduce media involvement and “advocates balance and awareness more than permanent disconnection” (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020: 1269). I speak of the digitally *disengaged* patient to frame those uses of digital technologies which do not revolve around detox, balance, and awareness, but are rather about keeping one’s involvement in digital care infrastructure and technologies at a constant low. I suggest that the term digitally disengaged is appropriate to describe the media use illustrated in the first vignette. My approach to disengagement is inspired by Heather O’Brien and Elaine Toms’s (2008: 944) definition: Disengagement occurs when a participant has made an “internal decision to stop the activity or when factors in the participants’ external environment caused them to cease being engaged”. To disengage then means to “sign off”, either by “ceasing to be engaged, or to stop using the system altogether” (O’Brien & Toms, 2008: 948). In the first vignette, the patient’s decision to keep digital media use in relation to illness management disengaged is a deliberate one which revolves around boundary work. In the second vignette, partial disconnection from digital care infrastructures affords moments of tuning into what the patient describes as a more authentic self through “detoxing” (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Through both the continuously disengaged and the disconnected mode of digital patienthood emerge practices of care. In both cases, the practice of digital patienthood is analysed through a distributive conceptualisation of care (Mol, 2008; see also Andelsman Alvarez, Chapter 12 in this volume, for perspectives on more-than-human care relations). Care is relationally achieved in chronic care infrastructures consisting of technologies and various human actors. The provision of care, then, emerges not as the task of the healthcare professional alone, but as a relational endeavour accomplished through collaborations between the healthcare professional, the affordances (as well as promises and ideals) of digital technologies, and the chronically ill body. Caring for a chronically ill body within these infrastructures sometimes implies practices of “disconnective care”, where patients are continuously disengaged with digital health technologies or (partially) disconnected from the care infrastructure.

## Method

The semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) were conducted in October to December 2021 in Copenhagen as part of a pilot study, and they form part of the larger project “Datafied Living”. Out of each patient interview, I developed a “narrative vignette” (Lomborg et al., 2020). Traditionally, vignettes have been used in nursing and healthcare research but have recently been introduced as a method in data studies (Lomborg et al., 2020; Maslen & Lupton, 2019) and critical digital health studies (Klausen, 2022). The narratives mobilised by these two vignettes do not allow any generalisable tendencies within

digital patienthood. Instead, the vignettes serve as a small-scale intervention against the highly celebrated figure of the digitally engaged patient and point to disconnection as a future avenue for research in digital patienthood.

The first vignette sheds light on how digitally disengaged patienthood both affords a practice of self-care while also imposing ambivalences and concerns about potential data going to waste. Being a digitally disengaged patient implies managing ambivalences connected to staying disengaged in a thoroughly digitalised healthcare sector *and* in a time marked by “moral obligations” to share data (Fotopoulou, 2018). We also meet the patient’s concerns about how an increase in use of digital technology in relation to illness could impose an unwelcome blurring of boundaries between the (mostly symptom-free) everyday life and illness-related practices. This digitally reinforced blurring of boundaries requires the patient to carry out what I refer to as “digital boundary work”, inspired by Blake E. Ashforth and colleagues (2000). The second vignette speaks about the paradox of partial disconnection as care for self, when complete disconnection is not an option because treatment is bound up with a digital care infrastructure. In the second vignette, partial disconnection serves as a way of turning away from media, screens, and information overload and instead attuning to “intuition” and a more authentic and (partly) media-free version of self.

## The digitally disengaged patient

### Self-care through digital boundary work in a moral economy of data-sharing

Søren is 30 years old and was diagnosed with IBD four years ago. Søren does not use an IBD-tracking app but he occasionally uses MyChart to communicate with clinicians, read and keep track of test results, and make sure that his values “stay within the green area”, that is, the recommended values of, for example, vitamin D levels in the blood. After being asked if he uses any sort of tracking device or app in relation to his IBD, he replied that he did not. He also stated that he tries to keep illness-related technology use “at a low”, preferring to deal as little with his illness as possible, which is often the case for patients with chronic illness (Danholt & Langstrup, 2012). Søren elaborated on his feelings and thoughts about data and how he imagines tracking data could contribute: “I didn’t know that there was this opportunity to track; had I known I think I would have done it, because I do want to... I think it’s a waste of data”. And in the same vein, a little further into the interview: “It’s a bit of a shame with all that data really... Like, I feel like there’s data going to waste. I imagine I’m not the only one feeling this way”. For Søren, the openness to the idea of health-tracking is connected to the imagined benefits of data-sharing and thus preventing data from “going to waste”. This we can approach through José van Dijck’s (2014:

198) “dataism”, understood as an ideology or secular belief in the “objective” quantification of tracking all kinds of human behaviour, and what knowledge Big Data is capable of generating. Interestingly, it is the common good, particularly medical research, and not himself Søren wished to benefit from his data: “Through this data collection it would be easier for the healthcare sector to organise the medication of each person”. And he continued, “it would be with the sole purpose of producing some data that could be used by somebody. It would not be for myself [...] It would be solely for someone who lacks that data”. In the dataism at play here, we see how the paradigm of informational medicine and the practice of digital patienthood become tied up with a “moral economy” connected to data-sharing. Aristeia Fotopoulou (2018: 144–145) argued that our cultural understandings of data “sharing”, including how we understand the self and our social responsibility, are shaped by and are shaping the emerging culture of quantification. This creates a situation where contemporary cultural understandings of self-tracking and data-sharing are underpinned by a “moral economy”: “Its values prescribe new ways of connecting with other and enacting ‘good citizenship’ through data practices and normalize these practices as our means to an altruistic sociality” (Fotopoulou, 2018: 145). For Søren, the idea of sharing data is very clearly connected with both a desire to contribute but also to the ambivalence arising from the fact that he is not, at least not as much as he feels he should be doing. Applying Fotopoulou’s notion of the moral economy of data-sharing within the context of digital patienthood thus allows us to approach patients’ sharing of health data as potential enactments of “good (digitally engaged) patients”. Through the affectively charged moral economy of data-sharing, chronically ill bodies are then being turned into production sites because of the data these bodies are imagined to be producing. In contemporary digital capitalism, where personal information disclosure is being reframed as “sharing” (Fotopoulou, 2018: 150), we see in Søren’s eagerness to contribute and in his belief in the usefulness of the data another aspect of how digital patienthood becomes tied up with labour. Søren elaborated on what the imagined pros and cons would be if he were to track using an IBD app, and again he set off by taking the perspective of the recipient of the data and not himself: “There would be some holes every now and then in the data. But of course it would be better than no data at all”. The dream of the complete (big) dataset is borne within the ideology of dataism (van Dijck, 2014), and the belief that an incomplete dataset with “holes” would still be better than no data at all again testifies to the imaginary surrounding datafication and what quantified data can do.

A little further into his thoughts about the pros and cons concerning IBD-tracking, Søren touched upon the risk of the illness becoming too present in his everyday life (where he most of the time does not feel symptoms) due to the (imagined) tracking:

It would be easy if I could just, like every time I have been to the toilet, then I'm there, in the situation, and ok fine... Boom then I can simply track "Toilet visit", "Pain", "Whatever", like the necessary things and then put it away. But do I then also have to remember to track every time I eat and how I feel? Then it becomes more... Then I have to spend time and brainpower on my illness that I would much rather spend on my work or anything else really. And then the illness would take up too much space.

In this thought experiment, Søren imagined an everyday life with IBD-tracking: His disengagement is not replaced by its opposite (a high level of engagement), but instead by a middle position where the technology is tamed in a way that does not blur the boundaries between the patient role and everyday life (Syvertsen et al., 2019). He knows from his life with the illness the frustration connected to having to go to the hospital every four weeks "even though I feel healthy", and this interruption by an IBD-related activity into an otherwise non-IBD affected everyday life disturbs him. Søren imagines the tracking would work similarly, as an unwelcome reminder of his illness. Though being digitally disengaged causes ambivalence because of the feelings attached to the data going to waste, disengagement affords a necessary delineation of everyday life, where he feels healthy most of the time. Illness-related digital tasks remind him of the patient role and gets in way of his ideas about a good life with chronic illness. The use of digital health technology such as tracking can thus create a blurring of boundaries for the patient between feeling ill and healthy. This requires boundary work (Ashforth et al., 2000) to be performed to avoid the patient role from leaking into everyday life.

## **The disconnected patient**

### **Disconnective self-care and making do**

Ole is 34 years old and works as an electrician. He was diagnosed with colitis (inflammation of the colon) in 2018, received ostomy surgery in 2019, and has had a colostomy bag since. Ole describes himself as "his own healer" and is quite sceptical towards the Danish healthcare sector, telling of several bad experiences of being a patient himself and having relatives hospitalised. He feels that the public healthcare sector has failed to provide him with care and treatment that allows him to live a good life with his chronic illness. Because of this, he has sought information and advice online on alternative ways to treat colitis, and in collaboration with a private clinic, he has devised a treatment plan that he follows rigorously, as he experiences beneficial health effects from this. He has spent what he perceives as "a lot of time" in Facebook groups for people with different colon diseases, as he wanted to share information about the beneficial effects of his current alternative treatment:

“I’m not expecting someone to send me a million kroner or to nominate me as anything, I’m just hoping someone can benefit from my experiences”. As part of the treatment, Ole has to keep track of daily breathing exercises and medicine intake (three to five times a day) and weekly routines such as meditation and coconut oil enemas. To assist in the daily and weekly management of treatment, Ole uses both the calendar function on his smartphone as well as a smartwatch, which he bought with the sole purpose of keeping track of his treatment and timing his breathing exercises. He receives notifications on the watch several times a day: “The watch is all about medication. When do I take these and those and when do I do this and that etcetera”. Ole explained: “It [the watch] rings here and there and from time to time. And it prevents your everyday from becoming so stressed, because you won’t forget stuff”. He also tracks sleeping patterns on the watch, “but I don’t really get anything out of it”, he says, and adds, “it tells me that I slept badly, and so what? [laughs]”. The watch also tracks pulse and exchanges this data with an app on his phone in which he sometimes looks into levels of oxygen saturation. He opened the app during the interview: “Right now my heart [rate] is 86. I don’t know what that is, I don’t use it. It’s kind of fun – you can see if you’ve walked 1,000, 10,000, or 18,000 steps and then go ‘yes!’” Besides the watch functioning as an alarm clock three to five times a day and his smartphone’s calendar function, Ole says that he has “thousands of Post-it notes at home with small reminders on them”. Ole delegates part of the responsibility for keeping track of his treatment to different technologies: The watch, the phone, and the Post-its on his walls support him daily in remembering when to do what in relation to treatment. Responsibility and care are thus distributed and emerge relationally within infrastructures consisting of (digital) technologies and human actors (Kristensen et al., 2021; Schwennesen, 2019). During the interviews, Ole also talked about the negative effects he experiences that media, especially the news and social media content, have on his mental health: “It’s depressing, social media, both what people choose to post and what they choose not to post. I’m pretty anti social media”. And with regard to the news: “I would never watch the news. It’s brainwash [...] News and newspapers serve only the one purpose of creating chaos and fear in people. I’m not up for that”. To care for himself, Ole occasionally takes what he refers to as a “retreat” in his summer house, which he described as “therapeutical”, involving laying on the beach during summer and swimming during winter as well as different digital disconnection practices:

My phone is on silent, and I’ll answer it when I notice there’s been a call. I do not bring my laptop – it’s about just being able to be yourself and being able to be yourself without watching TV or listening to music and so on. I believe this is good, and it is.



He also talked about how online health information can overwhelm him and cause him to worry about his illness flaring up: “but I found out, that then you just have to leave it be [the online health information], turn it off and follow your intuition”. Digital media technologies, news, and online health information in combination make up an entity which is experienced by Ole as getting in the way of him “being himself”, that is, a more authentic version of himself. However, Ole needs especially his smart watch to not forget when to take medication, and because of this, the watch stays on while the smartphone is placed in a drawer during his retreats. When asked about whether wearing the watch affects him during his retreats, he explained:

Sometimes it does disturb. But I’ve probably just come to terms with that I need to suppress this. It happens [notifications from the watch] because I need to do these things. It’s not: Remember to go for a run today. *It’s something important.* It’s going ok, but I can be in the garden and then it rings and tells me I need to do this and that. And then you just have to do it [emphasis added].

A chronically ill body situated in a digital infrastructure of distributed responsibility and care can only partially disconnect from this infrastructure. As the technological affordances have become vital components in the human–technology “care teams” (Piras & Miele, 2017) managing the illness daily, the opportunity to fully disconnect or “detox” is hampered. Some chronically ill bodies thus must stay connected, completely (e.g., patients with pacemakers or continuous glucose monitors) or partially (as Ole) to a digital care infrastructure. This then requires that the patient on their own does repair work (see Scott Hansen, Chapter 10 in this volume) and circumscribes ideals about full disconnection. Patients sometimes have no other option than to make do with whichever partially disconnected set-up that allows for the vital parts of the digital care infrastructure to still be functioning. This points to self-regulation (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020) as an integral part of digital patienthood: It is the individual’s responsibility to assess the potential risks and gains of repair work within the digital care infrastructure. We thus need to pay closer attention to disconnection and “digital reflexivity” (Fast, 2021) in patienthood to see partial disconnection and forms of disengagement as practices of such reflexivity.

## Response-ability

The vignettes shed light on practices of disconnection as part of digital patienthood and point to how chronic care infrastructures involve different ways of self-regulating for patients. For Søren, disengaged use of digital health technologies afford boundaries between patienthood and symptom-free everyday life, but comes with ambivalent feelings of not contributing through

data-sharing. Ole practices partial disconnection to attune to a more authentic version of himself but is in a position where only partial disconnection is possible, and he thus has to make do. In different ways, the two vignettes draw attention to questions of “response-ability” (Lomborg et al., 2020; Schwennesen, 2019), that is, “who or what is able and willing to respond to the needs of others” (Lomborg et al., 2020: 8). In a public healthcare sector increasingly marked by public–private innovative partnerships, as is the case described in the opening quote of this chapter, the question of who might be responsible for answering to – or caring for – patient needs, for example, for disconnection, becomes a highly pressing one with no simple answers. The digital care infrastructure is made up by various actors, values, interests, and spaces: healthcare professionals, tech-developers, hospitals, clinics, private homes, eBooks, MyChart, smartphones, smartwatches (including heart rate and sleep trackers), data visualisations, and so on. With the development of new digital welfare solutions, as Nete Schwennesen (2019: 179) pointed out,

the intention was not only to make care work more efficient by making those products available for use by the Danish welfare state, but also to export them to a global market, thereby providing the basis for an economically sustainable welfare state in the future.

In public–private digital welfare solutions, the embedding of patients in the double role of care recipient and “data produser” (Michael & Lupton, 2016) obscures whose interests are being looked after and blurs questions about recipients (app and platform owners, pharma and/or healthcare professionals?) and ownership of data, and thus of who is response-able for providing patients with guidance about what to track and when *not* tracking, or disconnecting, is an option as well as in relation to interpreting the tracked data .

Developing ethically response-able care infrastructures, I argue, also involves considering how the larger cultural framework of digital detoxing and self-regulation (Syvertsen, 2020) might impact practices of digital patienthood and place especially patients living with chronic illness in ambivalent and not easily navigated situations in which they are themselves responsible for assessing which digital health technologies they can disconnect from, for how long, and with what effect. The techno-solutionist approach to healthcare provision present in the statement “the more information you have, the better off you are” needs to be brought into dialogue with empirically grounded accounts opening up the paradoxes, moral economies, and ambivalences of digital patienthood. It might be fair to argue that the more information patients have (and produce) as recipients of care in chronic care infrastructures, the more urgent the question of response-ability becomes.

## Concluding discussion

The turn to informational medicine and digitally engaged patients is embedding patients, as recipients of care in the Danish public healthcare sector, into digital care infrastructures. Being tied up with these infrastructures can be experienced as intrusive, boundary blurring, and associated with intensification of digital labour, and last but not least, experienced as being at odds with personal ideals and wishes for how to live a good life with chronic illness. I have used a pilot study as a small-scale intervention against the techno-solutionist assumption illustrated in the opening interview quote, where more information or data is envisioned as a route to patient empowerment and better care. This intervention is operationalised by the creation of two narrative vignettes. The first shows us how a contemporary moral economy of data-sharing is affectively charging the practice of digitally disengaged patienthood with ambivalence. Prioritising self-care through disengagement and digital boundary work over that of care for others through data-sharing, I suggest, yields further empirical explorations: What does digitally disengaged patienthood look like? And to what extent might different forms of digital boundary work be shaped by and shape contemporary patienthood? The second vignette illustrates what partial digital disconnection in a life with chronic illness can look and feel like. It shows disconnective care as a compromise, as partial disconnection and making do stand in for the desired but not obtainable full disconnection.

Questions of disengagement in and disconnection from digital care infrastructures threaten to disappoint those expectations about patient empowerment and efficiency tied up with contemporary digital welfare solutions. By bridging the fields of disconnection studies with critical digital health studies, the narrative analyses illustrate how the messy everyday reality and practice of digital patienthood and forms of disconnective care run counter with techno-solutionist visions about the provision of healthcare. As private–public collaborations within healthcare are becoming more common, the need for an ethics of response-ability for *which kinds* of data are of use and value and for *who* becomes a critical element in the delivery of digital and data-driven care. The vignettes call for further empirical studies of how, why, and where patients disconnect. With this contribution, I hope to have brought attention to one of the paradoxes emerging when patients living with chronic illness receive care in the public digital healthcare sector: The more entangled with digital technologies and the production of data healthcare becomes, the more the recipients of care – the patients – might turn towards different practices of disconnection to care for themselves. For people living with chronic illness, care is paradoxically provisioned and received at one and the same time through connection and disconnection.

## Acknowledgements

This study is part of the “Datafied Living” project funded by Danmarks Frie Forskningsfond (grant no. 0132-00080B).

## References

- Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., & Fugate, M. (2000). All in a day's work: Boundaries and micro role transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(3), 472–491. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.3363315>
- Assing Hvidt, E., Søndergaard, J., Klausen, M., & Grønning, A. (2020). Not just an information-delivery tool: An ethnographic study exploring Danish GPs' perspectives on and experiences with the relational potential of email consultation. *Scandinavian Journal of Primary Health Care*, 38(4), 411–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02813432.2020.1843939>
- Atherton, H., Brant, H., Ziebland, S., Bikker, A., Campbell, J., Gibson, A., ... & Salisbury, C. (2018). Alternatives to the face-to-face consultation in general practice: Focused ethnographic case study. *British Journal of General Practice*, 68(669), e293–e300. <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X694853>
- Danholt, P., & Langstrup, H. (2012). Medication as infrastructure: Decentring self-care. *Culture Unbound*, 4(3), 513–532. <https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.124513>
- Dentzer, S. (2013). Rx for the ‘blockbuster drug’ of patient engagement. *Health Affairs*, 32(2), 202–202. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2013.0037>
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnective work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Fotopoulou, A. (2018). From networked to quantified self: Self-tracking and the moral economy of data sharing. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self and platforms, stories, connections* (pp. 144–159). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315193434>
- Greene, J., & Hibbard, J. H. (2012). Why does patient activation matter? An examination of the relationships between patient activation and health-related outcomes. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 27(5), 520–526. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-011-1931-2>
- Jepsen, C., Lüchau, E. C., Assing Hvidt, E., & Grønning, A. (2022). Healthcare in the hand: Patients' use of handheld technology in video consultations with their general practitioner. *Digital Health*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20552076221104669>
- Kennedy, H., & Hill, R. L. (2018). The feeling of numbers: Emotions in everyday engagements with data and their visualisation. *Sociology*, 52(4), 830–848. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516674675>
- Klausen, M. (2023). Older Danish men: Digital practice of care. In K. Pallesgaard Munk, M. Smaerup, K. Maibom, & K. Park Frausing (Eds.), *The old man* (pp. 161–189). Aarhus University Press.
- Klausen, M., & Grønning, A. (2021). My throat “tickles”: Bodies in affective discourse in patient-doctor email consultations. *Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation*, 8(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.7146/tjcp.v8i1.123038>
- Klausen, M., Grønning, A., & Stage, C. (2021). Editorial: Health, media and participation. *Conjunctions. Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation*, 8(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.7146/tjcp.v8i1.123036>
- Kristensen, D. B., Kuruoglu, A. P., & Banke, S. (2021). Tracking towards care: Relational affordances of self-tracking in gym culture. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 43(7), 1598–1613. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13352>
- Kristensen, D. B., & Ruckenstein, M. (2018). Co-evolving with self-tracking technologies. *New Media & Society*, 20(10), 3624–3640. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818755650>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interview: Introduktion til et håndværk [Interview: Introduction to a craft]*. Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Langstrup, H. (2013). Chronic care infrastructures and the home. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 35(7), 1008–1022. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12013>

- Lomborg, S., Langstrup, H., & Andersen, T. O. (2020). Interpretation as luxury: Heart patients living with data doubt, hope, and anxiety. *Big Data & Society*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720924436>
- Lomborg, S., Moring, C., & Kensing, F. (2021). Communication as ongoing care. *Conjunctions: Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation*, 8(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.7146/tjcp.v8i1.123037>
- Lomborg, S., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Advancing digital disconnection research: Introduction to the special issue. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1529–1535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211057518>
- Lüchau, E. C., Jepsen, C., Grønning, A., & Hvidt, E. A. (2021). Reciprocal dynamics between patients' choice of place and how they experience video consultations: A qualitative study. *Digital Health*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20552076211052158>
- Lupton, D. (2013). The digitally engaged patient: Self-monitoring and self-care in the digital health era. *Social Theory & Health*, 11(3), 256–270. <https://doi.org/10.1057/sth.2013.10>
- Lupton, D. (2014). Critical perspectives on digital health technologies. *Sociology Compass*, 8(12), 1344–1359. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12226>
- Lupton, D. (2017a). *Digital health: Critical and cross-disciplinary perspectives*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315648835>
- Lupton, D. (2017b). Self-tracking, health and medicine. *Health Sociology Review*, 26(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14461242.2016.1228149>
- Maslen, S., & Lupton, D. (2019). How women use digital technologies for health: Qualitative interview and focus group study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 21(1), e11481. <http://doi.org/10.2196/11481>
- McCosker, A. (2013). *Intensive media: Aversive affect and visual culture*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137273512>
- Michael, M., & Lupton, D. (2016). Toward a manifesto for the 'public understanding of big data'. *Public Understanding of Science*, 25(1), 104–116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662515609005>
- Moe, H., & Madsen, O. J. (2021). Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1584–1598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211048969>
- Mol, A. (2008). *The logic of care: Health and the problem of patient choice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203927076>
- Morozov, E. (2013). *To save everything, click here: The folly of technological solutionism*. Perseus.
- Nettleton, S. (2004). The emergence of e-scaped medicine? *Sociology*, 38(4), 661–679. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038504045857>
- O'Brien, H. L., & Toms, E. G. (2008). What is user engagement? A conceptual framework for defining user engagement with technology. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 59(6), 938–955. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20801>
- PLO (Praktiserende Lægers Organisation) [The Danish Organisation of General Practitioners]. (2010). *Lægernes overenskomst om almen praksis* [Doctor's agreement on general practice].
- Piras, E. M., & Miele, F. (2017). Clinical self-tracking and monitoring technologies: Negotiations in the ICT-mediated patient–provider relationship. *Health Sociology Review*, 26(1), 38–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14461242.2016.1212316>
- Prainsack, B. (2017). *Personalized medicine: Empowered patients in the 21st century*. New York University Press.
- Schwenneesen, N. (2019). Algorithmic assemblages of care: Imaginaries, epistemologies and repair work. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 41(S1), 176–192. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12900>
- Stage, C. (2017). *Networked cancer: Affect, narrative and measurement*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51418-5>
- Swan, M. (2012). Health 2050: The realization of personalized medicine through crowdsourcing, the quantified self, and the participatory biocitizen. *Journal of Personalized Medicine*, 2(3), 93–118. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jpm2030093>
- Syvrtsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The politics of disconnecting*. Emerald. <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787693395>

- Syvvertsen, T. (2023). Framing digital disconnection: Problem definitions, values, and actions among digital detox organisers. *Convergence*, 29(3), 658–674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221122910>
- Syvvertsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Syvvertsen, T., Karlsen, F., & Bolling, J. (2019). Digital detox på norsk [Digital detox in Norwegian]. *Norsk medietidsskrift*, 26(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN.0805-9535-2019-02-02>
- Thiyagarajan, A., Grant, C., Griffiths, F., & Atherton, H. (2020). Exploring patients' and clinicians' experiences of video consultations in primary care: A systematic scoping review. *BJGP Open*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgpopen20X101020>
- Topol, E. (2012). *The creative destruction of medicine: How the digital revolution will create better health care*. Basic Books.
- Topol, E. (2015). *The patient will see you now: The future of medicine is in your hands*. Basic Books.
- van Dijck, J. (2014). Datafication, dataism and dataveillance: Big data between scientific paradigm and ideology. *Surveillance & Society*, 12(2), 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v12i2.4776>
- WHO (World Health Organization). (2024). *Evaluating properties, effects and impacts of health technology*. Retrieved April 23, 2024, from <https://tinyurl.com/mr2tdvud>

## Endnotes

1. Eboks is a mailbox linked to Danish citizens' personal registration number, which enables communication between public authorities and citizens.

# Stay focused and grow a Forest

*The design and paradoxes of gamified digital disconnection*

YUKUN YOU

DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO, NORWAY

## ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I explore the multifaceted gamified digital disconnection within the technology-driven context. Forest, as a productivity app pioneering a gamified approach to foster focused work, embodies a paradox of using apps infused with game design elements to aid users in their quest for digital disconnection. Employing the app walkthrough method, drawing on disconnection and gamification research, in this chapter I critically examine Forest's game design elements, and the paradoxical role disconnection plays in a hyperconnected context. Three primary game design elements – game feedback, social connectivity, and real-life contribution – are identified as facilitators of disconnective practices in the app. These game design elements encourage users not only to optimise their own disconnective experiences but to compete with peers and contribute to nature. The indicated work may, at times, seem to contradict the app's intended goals, making distractions, fostering social connections, and potentially greenwashing rather than blocking distractions, promoting individual disconnection, and greening the environment.

**KEYWORDS:** digital disconnection, gamification, paradoxes, productivity apps, Forest app

---

You, Y. (2024). Stay focused and grow a Forest: The design and paradoxes of gamified digital disconnection. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 171–192). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-9>

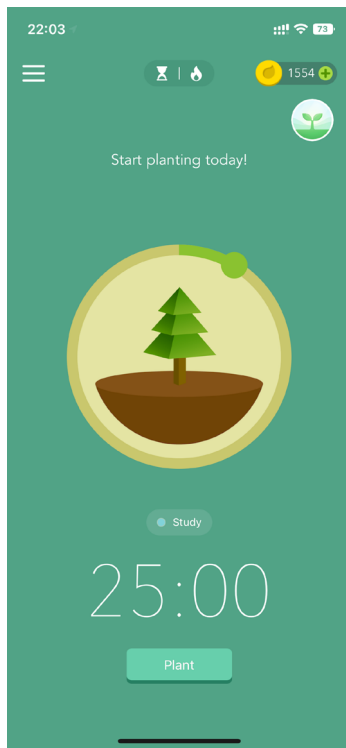


## Introduction

In 2018, Google introduced the Digital Wellbeing program for the Android system. This initiative aims to help users gain insight into their digital habits and offers features like app-limiting timers and modes for bedtime and focused work (Google, 2018). It marked one of the tech giant's earliest attempts to address concerns about excessive device use and promote healthier digital habits, as a response to techlash (Chia & Beattie, 2021). Other tech giants like Apple and Facebook followed this step and released similar features. However, before the tech giants ventured into the realm of digital well-being, a diverse array of activities and materials emerged in the late 2000s and early 2010s to help people grapple with the downsides of pervasive digital media and advocate for a digital break. Various campaigns, such as the Unplugging Day (Unplug Collaborative, 2009), Camp Grounded (Digital Detox, 2013), books like *The Digital Diet* (Sieberg, 2011) and *Reclaiming conversation* (Turkle, 2015), and tools like the Forest app (Seekrtech, 2014) gained attention and have been studied in the scope of digital disconnection (Huang et al., 2022; Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). These resources offer tips and strategies for reducing people's screen time, managing technology use, taking breaks from devices, and reconnecting with offline life and nature.

One of the key motivations behind people's pursuit of digital disconnection is the desire to improve productivity (Syvertsen, 2020). This drive, coupled with a growing awareness of the need to disconnect from the digital world, made individuals and companies explore the integration of disconnective features into their solutions. Even before Google's Digital Wellbeing, smaller companies and independent developers had begun addressing these needs through apps and tools. For instance, Freedom, launched in 2011 by Eighty Percent Solutions, is one of the early apps designed to block distracting websites and apps, allowing users to schedule sessions during which access to selected websites and apps is blocked. Cold Turkey, created by Felix Belzile in 2011, is a Windows application that allows users to block websites, games, and apps on computers. Forest, launched in 2014 by Seekrtech, is one of the early apps that used a gamified approach to engage people to do focused work. Users could plant virtual trees that would grow during their work sessions (see Figure 9.1).

**FIGURE 9.1** The home interface of Forest app



*Comments:* Forest's gamified timer interface, where users plant virtual trees during the focused work sessions, fostering productivity with visual incentives.

Forest's core functionality is centred around its gamified timer and blocker. Users can set a specific time for blocking the phone and plant virtual seeds within the app's interface. Each seed would gradually mature into a digital plant as users diligently attend to their tasks. Yet, if they are distracted by the phone and leave the app halfway, the plant will wither, providing a visual incentive to stay focused.

The allure of Forest goes beyond simple tree cultivation. Users who consistently nurture their virtual forests reap rewards in the form of virtual coins, new plant species, and achievements. The app further facilitates various focusing modes, time-tracking capabilities, and collaborative planting experiences for group productivity. Notably, it allows users to convert virtual earnings into real-world impact through a partnership with the non-profit tree-planting organisation Trees for the Future (TREES) (<https://trees.org>). According to the app, this collaboration has facilitated the planting of over 1.6 million real trees in Africa (as of 21 January 2024). Forest has reached over 40 million users globally, making it one of the top paid productivity apps (4.99 euro) in 136 countries, based on its description on the App Store.

While various apps or features like Space, Freedom, Cold Turkey, and Digital Wellbeing have been explored for their disconnective capabilities such as blocking distractions, practising meditation, improving well-being, protecting privacy, and so on (Beattie, 2020; Chia & Beattie, 2021; Ganito & Ferreira, 2020; Jorge et al., 2022), little attention has been directed specifically at disconnection-oriented game design or the complex paradoxes embedded in the intersection of games and disconnection. This paradox becomes particularly prominent in the game design of such apps, as they employ seemingly contradictory strategies by incorporating game design elements to aid individuals in their quest for digital detox. A prime example of this is Forest. Forest's transformation of focus into a virtual tree-nurturing game prompts critical questions about the effectiveness of gamified approaches in addressing the problems of digital distraction and phone addiction identified by the app. This paradox underscores the intricate interplay between technology and human behaviour, challenging us to navigate the nuanced landscape of digital disconnection in a world where our devices continue to exert a powerful allure.

By navigating the complexities inherent in the paradox of gamified disconnection, I aim to shed light on the promises and contradictions embedded in the app's claims and design, particularly the game design, which simultaneously contributes to and combats the very digital dilemmas they seek to address. As Gregg (2018) has pointed out, productivity tools may not merely help people manage their work, but may generate too many activities. By gamifying productivity, apps like Forest add another layer to users' tasks, turning work into play and rendering play work-like. In this chapter, I seek to critically dissect the game features of Forest and pay attention to the potential and limits of the game design, producing a nuanced understanding of the gamified digital disconnection technology and its implications. The research questions are the following:

- What are the game design elements of Forest that facilitate digital disconnection?
- What kind of work or activities are enabled by the game design of Forest, and how do they contribute to the paradoxical role of disconnection in a hyperconnected context?

Treating apps as sociocultural artefacts, I employ the app walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) to collect empirical data about the app, and I critically analyse the technological mechanisms and embedded cultural meanings of the game design as well as the app context.

## **Rethinking disconnection and gamification**

In this section, I briefly introduce existing discussions on the paradoxes of (dis)connection in media studies and clarify my use of the terms paradox and digital disconnection. This is followed by a review of current research

on the commodified and technological forms of disconnection, especially productivity apps, and how they may complicate the paradoxes and generate more work to be done. At last, I discuss what role gamification could play in the context of digital disconnection and introduce design elements or patterns in game studies that can be useful for understanding the design of a disconnection game.

## **Paradoxes of (dis)connection**

Influenced by digital divide studies (e.g., Wills, 1999), disconnection in media studies was often framed in opposition to connection, especially to the Internet, technology use, and the digital environment (Beattie, 2020). The dichotomies of online/offline spaces or digital/physical practices have contributed to the binary framing of (dis)connection as well as the paradox of “beating technology with technology”. Many digital disconnection products or services have perpetuated this binary narrative by promoting disconnection as a means to break free from “toxic” digital technology, reconnect with the physical world, and reclaim an “authentic” life, as commonly seen in self-help materials (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019).

Scholars increasingly eschew oversimplified notions of (dis)connection and binary thinking, focusing instead on the nuances of disconnection within the context of connection. They explore the paradoxes and ambiguities of (dis)connectivity based on various contexts and perspectives. For example, Light (2014) paid attention to the “disconnective practice” that exists within and beyond social networking sites. He argued that various modes of human and non-human disengagement, enabled by social networking sites, entangle with forms of connection and sit in relation to our experiences in the virtual and physical world. Disconnection, in this view, is not just the act of severing connections, but it exists in its own right, offering possibilities in relation to connection. Hesselberth (2018) further specified the “gesture” toward disconnectivity, signifying voluntary withdrawal from mediated forms of connectivity. This gesture can create an “outside” to the contemporary culture of connectivity, potentially fostering transformation. Additionally, Fast and Enli shed light on the challenges that individuals, particularly professional workers such as politicians, face when attempting to limit their connectivity in a digitalised society like Norway. As the politicians’ efforts to disconnect are considered largely futile, they suggest exploring how individuals navigate the spatial and moral distances from the connective media and norms of connectivity (see Fast & Enli, Chapter 7 in this volume).

Beattie (2020) criticised the paradox for unnecessarily framing disconnection in binary terms and black-boxing the technological side of disconnecting. Debates surrounding technological paradoxes are not novel in media studies; the discourse on the liberating or constraining influence of media technologies, particularly the Internet and smartphones, has been ongoing for quite some

time (Syvertsen, 2017). Building upon Jurgenson's (2012) critiques of digital dualism, Beattie (2020) pointed out that the framing of (dis)connection as a paradox can be misleading, as it reinforces the binaries of non-use/use, online/offline, and disconnection/connection. He underlined that this rigid separation of physical and virtual spaces can mislead people to view all digital or mediated practices as unhealthy or solely standing for connective behaviour. The technological solutions for disconnection, such as apps, may be paradoxical by requiring people to further connect to disconnect; yet, paradox can be an instructive notion to go beyond the surface of pros and cons of using technologies and create chances for analysing the new modes of relations that paradoxes can generate (Beattie, 2020; Bucher, 2020; Karppi et al., 2021).

In this chapter, following Beattie (2020), paradox is only used as a sign of the ambiguous nature of disconnection and a reminder for looking into what people are genuinely disconnected from – and connected to. Inspired by the existing discussion on the paradoxes and ambiguity of (dis)connectivity, digital disconnection here serves as an indicator of the multifaceted cultural phenomenon, encompassing efforts to “distance” oneself from the digital in various forms and degrees (see Fast & Enli, Chapter 7 in this volume). Productivity apps with disconnective features, such as blocking the phone, are thus included in the umbrella of disconnection apps. This inclusive perspective accommodates the seemingly paradoxical realm of app-based gamified disconnection, enabling the examination and discussion of its nuances in a commercial and hyperconnected context.

### **Commodified technological disconnection and productivity apps**

Current research on the impact and possibilities of disconnection in a commercial and datafied context adds another dimension to the discussion of the disconnection/connection paradox. Some scholars criticise disconnection apps as commodified solutions for temporal individualised disconnection that have little political impact on the always-on culture and attention economy (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019; Natale & Treré, 2020). They regard the technological and commodified disconnection, like lifestyle services and self-optimisation apps, as representing a form of digital solutionism for digital withdrawal (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019), in line with the ethos of technological solutionism that places great value on tech-based solutions but may overlook underlying problems and, in some cases, even exacerbate them (Morozov, 2013).

The consumer-driven digital disengagement can be another site for digital consumption and production (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2022). As shown in the case study of digital detox influencers (Jorge & Pedroni, 2021), social media disconnectivity is constructed as a strategy to recalibrate users and keep them engaged. Influencers are exploited by the platform power, and meanwhile ex-

exploit the audiences' attention and data. As Bucher (2020) argued, in a datafied and algorithmic world, actions of both use and non-use contribute to generating data that may be commercially and politically exploited in unknown future places. Machine learning and algorithmic arrangements also make the argument for individualised voluntary disconnection naïve, since we can't escape others or machines while the human and machine agency are often intertwined (Sundar, 2020). Productivity apps, cultivated in the contemporary knowledge economy, create a "fantasy" where individuals could control their life's unpredictability by deploying technological infrastructure (Gregg, 2015).

The commercial and technological nature of disconnection apps, especially productivity apps, also contributes to the ambiguity, in terms of intended consequences. According to Gregg (2018), productivity apps are solutions prioritising the process (how) rather than the content (what and where). Gregg (2018) suggested an "ascetics" to time management to block temptations and give them a morally good feeling (see also Turkle, 2015). To make the app more habitual, app designers try to translate the productivity methods into an embodied, daily practice, for example, through intuitive design like a user-friendly interface and combining minimalist approaches (Newport, 2019). Gregg (2018) argued that the design of productivity apps frequently cultivates an "aesthetics of activity" that transcends mere ascetic values. Instead, it elevates the imperative of "getting things done" to an art form, emphasising the seamless and, perhaps most significantly, aesthetically pleasing accomplishment of tasks. In doing so, it provides users with a profound sense of efficiency and pleasure in their interactions with these apps.

Gregg also pointed out that productivity apps with ever evolving capabilities can cause these apps to become sources of additional tasks or work, consuming time and energy. Productivity apps with disconnection capabilities may not be exceptions. As Fast (2021) argued, the "disconnection turn" affects our understandings and practices of work: Disconnection is multifaceted, which could be utilised *at* work and *for* work, and more importantly, can exist *as* work, reshaping the landscape of digital labour. This transformation could give rise to new forms of empowerment and exploitation in the context of disconnection, thus highlighting the complexities inherent in this evolving digital or post-digital landscape.

## **Gamification and game design for disconnection**

Concerning screen use, digital games and gamification have been critiqued for fostering addiction, distraction, and other unhealthy patterns (e.g., Alter, 2017; Karppli, 2018; Syvertsen, 2020). One of the prevailing criticisms in disconnection studies about techlash and social media pertains to the extractive-addictive design of the platforms, especially the gamification strategy. The design is often used to enhance users' engagement and sustain their online attention, making social media sticky and making users become addicts or

potential addicts (Alter, 2017). The behavioural architecture built on game elements, such as points, badges, and levels, fosters deep immersion and flow, causing users to lose track of time and space and become ambivalent about disconnection (Syvertsen, 2020). Yet, there are few explorations of the potential and limits of applying gamification to disconnection-oriented design.

Gamification, as defined by Deterding and colleagues (2011), is the use of game design elements in non-game contexts. These game design elements are “characteristic” rather than “specific” to games: They are features or principles that are readily identified and associated with games, shared by most but not necessarily all games, and found to play a significant role in gameplay. Depending on their own practices, designers, marketers, consultants, and scholars have different opinions on the impact of gamification, either as a way to invite full engagement with daily life and invent the future actively and creatively (McGonigal, 2011), or a consulting style employed by marketers and consultants to sell products and services (Bogost, 2014), or a practical approach to engage users and solve problems (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). In this chapter, I pay equal attention to the potential and limitations of gamification and focus on the game design indicated by interface design elements, such as levels and badges, that are commonly employed to foster user interaction, build communities, or address known problems within a context (Crumlish & Malone, 2009) and the paradoxical relations it may generate.

What if gameful activities become less “engaging”? Game design scholars have challenged the stereotype that all games are supposed to be “fun”. Instead, games can be intentionally designed to “harm” players physically, socially, and aesthetically (Jørgensen & Karlsen, 2018). According to Wilson and Sicart (2010), abusive game design, as an aesthetic approach, criticises the normative player-centric game design and casts light on the dialogic relation between the player and designer. There are different modalities for abusing the player, such as physical punishment (e.g., burn, electric shock, or lash), unfair design (e.g., extremely hard levels), sense assaulting (e.g., audiovisual tricks), and disturbance of social relations (e.g., long-lasting anger towards fellow players). Due to players’ negative feelings, the play becomes de-instrumentalised, and intersubjective, appealing the player to understand the designer instead of simply mastering the game, creating aesthetic experiences.

If players are not aware of, or agree to, what will happen in the game, the abuse becomes dark and unethical. Dark game design patterns – against players’ best interests and likely to happen without their consent – are created and used intentionally by designers to evoke the players’ intense negative emotions (Zagal et al., 2013). For example, temporal dark patterns such as grinding, as “a way of coercing the player into needlessly spending time in a game for the sole purpose of extending the game’s duration” (Zagal et al., 2013: 3), makes players feel like they are wasting time. Despite powerful design patterns, the

abuse or darkness depends on how the patterns are used and experienced – and the context. The game can be unethical and boring for one but acceptable and fun for another; it is the interdependencies between the game design and the player literacy that decides the gameplay (Zagal et al., 2013).

The abusive or dark design patterns may give some hints of how a game could aid disconnection or disengagement. Undoubtedly, how to find the balance between annoying players to the breaking point and keeping them hooked requires the designers' wisdom. As the design and implications of the gamified digital artefacts that serve disconnection are not fully explored, in this chapter, drawing upon gamification studies and disconnection studies, I uncover the possibilities and restraints that game design brings for disconnection.

## Method and data

To get richer data about the game design elements and its implications, Forest, a productivity app that practises the idea of gamification to the extreme, has been selected as an example for the qualitative empirical analysis. As a digital timer or stopwatch, Forest spares no effort in forming its core function based on the game mechanism, and thus blurs the boundaries between productivity apps, digital well-being apps, and digital games.

The app walkthrough method, developed by Light and his colleagues (2018), was used to collect the app data and critically access which game elements are incorporated into the app design of Forest. Different from the walkthrough for software design in human–computer interaction and videogames (Grimes, 2015; Lewis et al., 1990), app walkthrough is tailored as a critical approach for app studies – that is, a way that a researcher with analytical eyes directly engages with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and the embedded cultural meanings to understand how an app influences users (Light et al., 2018). When seeing the app as a material artefact and site of cultural struggle, the sociocultural processes around it can be identified.

The app walkthrough method includes two parts: the contextualisation of the expected use environment by identifying the app's vision, operating model, and governance; and a technical step-by-step walkthrough of various stages of app registration and entry, everyday use, and discontinuation of use. Thus, the empirical data consists of two parts: the promotional materials that help reveal the context, including information on the official websites of the app and its company, descriptions on app stores (App Store and Google Play), as well as their posts on social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Weibo); and the within-app data, mainly screenshots and notes, collected from the step-by-step observation and documentation of Forest's interfaces, features, functions, and flows of activity on smartphones. To explore the friending function and the mode of Plant Together, two user accounts on two



phones were created and made interactions. The data were collected from December 2021 to January 2022 on iPhones. Since apps are often subject to changes, I have also followed up on the app development to the latest version 4.73.1 (accessed 21 January 2024) and tracked important updates of features (e.g., launching new species based on Tiny TAN, the animated characters of the K-pop band BTS) and figures (e.g., the increasing number of real trees planted by users).

Combining inductive and deductive thematic coding (Rivas, 2012), I interpreted the functions and features of Forest into codes, categorised them, and generated themes guided by literature of gamification and disconnection studies. For example, codes like “collecting coins” and “unlocking badges” were categorised into “rewards” and helped form the “game feedback” theme. Inductively, codes like “blocking apps” and “creating app allow lists” helped generate the “paradox of blocking or making distractions”. The data were eventually grouped into two themes (with categories): game design (game feedback, social connectivity, and real-world contribution); and paradoxes (blocking or making distractions, disconnecting or connecting people, green-ing or greenwashing).

## **Analysis I: The game design of disconnection**

Forest attempts to turn the process of staying focused on tasks or people that matter into a game. In this section, three game design elements of Forest – game feedback (rewards and punishment), social connectivity (competition and collaboration), and real-life contribution (environmentalism and sustainability) – are identified and analysed regarding their aid for digital disconnection.

### **Game feedback: Rewards and punishment**

Rewards and punishment are two key components of the feedback system in games, and they are ubiquitous in games and gamified applications (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). They are often represented by points, currencies, badges, levels, or statuses. As focusing is gamified as a tree-planting or species-collecting game by Forest, the main rewards are grown plants, expanded forest, collected coins, unlocked species, new badges for achievement, high rankings on the leaderboard, and more. These incentives are strategically designed to make users hooked and wanting to constantly achieve their focused goals and avoid failure.

The rewards are meticulously designed to be diverse and visually compelling. For example, some achievements or badges, like “Novice Planter” (4 focused hours in total), are easily attainable to intrigue users at an early stage, while others, like “30 Days in a Row” (planting healthy trees 30 days in a row), require extra or long-time commitment or follow a special event like “2022 Make your New Year’s resolution” (staying focused for 2,022 minutes to

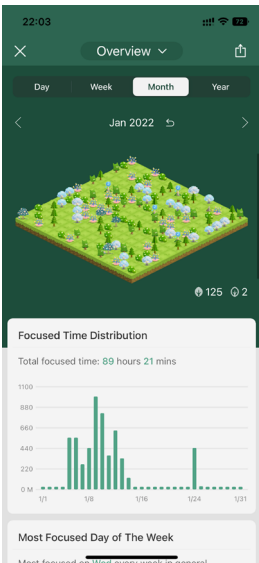
get the event-limited tree). To make the virtual plants appealing and keep players hooked, avatars of species are crafted in a blend of realism and imagination. Beyond traditional flora, they encompass an array of elements, from festivals such as Christmas to events like Earth Day, and even real-life human figures such as K-pop stars BTS. In this case, user engagement is expected to be extended beyond the pursuit of a digital break, to become a form of interaction with the real-world occurrences, mirroring fan-like support and appreciation for these elements.

In addition to the visual design of plants, the status of plant and forest plays a key role in the feedback system, as it measures, quantifies, and visualises the outcomes of one’s gaming endeavours and detoxing efforts. Success and failure are represented by the icons of healthy and withered plants (see Figure 9.2), respectively, which serve as tangible markers of users’ diligence: The harder you work, the more rewards you get and the lusher your forest becomes.

**FIGURE 9.2** A grown tree and a withered tree



**FIGURE 9.3** An overview of one’s forest



*Comments:* Two icons and forest overview visually display one’s focus endeavours and time data.

The avatars, with the focused time data, are shown and analysed in the overview of one's own forest (see Figure 9.3), to remind people how long and on what they have been focused, as well as how many times they have succeeded and failed. Different types of charts including columns, lines, and pies, are also generated to represent the focused time, trends, timelines, tags, and favourite tree species, transforming a large database of numbers and codes into comprehensive and visually appealing representations.

### **Social connectivity: Competition and collaboration**

Social connectivity, an integral aspect of game design, plays an important but tricky role in Forest, giving rise to semi-social dynamics. Within the realm of game design, competition and collaboration are two fundamental mechanics associated with the aesthetics of challenge and fellowship (Hunicke et al., 2004). In the Forest app, competition and collaboration are manifested by two features respectively – the Global leaderboard and the Plant Together Mode – making focusing competitive and collaborative work.

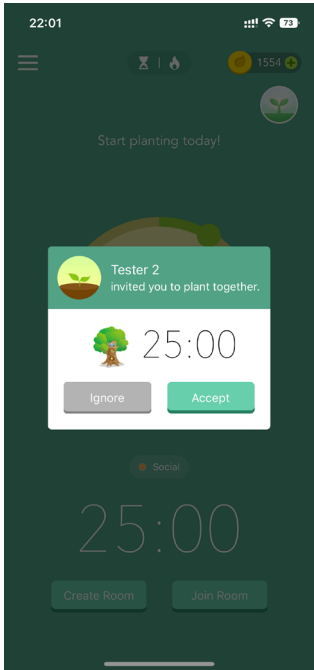
In Forest, the Global leaderboard (Deep Focus Ranking) (Figure 9.4) shows the weekly Top-100 focus rankings of users in the same server on the leaderboard. The username, number of grown and withered plants, and the total focusing time of the week are shown on the board. The data about the users' focused time and their forest is accessible by clicking their profiles. The weekly mode of success ensures that the leaderboard data is fresh and dynamic for users, as everyone starts from zero in a new round.

The leaderboard encourages users to work harder and spend more time focusing with the aid of Forest. Since only focused time in the Deep Focus Mode contributes to leaderboard rankings, users must adhere rigorously to the game rules, refraining from using the App Allow List and staying within the app during the designated periods to increase their Deep Focused Time and enhance their rankings. This dynamic subjects users to the pressure of keeping their positions or ascending higher.

**FIGURE 9.4** Global leaderboard



**FIGURE 9.5** A co-planting invitation



*Comments:* The Global leaderboard encourages competition while the co-planting mode invites collaboration, revealing the social dynamics in the Forest app.

As shown in Figure 9.4, the top-3 users spent around 150 hours a week planting, meaning they used Forest for over 21 hours per day on average, from working to sleeping. In this case, their smartphones were not used as multifunctional smart devices but reduced to hard-core “tree-planting” machines. This presents an unconventional approach to the gamified pursuit of digital disconnection through apps.

There is no instant messaging channel in Forest, but users are encouraged to socialise by adding friends and co-planting. The app offers users the opportunity to not only connect with friends but also interact with strangers, fostering competition and collaborative work. Adding friends can be achieved through either e-mail invitations or sending requests to the top users visible on the Global leaderboard. Once connected, users have access to join co-planting sessions in dedicated rooms.

The Plant Together Mode encourages users to invite people from their contact list and create focused workspaces (see Figure 9.5). Non-friends can also join the room by entering a designated room code. This co-planting mode introduces an element of peer pressure and underlines the importance of trust and mutual responsibility. Here, mutual surveillance serves as a mechanism to help people regulate themselves (Albrechtslund, 2008; Andrejevic, 2004). By inviting friends or strangers to plant trees together during the agreed period,

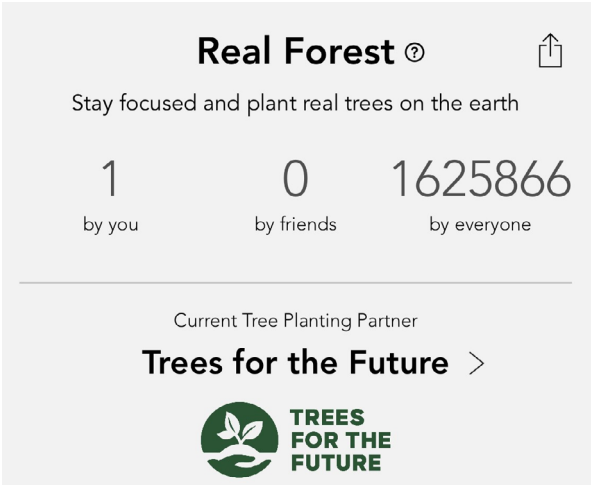
users expect to be surveilled and disciplined by not only themselves but also others, whether familiar or unknown. When planting a healthy tree becomes a common goal, focusing becomes not merely an individual task but groupwork, even though the participants may remain unacquainted and are performing different tasks at different locations in reality. In this case, Forest functions as a “semi-social” media app – distinct from typical social-networking apps – steering users to establish virtual connections to facilitate digital detoxification.

**Real-life contribution: Environmentalism and sustainability**

Digital disconnection can be associated with environmental and climate issues on a global level and plays a role in sustainability (Moe & Madsen, 2021; Rauch, 2018). Forest strategically intertwines the act of distancing from one’s phone with real-world environmental impact. This integration is evident from the app’s name, Forest, the predominant green theme colour, the incorporation of plant symbols, and the functionalities involving seed collection and plant growth, all of which are designed to evoke a connection to nature.

Central to the integration is the feature of Real Forest (see Figure 9.6), symbolising Forest’s commitment to environmentalism and sustainability in the physical world. According to the app’s rules, a real tree will be planted in Africa if a user accumulates 2,500 virtual coins through focused time or in-app purchases. It takes about 20 days to save enough coins to plant a real tree if someone focuses 6 hours a day (earning 130 coins) and uses the app every day. Yet, through in-app purchases, users can shorten the process by getting triple coins after planting trees in the following period (0.99 euro for 1 week and 1.99 euro for 3 weeks).

**FIGURE 9.6** Real Forest



*Comments:* The Real Forest feature symbolises the app’s environmental commitment, as it allows users to plant virtual trees to contribute to real tree planting in Africa.

As the app claims, in collaboration with non-profit organisation TREES, their team aims to allow users around the world to contribute to planting a real forest, and they have planted over 1.6 million trees (as of 21 January 2024). This initiative serves as a potential motivator for people to start their digital detoxification journey and seems to be a tangible reward for those with a commitment to environmental sustainability.

The logic of real tree planting via Forest lies in the app's pledge to donate to its nonprofit organisation partner and execute planting orders whenever people use their virtual coins to plant real trees. Echoing serious games encouraging pro-environmental behaviours (Morganti et al., 2017) and green gamification as a type of designed persuasion (Froehlich, 2014), gamification in Forest is expanded as an entertaining digital strategy for bigger collective challenges. As shown in the app, the initiative of TREES is to revitalise degraded lands, improve the livelihoods of impoverished farmers, and address the global environment. In this case, they also try to relate to other United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, such as the eradication of poverty and hunger. Forest thus reveals the ambition to evolve from a mere gamified productivity app addressing mobile distractions to a platform that aspires to serve a broader sustainability agenda.

## **Analysis II: Paradoxes of gamified disconnection**

The app-based gamified disconnection raises important questions about how many activities are actually enabled by the app design, and what paradoxes it may generate regarding the relationships between users, technologies, and nature, complicated by Forest. In this section, I present three paradoxes illuminated by Forest's game design – blocking or making distractions, disconnecting or connecting people, and greening or greenwashing – requiring various work to be done by oneself, with others, and for nature.

### **Blocking or making distractions?**

Forest's gamified approach to disconnection raises a paradox regarding whether it effectively blocks distractions or inadvertently creates new ones. Fundamentally, the app seeks to assist users in maintaining focus by discouraging the use of distracting applications. However, a nuanced contradiction emerges, as the act of nurturing virtual trees within the app itself potentially becomes a source of distraction. This paradox prompts the question of whether the app genuinely enhances productivity or simply replaces one type of distraction with another.

Furthermore, Forest's approach to establishing screen-free intervals introduces complexities within the realm of screen (dis)engagement. On the one hand, it tries to create screen-free times through the feedback mechanism, limiting one's physical interaction with the screen during designated times;

that's why leaving Forest during these periods and using other apps by clicking, scrolling, swiping, dragging, and so on, are deemed "wrong" and are penalised by the game. On the other hand, disengaging with the screen by engaging with the Forest app does not guarantee the process and outcome of phone blocking. Whether the designated detox time is completely screen-free is ambiguous, largely dependent on users' adherence. For instance, during the so-called screen-free periods, users are still granted access to their screen by checking the growth status of their trees. Forest itself then may become a paradoxically significant source of distraction, undermining its own mission.

Additionally, Forest provides options allowing more freedom or flexibility during one's digital detox, which may, to some extent, contradict the app's goals of curbing digital distractions and combating phone addiction, intensifying the tensions within Forest's design. For example, the App Allow List gives users an option to use apps that they want to maintain access to during their detoxing period. Using these apps then won't destroy the growth of virtual plants. Also, switching off the Deep Focus Mode allows people to freely engage with other apps and it won't affect the growth of the tree, as long as Forest runs in the background. These customisable features grant users choices between strict detoxification and a more lenient and enjoyable approach, and moreover, places more responsibility on individual users. The customisation requires cognitive labour, as users must navigate the complexities of configuring the app to align with their specific needs and goals (Gregg, 2018). This self-imposed responsibility adds another dimension to the paradox – one where users both contribute to the distraction and take on the duties of personalising their digital environment, further complicating the intricate interplay between Forest's design, individual agency, and the quest for enhanced productivity.

## **Disconnecting or connecting people?**

Forest's primary goal is to encourage individual users to disconnect from their digital devices and unnecessary use of social media and immerse themselves in focused work. However, the app also offers features that enable competition and collaborative tree-planting challenges, allowing users to engage in these activities with friends or colleagues. This paradox underscores the inherent tension between promoting individual disconnection and simultaneously fostering social connections through gamified networking. It raises fundamental questions about striking a balance between personal productivity and the innate human desire for social engagement in an increasingly digitally connected world.

Despite Forest's emphasis on reducing social interruptions within the app, it is important to acknowledge that the semi-social features may increase people's digital engagement. While Forest lacks the communication channels found on traditional social media platforms, it actively encourages users to invite others to join the game, creating shared spaces for focused work. The

app's friending function and the Plant Together mode enable individuals interested in forming groups to unite and contribute to a common goal, all without the need for direct verbal or textual communication within the app, but possibly involving interactions outside the app on other social platforms, for instance, recruiting people to join a co-planting room. This semi-social approach aligns with the idea that a more social form of disconnection can emerge when relationships or activities are integrated into the disconnection process (Beattie, 2020).

Additionally, Forest's sharing function complements the friending feature by encouraging users not only to invite others but also to share their progress when achieving specific milestones or completing daily check-ins on their social media or messaging services. These shared updates can reach a broad audience, including friends, family, strangers, and official Forest channels. The act of sharing their digital detox data, on the one hand, can serve as a potential motivator for users to nurture their digital forests, while also providing an avenue for them to express their identity and affiliations with specific communities. On the other hand, it prompts reflection on the true impact of Forest on users' networking behaviours. Forest may not necessarily limit users' networking but could influence them to manage their existing social networks and potentially create new relationships and communities, aligning with the app's objectives. Nonetheless, the semi-social features are integral to Forest's business strategy, aiming to attract more users and extend its reach. It is worth contemplating whether these semi-social features genuinely facilitate digital detox or merely redirect smartphone engagement and online interactions to different platforms, thus calling into question the app's core purpose.

## **Greening or greenwashing?**

Forest's design incorporates elements of environmental awareness by tying virtual tree growth to focused work sessions. This paradox centres on whether the app genuinely fosters ecological awareness and sustainability or if it offers users a superficial illusion of making a meaningful environmental impact. It prompts reflection on whether gamification can effectively motivate users to engage with nature and sustainability efforts or if it risks trivialising environmental concerns through token gestures.

Amid the commendable efforts of Forest to promote environmental consciousness and foster a connection with nature, it is crucial to address potential pitfalls. Still, it remains unclear whether users' efforts are genuinely translated into meaningful environmental impact and are aligned with Forest's representations. The line can be blurred between genuine environmental stewardship and greenwashing, a form of selective discourse that highlights positive information about a company's environmental or social performance while concealing negative information on these dimensions in order to keep a



good corporate image (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Green claims can be vague, ambiguous, missing the necessary information to evaluate its validity, false, or even outright lies (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020).

In the case of Forest, two key concerns arise. First, the app lacks transparency regarding donation details. As stated in Forest, their collaborator TREES does “not have additional resources to track every single tree they plant”, as they “use many of their resources to help local farmers set up sustainable farming lands and offer them training on farming skills”. Forest’s team has claimed to have visited TREES in Africa and documented the planting project on their official Facebook page. However, the responsibility for information verification and responding to queries falls on users and TREES, as Forest encourages users to visit their website and contact them via e-mail with inquiries.

Second, Forest raises questions about the actual impact of tree planting on real-world environmental challenges. While the acts of planting virtual trees and contributing to the planting of real ones may be symbolically potent, they may inadvertently perpetuate the debatable concept of carbon offsetting (Lovell et al., 2009). The reduction of one’s carbon footprint through digital means might paradoxically encourage the continuation of carbon-intensive practices elsewhere. Whether planting a real tree can effectively counterbalance the emissions generated by the app is vague. What if people’s media consumption inadvertently exacerbates environmental issues, for instance, in cases of maintaining and developing digital infrastructure like global servers and data centres (Holt & Vonderau, 2015)? Not only the environmental footprint of the media product, but its distribution and consumption should be critically examined (DeCuir, 2021). This dilemma underscores the broader challenge faced by digital technologies – how to balance their digital offerings with tangible contributions to sustainability while avoiding the pitfalls of merely symbolic environmental gestures.

## Concluding discussion

In examining the Forest app’s gamified approach to digital disconnection, this chapter has illuminated the multifaceted landscape of contemporary disconnective experiences in a commercial and hyperconnected context. Three key game design elements within Forest – game feedback, social connectivity, and real-life contribution – have facilitated users’ engagement with disconnection practices while simultaneously engendering paradoxical dynamics. The paradoxes underscore the complexities surrounding the use of gamified disconnection apps like Forest, shedding light on the complicated relationships between users, technology, and nature within the context of productivity and disconnection.

Following Fast’s (2021) argument that disconnection is not only used for work but *becomes* work requiring labour, I identify three paradoxes

embedded in Forest, encompassing work done by oneself, work carried out with others, and work directed toward nature. This work complicates tasks for improving one's productivity and disconnection practices. First, the paradox of distraction-blocking or -making questions the efficacy of Forest in blocking distractions while highlighting the potential for the app itself to become a source of diversion. Users, in their quest for boosting productivity, may paradoxically be trapped in the engaging process of nurturing virtual trees, raising fundamental questions about the app's impact on actual work. Second, in the paradox of (dis)connecting with others, the tension between individual disconnection and collaborative engagement, is apparent. While Forest encourages social connections through gamified challenges, it simultaneously seeks to reduce social interruptions. This paradox underscores the challenges of balancing personal productivity with the desire for social interaction in a digitally connected world. Third, the paradox aroused by Forest's work for nature centres on whether Forest genuinely fosters ecological consciousness and contributes to the sustainability goals, or merely offers users a feel-good illusion of environmental impact. Questions arise about the transparency of Forest's environmental commitments and the potential for greenwashing, raising concerns about the actual influence of virtual tree planting on real-world environmental challenges.

Forest's design elements are entwined with seemingly contradictory objectives, balancing users' productivity needs and their entertainment desires while taking the company's profit motives and social responsibilities into consideration. This paradoxical design adds complexity to the discourse on (dis)connection and prompts reflection on the core issue of what individuals truly disconnect from when using or not using digital technologies in a post-digital era (see Beattie, 2020; Fast, 2021).

In conclusion, Forest's gamified approach to digital disconnection runs at the intersection of disconnection and connection, offering flexible modes of disengagement within a commercial and hyperconnected context. It highlights the transformative potential of disconnection as a catalyst for users to manage their relationships with technology and engage in boundary work (Huang et al., 2022). While Forest has its own limits, it prompts critical questions about users' digital habits and broader consequences. Further production and reception studies are essential for understanding the intentions and the (un)intended consequences of technological disconnection solutions, and how people engage with gamified disconnection technologies, understand the paradoxes, and construct meaning from their experiences.

Compared with games with clear rules and goals, everyday life is more complicated and ambiguous. Rather than establishing boundaries between the physical and digital world, and between productivity apps and digital games, Forest reminds us of the openness and ambiguity of digital disconnection, as well as the potential of and problems caused by gameplay. By shedding

light on the application of gamification in technology-assisted, disconnective design, this chapter contributes to understanding various forms of “everyday friction of resistance” (Chia & Beattie, 2021) and the discussion of possible, diverse coping tactics and survival strategies in a hyperconnected world.

## Acknowledgements

I am funded by the Department of Media and Communication at University of Oslo, and supported by the project “Intrusive media, ambivalent users and digital detox (DIGITOX)” (2019–2024) funded by the Research Council of Norway (grant no. 287563). I wish to thank the DIGITOX project members, reviewers, and editors for their valuable feedback on the draft.

## References

- Albrechtslund, A. (2008). Online social networking as participatory surveillance. *First Monday*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v13i3.2142>
- Alter, A. L. (2017). *Irresistible: The rise of addictive technology and the business of keeping us hooked*. Penguin.
- Andrejevic, M. (2004). The work of watching one another: Lateral surveillance, risk, and governance. *Surveillance & Society*, 2(4). <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v2i4.3359>
- Beattie, A. (2020). *The manufacture of disconnection* [Doctoral dissertation, Te Herenga Waka – Victoria of University of Wellington, New Zealand]. ResearchArchive–Te Puna Rangahau. <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.17151578.v1>
- Belzile, F. (2011). *Cold Turkey* [Windows feature]. Cold Turkey Software, Inc. <https://getcoldturkey.com/>
- Bogost, I. (2014). Gamification is bullshit. In S. P. Walz, & S. Deterding (Eds.), *The gameful world: Approaches, issues, applications* (pp. 65–79). MIT Press.
- Bucher, T. (2020). Nothing to disconnect from? Being singular plural in an age of machine learning. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(4), 610–617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720914028>
- Chia, A., & Beattie, A. (2021). Ethics and experimentation in the light phone and Google digital wellbeing. In A. Chia, A. Jorge, & T. Karppi (Eds.), *Reckoning with social media* (pp. 127–146). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Crumlish, C., & Malone, E. (2009). *Designing social interfaces: Principles, patterns, and practices for improving the user experience*. O'Reilly Media.
- DeCuir, G. (2021). *Green(ing) media (studies) – NECSUS*. <https://necsus-ejms.org/greening-media-studies/>
- de Freitas Netto, S. V., Sobral, M. F. F., Ribeiro, A. R. B., & da Luz Soares, G. R. (2020). Concepts and forms of greenwashing: A systematic review. *Environmental Sciences Europe*, 32(1), Article 19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-020-0300-3>
- Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R., & Nacke, L. (2011). From game design elements to gamefulness: Defining “gamification.” *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference on Envisioning Future Media Environments - MindTrek '11*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2181037.2181040>
- Digital Detox. (2013). *The camp grounded*. <https://www.digitaldetox.com/experiences/camp-grounded/>
- Eighty Percent Solutions Corporation. (2011). *Freedom* [App]. <https://freedom.to/>
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnective work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Froehlich, J. E. (2014). Gamifying green: gamification and environmental sustainability. In S. P. Walz, & S. Deterding (Eds.), *The gameful world: Approaches, issues, applications* (pp. 563–596). MIT Press.

- Ganito, C., & Ferreira, C. (2020). Managing the flow of time: Disconnection through apps. In A. Kaun, C. Pentzold, & C. Lohmeier (Eds.), *Making time for digital lives* (pp. 175–195). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Google. (2018). *Digital wellbeing through technology* | Google. <https://wellbeing.google/>
- Gregg, M. (2015). Getting things done: Productivity, self-management, and the order of things. In K. Hillis, S. Paasonen, & M. Petit (Eds.), *Networked affect* (pp. 187–202). MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9715.003.0016>
- Gregg, M. (2018). *Counterproductive: Time management in the knowledge economy*. Duke University Press.
- Grimes, S. M. (2015). Little big scene: Making and playing culture in Media Molecule's LittleBigPlanet. *Cultural Studies*, 29(3), 379–400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2014.937944>
- Hesselberth, P. (2018). Discourses on disconnectivity and the right to disconnect. *New Media & Society*, 20(5), 1994–2010. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817711449>
- Holt, J., & Vonderau, P. (2015). “Where the internet lives”: Data centers as cloud infrastructure. In L. Parks, & N. Starosielski (Eds.), *Signal traffic: Critical studies of media infrastructures* (pp. 71–93). University of Illinois Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt155jmd9.7>
- Huang, D., Liu, C., & Yang, R. (2022). 弹性断连、专注力管理与数字化时代的自我边界工作 [Flexible disconnection, focus management, and self-boundary work in the digital age]. *News and Writing*, 6, 14–26.
- Hunicke, R., Leblanc, M., & Zubek, R. (2004). *MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research*. AAAI Workshop - Technical Report, 1.
- Jorge, A., Amaral, I., & de Matos Alves, A. (2022). “Time well spent”: The ideology of temporal disconnection as a means for digital well-being. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 1551–1572. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18148>
- Jorge, A., & Pedroni, M. (2021). “Hey! I’m back after a 24h #DigitalDetox!”: Influencers posing disconnection. In A. Chia, A. Jorge, & T. Karppi (Eds.), *Reckoning with social media* (pp. 63–83). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jurgenson, N. (2012). When atoms meet bits: Social media, the mobile web and augmented revolution. *Future Internet*, 4(1), 83–91. <https://doi.org/10.3390/f4010083>
- Jørgensen, K., & Karlsen, F. (2018). *Transgression in games and play*. MIT Press.
- Karppi, T. (2018). *Disconnect: Facebook’s affective bonds*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Karppi, T., Chia, A., & Jorge, A. (2021). In the mood for disconnection. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27(6), 1599–1614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211034621>
- Kuntsman, A., & Miyake, E. (2019). The paradox and continuum of digital disengagement: Denaturalising digital sociality and technological connectivity. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41(6), 901–913. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719853732>
- Kuntsman, A., & Miyake, E. (2022). *Paradoxes of digital disengagement: In search of the opt-out button*. University of Westminster Press.
- Lewis, C., Polson, P., Wharton, C., & Rieman, J. (1990, March). Testing a walkthrough methodology for theory-based design of walk-up-and-use interfaces. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 235–242. ACM Digital Library. <https://doi.org/10.1145/97243.97279>
- Light, B. (2014). *Disconnecting with social networking sites*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137022479>
- Light, B., Burgess, J., & Duguay, S. (2018). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 881–900. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816675438>
- Lovell, H., Bulkeley, H., & Liverman, D. (2009). Carbon offsetting: Sustaining consumption? *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 41(10), 2357–2379. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a40345>
- Lyon, T. P., & Maxwell, J. W. (2011). Greenwash: Corporate environmental disclosure under threat of audit. *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy*, 20(1), 3–41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-9134.2010.00282.x>
- McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. Jonathan Cape.
- Moe, H., & Madsen, O. J. (2021). Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27(6), 1584–1598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211048969>

- Morganti, L., Pallavicini, F., Cadel, E., Candelieri, A., Archetti, F., & Mantovani, F. (2017). Gaming for Earth: Serious games and gamification to engage consumers in pro-environmental behaviours for energy efficiency. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 29, 95–102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.05.001>
- Morozov, E. (2013). *To save everything, click here: Technology, solutionism and the urge to fix problems that don't exist*. Allen Lane.
- Natale, S., & Treré, E. (2020). Vinyl won't save us: Reframing disconnection as engagement. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(4), 626–633. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720914027>
- Newport, C. (2019). *Digital minimalism: Choosing a focused life in a noisy world*. Portfolio.
- Rauch, J. (2018). *Slow media: Why slow is satisfying, sustainable and smart*. Oxford University Press.
- Rivas, C. (2012). Coding and analysing qualitative data. In C. Seale (Ed.), *Researching Society and Culture* (3rd ed.) (pp. 367–392). Sage.
- Seekrtech. (2014). *Forest* [App]. <https://www.forestapp.cc/>
- Sieberg, D. (2011). *The digital diet: The 4-step plan to break your tech addiction and regain balance in your life*. Harmony.
- Sundar, S. S. (2020). Rise of machine agency: A framework for studying the psychology of Human–AI Interaction (HAIL). *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 25(1), 74–88. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmz026>
- Sutton, T. (2020). *Digital re-enchantment: Tribal belonging, new age science and the search for happiness in a digital detoxing community*. University of Oxford.
- Syvrtsen, T. (2017). *Media resistance: Protest, dislike, abstention*. Springer Nature.
- Syvrtsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The politics of disconnecting*. Emerald.
- Syvrtsen, T., & Enli, G. (2019). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 26(5–6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Turkle, S. (2015). *Reclaiming conversation: The power of talk in a digital age*. Penguin Press.
- Unplug Collaborative. (2009). *Global day of unplugging*. <https://www.unplugcollaborative.org/gdu-home>
- Wills, M. (1999). Bridging the digital divide. *Adults Learning*, 11(4), 10–11.
- Wilson, D., & Sicart, M. (2010). Now it's personal: On abusive game design. *Proceedings of the International Academic Conference on the Future of Game Design and Technology - Futureplay '10*, 40. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1920778.1920785>
- Zagal, J. P., Björk, S., & Lewis, C. (2013, May 14–17). Dark patterns in the design of games. *Foundations of Digital Games Conference, Chania, Greece*.
- Zichermann, G., & Cunningham, C. (2011). *Gamification by design: Implementing game mechanics in web and mobile apps*. O'Reilly.

# Disconnecting the communicating body

*On the human work of articulation, maintenance, and repair in the use of personal tracking devices*

SNE SCOTT HANSEN

CENTER FOR TRACKING AND SOCIETY, DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION,  
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

## ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I analyse how humans navigate recurring processes of digital disconnection and articulation work to manually repair and reconnect with their wearable devices. I ask what these processes tell us about the relations we form and experience as meaningful with our devices. Specifically, interviews and photo diaries on body-technology relations were conducted with couriers doing delivery services on app-based platforms, with employees who have volunteered themselves to have a microchip implanted in their hand, as well as with self-trackers using tracking devices embedded with sensors for various purposes in their private life. The vignettes in the analysis show how participants constantly navigate moments of disconnection and connection with their devices, resulting in them having to fix the breakdowns to stay connected and work on maintaining a meaningful relationship with their personal tracking device. The analysis shows how the characteristics of this work depend on the context of tracking, the material aspects and physical proximities of the relation between body and device, and the generated data.

**KEYWORDS:** breakages, repair work, maintenance, digital tracking technologies, body-technology relations

---

Scott Hansen, S. (2024). Disconnecting the communicating body: On the human work of articulation, maintenance, and repair in the use of personal tracking devices. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 193–214). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.  
<https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-10>

## Introduction

Digital tracking technologies are moving into many facets of everyday life, “at the intersections of key social arenas – between health and wellness, between work and life, and between accessibility and luxury” (Neff & Nafus, 2016: 121). Whether at work or in private life, these devices are also increasingly, and physically, moving closer to our bodies in new ways. For instance, in 2017 and 2019, Swedish and Danish employees in the Nordic region’s largest travel agency had microchips inserted in their hands at a corporate event to test new technological solutions to optimise the workplace environment and ease certain work-related practices for employees (Epoch Times, 2018; West, 2019). Today, about 3,000 employees can use their microchip for public transportation in Sweden by uploading train tickets to it via an app, or simply for checking in at their local gym (Markvardsen & Gram, 2017). The permeation of personal tracking technologies into intersections of everyday life is even more visible with the growing number of couriers in the streets whose work is based on the use of apps to track their bodily movements and work performances while delivering food for platform companies. In our personal lives, it is likewise becoming mainstream to use wearables on different body parts for monitoring bodily movements and functions, which are then transformed into data about one’s health status, training results, diet, mood, sleep patterns, chronic illnesses, and the like (e.g., Berg, 2017; Jansky & Langstrup, 2022; Lupton, 2016). At the same time, some digital tracking technologies are being used at workplaces to keep track not only of individual employees’ productivity levels but also of more personal and physically close aspects concerning their general health and well-being, thereby eroding the boundary between what is typically understood as private life and work life (Lomborg, 2022).

Usually, these devices are sold as tools that can help people become more efficient and productive in a variety of ways and optimise certain aspects of people’s bodies and lives when implemented seamlessly into everyday routines (Neff & Nafus, 2016). At first glance, by implementing these technologies into our everyday lives, we seem to be constantly connected. However, our connections with technologies that track us are inherently marked by moments of breakdown and disconnection: moments where intentions to engage in tracking for various reasons are not supported by the affordances of the specific technologies, thereby restricting us from using them in the way we originally intended (Lupton, 2016). As Lupton (2016: 75) noted, technologies that track us “may break down, fail to synchronise with other devices as they should, or lose their power or their internet connection”. In many ways, they “bear the marks of our bodies as we touch and handle them”, both in data and in a physical, material sense (Lupton, 2016: 41). In fact, everyday failures and disruptions are ubiquitous, and as some anticipate, are even built into our devices from when they are made by manufacturers in the tech industry, simply as a business strategy to lead users to replace

their broken gadgets with new ones (Fowler, 2022). However, it is when we as humans enter into close relations with such devices at the intersections of our everyday lives that these breakages become significant. It is the moments of disconnection from our devices that reveal how partnering up with them in various constellations shapes us and our everyday lives in certain ways, potentially by empowering us or making us more vulnerable.

In this chapter, I investigate the emerging use of digital tracking technologies, which are used in various relations to the body under forced as well as voluntary conditions. I argue that as humans, we are, in fact, always disconnecting from such devices, even when we experience being connected to them. As a result, we involve ourselves in various forms of continuous repair work with such technologies to maintain a sense of connection. On this basis, I ask how people are involved in repair work with various digital tracking technologies, and what these instances of breakdown, disconnection, and repair tell us about the relations we form and experience as meaningful with our tracking devices. By way of three vignettes, I explore empirical cases of managing and maintaining (dis)connection in cases of tracking in various proximities to the body, between work and private life. I investigate how Jackson's (2014: 223) "broken world thinking" – the idea that the world we build and live is, in fact, "always breaking" – can help us better understand contemporary human–machine relations, and how they become important to us. Related to the increased closeness and reliance between digital tracking technologies and humans, I explore and problematise how moments of disconnection can sometimes be a source of constant devotion, occupation, or even frustration rather than opportunities to let go of stress and regain a sense of authenticity, as usually suggested in studies on digital disconnection (e.g., Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Regardless of whether one is disconnecting from voluntary or more externally forced relations with digital tracking technologies, I show how disconnection is associated with the work of rebuilding connection. In cases where people in my sample use digital tracking devices under more forced conditions, disconnection is associated with the work of rebuilding the connection in a certain way to meet external goals. On the other hand, in cases of using digital tracking devices under more voluntary conditions, disconnection is associated with the opportunity to rebuild the connection in several ways depending on one's personal needs and preferences.

## Digital disconnection and the body

Research on digital disconnection has mostly centred on the mental and psychological effects of the over-digitalisation of everyday life (Moe & Madsen, 2021), leaving the physical and material aspects of the emerging use or non-use of digital technologies in relation to the body insufficiently researched. However, whether we connect or disconnect from technologies depends on either a physical collaboration or decoupling between a body, a



technology, and the data they share. Some of these considerations can be found in the post-phenomenological literature. For instance, Ihde (1990: 72) described “the various structural features” of ambiguous human–technology relations and pointed to the importance of studying how the human as a body interacts with its environment “by means of technologies”. This is relevant in terms of understanding how practices of connection and disconnection are both enabled and limited depending on the specific physical characteristics and contexts of the partnership between body, technology, and data. There is a difference between disconnecting from one’s phone compared with disconnecting from a smartwatch, a microchip, or a blood glucose sensor. However, only a few studies have investigated physical and material aspects related to disconnection from devices used in various conjunctions with the body.

In a study on food delivery couriers conducted by Andersson (2021), the physical and material aspects of the mobile phone as a digital tracking tool were analysed in relation to the dynamics of temporary disconnection from the delivery app. In this context, Andersson (2021: 200) adopted the concept of “dwelling” to study what happens in the moments of disconnection when workers are waiting for a new order to appear on their screen. He described such moments as times in which couriers need to stay attentive to incoming orders by holding the phone in their hand being ready to swipe the *accept order* beam in the app. But he also described how couriers work to actively fill the temporary moments of disconnection in between orders and deliveries by dwelling on the phone: switching between making calls to friends and family, checking social media, playing games, or paying bills, and returning to the delivery app at regular intervals to check for updates or orders (Andersson, 2021).

Also in a work context, but in a case of closer proximity between body and device, Gauttier (2019) presented a study of the acceptance and non-acceptance of “insideable” technology in the workplace, that is, employees’ considerations of whether or not to get an information communication technology implant (ICT implant) embedded inside the body. She argued that ultimately, non-acceptance of insideables is typically based on the need to maintain control over one’s own body, whereas acceptance typically emerges in the desire to pioneer and be able to enhance the abilities of one’s body (Gauttier, 2019). However, as Gauttier (2019: 102) noted, we tend to theorise technology use from the perspective that there is an “*expected performance*” – an optimal way in which any technology can and should work in contexts of use – and tend *not* to theorise technology use based on “*expected risks or bad consequences stemming from the use of this technology* [emphasis added on the first quote]”. As Graham and Thrift (2007) more explicitly noted, we often turn towards technologies as they manifest in their workings, and less often towards how they manifest in their unfunctionalities. We need to look at the plethora of negligence, opt-out, breakdown, and failure, and thereby at how disconnections happen in our daily interactions and relations with technologies all the time.

## Technological breakages, repair workers, and articulation work

Jackson (2014: 222) argued that in society, two different realities exist: on the one hand, “an always-almost-falling-apart world”, and on the other, “a world in constant process of fixing and reinvention”. Acting as a focal point of these different realities, he argued that repair work is constantly taking place as part of maintaining what we know of as stability in a society where what is broken also gets physically and materially restored. This happens through “subtle acts of care by which order and meaning in complex sociotechnical systems are maintained and transformed, human value is preserved and extended, and the complicated work of fitting to the varied circumstances of organizations, systems, and lives is accomplished” (Jackson, 2014: 222). In other words, humans make continuous, and oftentimes tacit, efforts of trying to bring the broken pieces of tools and infrastructures together and into order in a way that makes sense and makes things work more efficiently within the specific context. Breakdowns and repairs are regular, ubiquitous, and mundane: They are not exceptional but a part of the lived experience. It is, for example, the acts of maintenance we engage in when we change the tires on our car, update our computer’s software, or buy covers or power banks for our smartphones. We are constantly repairing and preparing for breakages, or the “points at which progress is stopped due to material limitation” (Tanweer et al., 2016: 737). Looking at these points of material limitation and breakdown, and at the repair work that follows, enables the exploration of the “hidden dynamics, processes and powers” that constitute different relationships between human bodies, tools, and devices (Jackson, 2014: 229). In this way, looking through the lens of “broken world thinking” (Jackson, 2014: 221), that is, at “the processes of maintenance and repair that keep modern societies going” (Graham & Thrift, 2007: 1), opens up the possibility for re-imagination of the partnership between human bodies and digital devices as something that resides in the constant work, adjustment, and adaptation it requires for the two material units to come together.

As we work on maintaining a sense of stability with the digital devices we let into our daily lives and close to our bodies, we engage in what Strauss (1985) referred to as articulation work. Articulation work is mostly referred to in relation to the use of and collaboration between humans and computer systems in practice, whereas processes of breakdown, repair, and maintenance are not necessarily related to computer systems specifically, but to material objects and tools in a broader sense. However, computer systems are also material objects that only function based on collaboration at the intersection between digital tracking tools, people and their bodies, and their contexts of use. Building on Strauss (1985), Gerson and Star (1986: 258) described articulation as consisting of “all the tasks needed to coordinate a particular task, including scheduling subtasks, recovering from errors, and assembling resources”.

This means carrying through a course of action despite local contingencies, unanticipated glitches, incommensurable opinions and beliefs, or inadequate knowledge of local circumstances. (Gerson & Star, 1986: 266)

To put it in other words, it is impossible to anticipate every problem or incident that may occur in the real world using any system in our daily lives, including computer systems, whether in the form of a laptop, a smartphone, a smartwatch, or the like. In situations where unanticipated incidents arise, we deal with them by doing articulation work with the technologies, to get things done and make everything come together “so that work can go on” (Gerson & Star, 1986: 266). In practice, the result of articulation work therefore often appears as “workarounds” in our use of the technologies, and it thereby “misfits with the idealized representations of work that requirements have represented” or the expected performance (Gerson & Star, 1986: 266). Although articulation work does not fit into our original thoughts on how a given collaboration with our devices should take place, they work as “local closures” of our use of a system and are necessary in terms of fixing, for example, the lack of resources or technical and material limitations that affect one’s further work in a given situation (Gerson & Star, 1986: 267).

Therefore, articulation work can be considered a form of repair work where the human acts as a repair worker by collaborating with the given technological device to seamlessly make everything come together after a breakdown has occurred. To make things come together, the partnership between human and device “is shown to be a process of continual structuring and restructuring done *through*, *to*, and *with* both technology and people in an unselfconsciously conscious manner [emphasis added]” (Schmidt & Bannon, 2013: 356). To understand how the collaboration of continual structuring and restructuring – of breakdown, repair, and maintenance processes – works in practice, and what it reveals about the way we form relations with devices we consider meaningful, we need to pay attention to the “moment-by-moment flow of activity”, “the situated integration of tools”, “entwined action”, and “mutual adjustment” (Schmidt & Bannon, 2013: 356). Most importantly, attention must be paid to the materiality of these processes, as it is the physical properties of the partnership between humans and devices that set the framework for the kind of repair work that takes place and what meaning it has for people in the specific context.

## Methods

Since January 2021, I have been conducting repeated interviews and photo diaries in Denmark and Sweden with people who are engaging with various digital devices that are tracking different aspects of their bodies, at work or in private life. Recruited through a mix of maximum variation and network sampling, the following analysis highlights six out of a total of twenty interviews, including

three illustrative photo diaries, conducted during 14 months of fieldwork. The selected material represents the greatest variety of participants' use of devices in the total sample, including smartphones, watches, and rings embedded with sensors, cycle computers, and power meters, as well as microchips and glucose monitors. The age group represented in the sample of the six selected participants ranges from 20–65, of whom three participants are women and three are men. Two participants were recruited in connection with their job as couriers for the Wolt and Foodora food delivery platforms in Denmark and Sweden, whereas one worked for a Scandinavian travel agency. The remaining three participants were Danes and were recruited based on their use of self-tracking devices in their private lives. The sample thereby also includes cases where the management of disconnection and connection is based on voluntary as well as more forced forms of engagement with digital tracking technologies.

I was invited into the homes of each of the six participants for a semi-structured interview either physically or over Zoom, depending on what the Covid-19 restrictions allowed us to do. The interviews had a structure circling around everyday examples of how the participants experienced using and interacting with their devices in conjunction with the body for each of their specific purposes. However, I ensured that there was room for the participants to weigh and prioritise talking about the aspects of their experiences of using the tracking devices that were of particular importance to them, after which I again sought to get the participants to link their more abstract thoughts to concrete everyday encounters with their devices.

After having met with the participants, our conversations were transcribed and re-read before I continued to pull the analytical threads that had appeared during the interviews and later proved to be consistent across the material. Throughout the analytical process, I identified a common theme that was brought up by each of the participants, despite the variation of cases, but seemed to be differently linked to the purely material and physical location of the device in relation to the body, although the body was not necessarily the focal point for the tracking practice itself. What the participants were in fact all describing was their experiences of maintaining the relationship they had formed for various reasons with their devices, which was oftentimes linked directly to experiences of moments of breakdown followed by repair work. They described their role as repair workers, or, to use Jackson's (2014: 234) wording, "maintainers", "fixers", and even "breakers" of the partnership with their device or devices.

To illustrate the physical and material aspects of the human–device partnerships and their influence on the experiences of breakdown–repair processes as part of forming and maintaining the partnership with various types of devices, the following analysis is structured into three main vignettes, each consisting of two related narratives. Due to its holistic representation of empirical phenomena, the vignettes are particularly useful for describing

the above-mentioned “moment-by-moment flow of activity”, “the situated integration of tools”, “entwined action”, and “mutual adjustment” (Schmidt & Bannon, 2013: 356) that come into play when people work on maintaining a relation to their device. In accordance with Jackson’s (2014) broken world thinking, it thereby becomes possible to analytically tease out the many subtle, continuous, and oftentimes tacit efforts of repairing, maintaining, and transforming things that are meaningful to humans, and how such processes of managing shifts how being disconnected and connected with one’s device might look different for different people.

In the analysis, the first vignette describes the managing of (dis)connection with tracking devices used in a work context. This vignette illuminates experiences of maintaining the body–device relation when tracking the body at a distance – both in terms of the data being collected, but also in terms of the physical encounter between body and device. The second vignette describes the managing of (dis)connection with tracking devices used in private life. It illuminates self-trackers’ experiences of maintaining the body–device relation in cases of tracking in-between, that is, when devices collect internal data about the body, and in some cases move closer to the body in physical distance. Lastly, the third vignette describes the managing of (dis)connection with tracking devices used across work and private settings. Based on two narratives from an employee and a self-tracker, it illustrates experiences of maintenance when tracking the body from the inside, that is, when devices are implanted into the body for different reasons. Taken together, the vignettes thereby present different realities associated with breakdown-repair work related to tracking the body at different physical distances, contexts, and scales of connection. As instances of connection or disconnection happen based on either a physical collaboration or a decoupling between body, technology, and data, the specific physical configuration of body and device – and how it is constantly going through joint processes of breakdowns, repair, and maintenance – is crucial for understanding how we form and experience relations with certain devices as meaningful for us. As we shall see in the analysis, these processes of managing ongoing states of disconnection and connection – of breakdown and repair – mean different things for the relationship we form with the device, depending on its specific material framework. In other words, what processes of maintenance mean for these relations depends on how and to what extent we physically collaborate or decouple from the given device, that is, how we experience that the device helps us when we go along and collaborate with it in physical practice, and how we experience the problems it causes us when the collaboration does not work due to material limitations and we get pulled away from the device.

## Analysis

### Managing (dis)connection in cases of tracking from outside the body

I met with Wolt courier Victor on Zoom on a Thursday morning in late April 2021. With emphasis on the flexibility of his work, he explained to me how he can more or less choose himself when he wants to work. However, there is usually not much to do in the morning. Therefore, Victor works from around 17:00–21:00 and uses his electric moped 45 which, however, has a limited range. This means that, unlike gas mopeds that can drive all day, Victor's moped can run for 3.5 hours followed by a 10-hour recharge. For Victor, this fits perfectly with the time of peak delivery which is indicated in the Wolt app. He told how he finds the moped appropriate:

In terms of maintenance, an electric moped is also just easier than a gas moped and a car. So, I think it's very cool the way I do it. I don't think I would want to do it by bike [...] it always breaks down and needs to be maintained and stuff like that.

However, with the relatively short time span before another power charge is needed, the maintenance of the moped is what ends up drawing the line between work life and leisure in combination with the app's indication of peak times. When Victor goes online, he places the phone in the phone mount and “surrender[s] to the algorithm” as he presses the button in the app and lets the algorithm “drive [him] around” Copenhagen for 3.5 hours. However, he told me about a time when he was new to the job, and his phone turned off when he was in the process of a delivery, as it was being exposed to wind, rain, and cold weather. After managing to turn the phone back on, by “warming it up” and “wiping off the water”, he was able to carry through the course of action and complete the delivery despite the unanticipated glitch. The incident made him start bringing a power bank with him every time he works to ensure that there is enough power for the phone to run the app while at work, thereby minimising the risk of future possible moments of disconnection.

About nine months later, I met with the Swedish courier Ramesh, who is working in Malmö. Unlike Victor, Ramesh uses his car at work. However, prior to our interview in early January 2022, I received a text message from him with a picture of a burned car (see Figure 10.1) asking if we could move the interview to another date. Ten days later, Ramesh returned to me after having had the car fixed so he could work again. I met with him virtually, he on his phone in his new car. Ramesh is an experienced courier and has enjoyed working for around twelve other delivery companies back when he was living in Denmark. By manoeuvring between working as a courier for the Swedish food delivery platform Foodora and working as a courier for Wolt,

he manages to deliver enough orders so that it corresponds to a full-time job. He explained to me that “if you are working with two companies, then obviously if there is a problem with one, you can go with the second one”. As an example, he explained how Foodora couriers are allowed to work for a maximum of 40 hours a week (corresponding to a Swedish full-time job), and car couriers only for four hours in a row, due to rules from the Swedish Transport Agency. Additionally, as Wolt has only recently been launched in Malmö (at the time of the interview), it often requires couriers to “dwell” on the phone for up to 15 minutes in between orders, which Ramesh rarely has time or money for. To avoid these disruptions he would otherwise have in his working day had he worked for just one of the platforms, he combines both apps by switching between logging on and off to fill in the gaps. To otherwise maintain a seamless work structure, Ramesh uses a backup phone with both food delivery apps installed:

If you have a spare phone, like now where I’m having the app in two mobiles [...], and if there is a problem with the net or something, then you can use another mobile and then it doesn’t make any problem.

As such, by assembling resources such as backups of phones and apps for work, Ramesh is prepared for any problem he may encounter, enabling him, together with the technological tools, to plan and coordinate life as a platform courier working from two different apps.

As exemplified in Victor’s and Ramesh’s stories, reparation and maintenance of moments of disconnection from tracking outside the body becomes primarily a matter of “assembling resources” (Gerson & Star, 1986: 258). In Victor’s and Ramesh’s cases, assembling resources refers to everything infrastructural, such as installing more of the same apps on several backup phones, to having power banks and vehicles ready for tracking at very specific times during the day. Disconnection from tracking in these cases are typically moments where the app, which is necessary for solving a specific, generally delimited task is inaccessible and thereby hinders the user from completing the particular tracking action or sequence at the required time. Along these lines, as the work of repairing and maintaining the tracking is located outside the body, it takes on a practical rather than personal meaning, where the interaction with the device, and the data created as a result, is not addressed directly at the body but rather at external goals to be achieved in the partnership.

**FIGURE 10.1** MMS of Ramesh's broken car



*Comments:* The photo was taken by the participant Ramesh in January 2022. Ramesh depends on his car to get around faster in his job as a courier which means that car damage like this makes it impossible for him to work from his app. The car damage necessitated engagement in practical work to solve the situation so that tracking at work could go on. Normally, Ramesh keeps two phones in his car with two food delivery apps installed on both. When at work, the specific app in use tracks where Ramesh is, in the extension of his car, and how many orders he picks up and delivers.

## **Managing (dis)connection in cases of tracking from the surface of the body**

The couriers in my study engage in a more delimited use of their tracking technology which, in their specific case and setting, is used for delivering orders. In contrast, leisurely self-trackers sometimes seem to engage in more or less permanent relationships with devices in their private life. One example is Peter, whom I met for an interview in central Copenhagen in mid-February 2022 to learn more about his experiences of using an Ōura ring for tracking sleep and exercise. Peter quickly refuted my question when I asked him for an example of how he collaborates with the ring and the related app and replied, “Well, I don’t. I don’t. That’s what’s cool. There’s no maintenance. You can access it at any time and track your data, so I don’t need to do that [collaborate]”. He then added: “Well, if I’m going for a walk, I would like to see how far I’ve come. Or if I run or play football, I look at it. Otherwise, I don’t”. In fact, Peter does not experience any need for maintaining the tracking facilitated by his device other than the 15 minutes once a week, when the ring needs to be charged. Except for that, he wears the ring all the



time. Instead, maintenance of tracking for Peter seems to be centred around his body, where the ring helps him pay a little extra attention to health-related aspects such as time and quality of sleep, stress levels, and exercise and recovery patterns to avoid physical breakdowns. In terms of exercise, however, the ring requires Peter to add the specific type of exercise to the app for its predictions to be accurate, as “it [the sensor in the ring] cannot feel what I have been doing”, Peter explained. Thus, to prevent his data collection from failing and not being usable, Peter needs to manually feed the ring and the associated Ōura app with metadata about the movements it has already registered. Only through the work of completing his personal data, by adding closures and pieces of information to glue the data cracks together, is Peter able to maintain a meaningful relation with his ring and the data that come out of wearing it on the surface of his body.

Like Peter, the self-tracker Lene also tracks her exercise, but she uses a social network app for athletes, called Strava, to keep track of her training results. She has a bicycle computer and a power meter, but she mostly uses her Garmin watch, which is connected to Strava. However, her watch is getting old: “It quickly gets outdated, doesn’t it?” she asked me, in agreement. She has always had sports watches and made sure to update them once in a while, as she wants the best and latest version. She explained that when using Strava with her Garmin watch, the app automatically shows the address where a route is started. This is a well-known problem for many Strava users, and for that reason, Lene has deliberately begun to start her Garmin watch a few minutes after she starts her run, as she does not want other people to know where she lives. Thus, she starts out walking the first distance, after which she presses play to start the tracking feature of her watch as she starts running. To Lene, “the run does not really start before [she] starts running” either, so for that reason, she is extra careful in her coordination of exactly when and where to track, because she wants her data to be as accurate as possible and not count the distance she has walked into the total run. To collect as accurate data as possible, and to keep a good time on her runs, Lene has even set her clock to automatically stop when she is standing still, which she usually does to take pictures of something she sees on her run or walk (see Figure 10.2). In this way, while Lene is still physically wearing the watch, she pauses its timer to maintain precise running data by sorting out the fragments that cannot be used and thereby composing the usable data fragments of the run into an overall summarised run that is then ready to be shared with pictures, time, distance, elevation gain, and so on, with fellow athletes in Strava. However, sometimes, the app mistakenly posts unedited routes before Lene has had a chance to add photos and descriptions of her run, which can cause great frustration.

As exemplified in Peter’s and Lene’s stories, reparation and maintenance of moments of disconnection from tracking on the surface of the body is “a process of continual structuring and restructuring done through, to, and with both technology and people in an unselfconsciously conscious manner”

(Schmidt & Bannon, 2013: 356). It is about creating “local” or situational “closures” (Gerson & Star, 1986: 267) to the data that are created in the partnership, to make sure that this data reflects them and is personally shaped and meaningful. Thus, disconnection from tracking in these cases are typically moments where data are in the process of becoming personal, and not yet experienced as reflecting them or as fitting into the unique circumstances of their use. When tracking is located on the surface of the body, is moving closer in physical proximity, and is collecting data directed at or even inside bodies, for example, about sleep patterns, place of residence, or training results, the work of repairing and maintaining becomes about personalising tracking practices. Through this, maintenance almost becomes an investment in oneself and one’s body, achieved in the partnership.

**FIGURE 10.2** Breakdown of Lene’s walk into small stops along the way to take pictures for Strava



*Comments:* The photo was taken by the participant Lene in October 2021. Lene uses Strava to compose data fragments and photo snippets into an overall summarised run, as shown in the figure. This task is necessary for Lene to make use of her data as she sometimes sets her watch to, either manually or automatically, start and stop during runs and walks for it to not track her for various reasons.

## Managing (dis)connection in cases of tracking from inside the body

In March 2022, I was fortunate to get to interview Emma, an employee at a Scandinavian travel agency. Emma has a microchip implanted in the same hand that she usually also wears her Apple smartwatch for tracking her walks. However, because her Apple watch ran out of power, she forgot to put it on that day. Sometimes she even forgets that she is, in fact, also permanently wearing a microchip: “I sometimes forget that I have it. It’s just there. And that’s because we don’t really use it here [at the office]”. To begin with, Emma would have liked to have it inserted at the tip of her index finger, as “it would have been easier to just press; just like one would press a button”, but the skin was too thin for that, so she got it injected in her hand instead, between her thumb and index finger. According to Emma, the chip cannot be used for much in Denmark yet, but she expects it to be implemented in the coming years “so everything is at hand; literally, at hand”, she said. “It does not help me that much yet. Not in this office. Then you need to go to Stockholm [to use it]”, she added and explained how she can “beep” herself into the Swedish office if she has forgotten her card. In the Danish office, however, the building is owned by another company, and they have chosen to implement a door system that does not work with the chip. However, Emma rarely takes advantage of the opportunity to open doors in the Swedish office anyway, and that goes for the cabinets in the Danish office too, which she can, in theory, also open with the chip, but never does. Although Emma is constantly and physically connected to the device, it appears that the opportunities for using it are materially and technologically limited, resulting in her feeling disconnected from the chip although it is permanently connected to her. In this case, maintaining the potentiality of tracking via the use of the chip from inside the body becomes, as she describes it, more of “a fun gimmick” that she can “play with” or “show to other people”. It becomes a form of a mental “workaround” and adjustment that misfits with the “idealized representations of work” (Gerson & Star, 1986: 266) with the chip. She likewise showed me the associated app, NFC Reader, where she can scan and register information from her chip: “Let’s see if it works”, she said as she rubbed the phone against the back of her hand a couple of times. Finally, something appeared on the screen of her phone. She showed how the app can be programmed so it can be used to log on to social media, but Emma does not perceive herself as being technical enough to figure out how to set up this feature. However, she told me about one of her colleagues who “used the chip to log on to Facebook, but now he has deleted his Facebook [profile]”. Other colleagues had surgery to have the chip taken out, while another colleague realised that the chip had disappeared in her body: It was “crawling in the body – so, it disappeared”, Emma said. Having a tracking device inserted into the body facilitates a partnership with technology that is

intimate in another way than in cases of maintaining tracking from outside or from the surface of the body, although the data resulting in tracking from inside the body are not necessarily *about* the body, as in the above-described cases of maintaining tracking from the surface of the body. In Emma's case, for instance, the chip is not considered a tracking device per se, but since it is possible to open doors and cabinets, print, and log on to social media, and so on, and in some cases even possible to travel by public transportation, the data that are stemming from the body are still being registered somewhere.

However, for Marie, a woman I interviewed who has had Type 1 Diabetes since her youth, the data that come out of maintaining tracking via her glucose monitor – a sensor with a needle that is inserted under the skin on her arm – give insights into what is going on inside her body. To maintain tracking from the sensor, Marie must replace it with a new one once every two weeks, as they do not last forever. In connection with our interview in March 2022, she showed me a new type of sensor which she was going to try out as soon as it was time for her to replace the sensor she was currently wearing (see Figure 10.3). To make it easier for her to keep track of low as well as high blood sugar levels, the new sensor has an alarm that is attached to the associated app that Marie has installed on her phone, so that she gets notified about changes in her body and is able to react more quickly to them than if it, like now, is only up to herself to check her blood sugar levels by scanning the sensor with the app. Marie is already used to getting notifications from her app and current sensor to help her maintain the tracking, and thereby her body, for example, when it is time to replace the sensor or “repair” fluctuations in her blood sugar with insulin. However, the alarm feature of the new sensor makes her nervous: “The first thing I thought when the nurse said, ‘now I think we should try these with alarms’ was ‘how can I get it to stop beeping?’” At a consultation, her diabetes nurse, however, explained that it was still possible to change the general settings of the tracker to make it adapt to one's personal needs: “She was like, ‘you just go to...’ and so on, and ‘everything is possible’; ‘go to settings – general – notifications – and...’ something. I need to talk to her again”, Marie said, and continued:

That's my only concern; how aggressive it gets [...]. One thing's to sit in the office with my colleagues and I can check [my levels ...], but if it's constantly beeping, then they're suddenly invited in my life and private sphere.

Thus, the “idealised representation” (Gerson & Star, 1986: 266) of how an updated sensor would work better with an alarm to assist her in maintaining the tracking of her blood glucose levels misfits with her expectations of how the tracking device is supposed to adjust to her body and circumstances. In planning how she might have to change the settings, she is doing articulation and repair work to put together and maintain a certain personally meaningful connection between the sensor, body, and data, allowing her to maintain her health.

As exemplified in Emma’s and Marie’s stories, reparation and maintenance of moments of experiencing disconnection from the tracking that takes place from inside the body is a process of “mutual adjustment” (Schmidt & Bannon, 2013: 356). The mutual adjustment here is experienced in different ways depending on the context of tracking and maintenance, but it is in both cases shaped by the fact that the tracking device is physically paired with the body. It is about finding a way in which the two can act synergistically together to achieve something more by extending the body and overcoming its limits. Thus, disconnection and breakages occurring in cases of tracking from inside the body are typically moments where tracking might feel redundant, alienating, or bothersome. These are moments where the user needs to do repair work to unite the body and technology. Thus, maintenance becomes the somewhat mental task of working towards connecting and merging one’s life with the device in the body, rather than accepting it as an artificial and separated entity.

**FIGURE 10.3** Supplies for Marie’s repair work and maintenance of blood glucose tracking



*Comments:* The photo was taken by the participant Marie in December 2021. The photo shows a box of new sensors for Marie’s tracking of her blood glucose levels. Marie needs to replace the sensor every two weeks for tracking to go on and thereby needs to always make sure she has a box of new sensors available at home so she does not run out and become unable to track herself for a longer period of time.

## Concluding discussion: Disconnection as default

The three vignettes provide insights into how breakdowns may occur in several ways in the use of digital tracking technologies of various kinds and for various reasons. In addition, they provide insights into how humans also repair and rebuild their relations with digital tracking technologies in different ways, and how this depends on the context and the physical characteristics of the relation between body and device, but also on the role that the generated data play in connection with this.

Breakdowns are moments when people experience digital disconnection from their devices, and as the analysis indicates, it happens all the time. As revealed by the vignettes, moments of digital disconnection can be but are not restricted to breakages of the physicality itself of the digital device at hand, or of other technological tools that are not necessarily digital but used in extension to the digital device, which is then used in partnership with the human body: In the couriers' cases, for instance, this is the experience of suddenly not having a functioning vehicle or smartphone, and thereby being cut off from their use of the tracking app for some time. However, disconnection simultaneously encompasses breakages occurring in the use of the digital device at hand, that is, in moments of disconnection from the data that is generated when connected to the device: In the self-trackers' cases, for instance, this is the experience of having to put a certain amount of extra work into building and using one's data that is generated in the body-device relation – a form of oftentimes invisible data work (Pedersen & Bossen, 2021; Star & Strauss, 1999), but a crucial part of making sense of data. As Pedersen and Bossen (2021: 2) put it, “data requires work”, as it has to be “generated, shaped and presented – by people” to become meaningful. Additionally, moments of disconnection may be moments of having difficulties with creating the desired relation with one's digital tracking device: In the two pioneers' cases, for instance, where a patient reflects on trying out new body-sensors for blood glucose monitoring, and an employee in a private company reflects on experimenting with microchip implants, disconnection is the experience of not blending properly with the tracking device – the experience of feeling awkward or powerless together with the device.

Thus, intended seamless use of digital tracking technologies is constantly breaking down along the way and is thereby in need of different types of repairs. Here, the material configuration of the relationship between the body and device, that is, whether it enables tracking of the body from outside, inside, or from the surface, is crucial for how people are involved in a certain type of repair work and thereby for how they, as a result, experience being in the partnership they are working on forming. The concept of articulation work contributes to nuancing exactly this: the specific type of repair work that is taking place and its significance. As a concept, it makes it possible to study the (repair) work itself, that is, the work “that people must engage in in order to make

the cooperative mechanisms developed to support different aspects of work in complex environments fit together and fit to local circumstances” (Schmidt & Bannon, 1992: 22) – in the case of my analysis, the work invested in making the body–technology relationship work. Subsequently, it thereby contributes to gaining an understanding of what types of significance the given tracking device might be assigned in different body–technology relations, as humans constantly work on maintaining a particular connection to it. The latter is also shaped by the context in which the partnership plays out, and more knowledge is needed in terms of how, for instance, maintaining tracking from the surface of the body might also play out in work contexts, such as described in a recent study conducted by Borenstein (2021) about tracking from the wrist via the use of GPS watches of top female Ethiopian athletes, just like the use of tracking devices inside the body is already being suggested to employees in certain companies.

For the two couriers in this study, repairing and maintaining the delivery app’s tracking of the working body meant taking care of breakdowns and repairs of everything from phones to power banks and cars. If they did not manage to stay connected to the app, they would not be able to get enough deliveries to maintain a stable income. Thus, in their cases, connection was needed to be able to carry out certain work-related tasks, and their maintenance of tracking to avoid disconnection was centred on something external to the body, namely deliveries and money earned. For the self-trackers, the work of maintaining a stable connection was centred around the body and the data generated about the body. Here, connection was needed to care for, optimise, and perform with the body via continuous attention to and shaping of personal data patterns, depending on the specific aspect of the body being tracked. In the last vignette, maintaining tracking inside the body was important to maintain a certain sense of self, as it changes the moment a device becomes permanently implanted in the body, whether for voluntary or coerced reasons. In other words, a feeling of being connected was fundamental for the experience of one’s self, body, and technological implant as a unified entity. In these ways, the work of maintaining and repairing the body–device relationships helps people ground themselves, because they actively participate in defining why and how their attachments are worthy of care (see Andelsman Alvarez, Chapter 12 in this volume). At the same time, the default of disconnection in the use of digital tracking technologies in various proximities to the body was indirectly considered as something to avoid rather than embrace. Moments of digital disconnection due to digital breakages were experienced as a workload and burden rather than “breathing space” (Savolainen & Ruckenstein, 2022: 5). On the contrary, it was the moments of connection that took shape as breathing spaces. Connection was perceived as the ideal stage in the partnership between body and technology because it allowed the two to work seamlessly together with minimal interference. To push against disconnection by constantly repairing the breakages, articulation work was done through “continual structuring and restructuring” processes

(Schmidt & Bannon, 2013: 356) of data; by “assembling resources” (Gerson & Star, 1986: 258) to repair certain digital infrastructures allowing one to engage in tracking; by finding “local closures” and “workarounds” (Gerson & Star, 1986: 266–267) to solve problems related to experiences of being disconnected from tracking; and by trying to “mutually adjust” oneself and the device (Schmidt & Bannon, 2013: 356) to determine how to stay connected to tracking technologies in a meaningful way.

In any form of tracking presented in the analysis, maintenance is putting more work on the shoulders of the human, and the human’s responsibility is being moved to the forefront by way of handling the uncertainty, breakdowns, and moments of disconnection. As shown in the analysis, what the people in the present study described was how disconnection required constant devotion and occupation in making the partnership with tracking technology work, and how it could even lead to frustration. Thus, my analysis points to how digital disconnection is not necessarily a negative choice, but a dynamic of processes of breakdown followed by repair. As Kaun (2021: 1574) has likewise argued, “contemporary relationships are characterized by a dynamic of ending, breaking, and waning that intertwines positive and negative choices or bonds and non-bonds”. Pointing our focus to the margins and unfunctionalities of our encounter with contemporary digital devices, and the oftentimes hidden and tacit processes of repair work that are invested and prioritised to maintain our use of tracking devices we find meaningful for various reasons, tells us something about how people are already bonding with digital tracking technologies in a very physical sense, and that they are vulnerable to the moments of disconnection they experience. But it also points us in future directions of how people imagine bonding in new or different ways: partly how such developments might shape the human body in new ways when it connects in close partnerships with digital tracking technologies, and partly how inevitable and ubiquitous moments of digital disconnection potentially might put even more work on our shoulders in the future, at least if our focus is on maintaining the status quo and the experience of being constantly digitally connected.

## Acknowledgements

This research is part of the “Datafied Living” project, funded by the European Research Council (grant no. 947735).



## References

- Andersson, M. (2021). The courier and his/her mobile phone. In A. Hill, M. Hartmann, & M. Andersson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of mobile socialities* (pp. 195–208). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003089872>
- Berg, M. (2017). Making sense with sensors: Self-tracking and the temporalities of wellbeing. *Digital Health*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2055207617699767>
- Borenstein, H. (2021). Tracking work from the wrist: The surveillance of Ethiopian women athletes for capital. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 7(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v7i1.34037>
- Epoch Times. (2018). Här är företaget som chippar sina anställda [Here is the company that chips its employees]. *Epoch Times*. <https://epochtimes.se/Har-ar-foretaget-som-chippar-sina-anstallda>
- Fowler, G. A. (2022). Electronics are built with death dates. Let's not keep them a secret. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/08/02/why-gadgets-die/>
- Gauttier, S. (2019). 'I've got you under my skin': The role of ethical consideration in the (non-) acceptance of insideables in the workplace. *Technology in Society*, 56, 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2018.09.008>
- Gerson, E. M., & Star, S. L. (1986). Analyzing due processes in the workplace. *ACM Transactions on Office Information Systems*, 4(3), 257–270. <https://doi.org/10.1145/214427.214431>
- Graham, S., & Thrift, N. (2007). Out of order: Understanding repair and maintenance. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24(3), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407075954>
- Ihde, D. (1990). *Technology and the lifeworld: From garden to earth*. Indiana University Press.
- Jackson, S. J. (2014). Rethinking repair. In T. Gillespie, P. Boczkowski, & K. Foot (Eds.), *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality and society* (pp. 221–239). MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262525374.003.0011>
- Jansky, B., & Langstrup, H. (2022). Device activism and material participation in healthcare: Retracing forms of engagement in the #WeAreNotWaiting movement for open-source closed-loop systems in type 1 diabetes self-care. *BioSocieties*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41292-022-00278-4>
- Kaun, A. (2021). Ways of seeing digital disconnection: A negative sociology of digital culture. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27(6), 1571–1583. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211045535>
- Lomborg, S. (2022). Everyday AI at work: Self-tracking and automated communication for smart work. In S. Pink, M. Berg, D. Lupton, & M. Ruckenstein (Eds.), *Everyday automation: Experiencing and anticipating emerging technologies* (pp. 126–139). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003170884>
- Lupton, D. (2016). *The quantified self: A sociology of self-tracking*. Polity.
- Markvardsen, C., & Gram, K. D. (2017). *Første land i verden: Få din togbillet skudt ind under huden i Sverige* [First country in the world: Get your train ticket shot under the skin in Sweden]. DR. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/foerste-land-i-verden-faa-din-togbillet-skudt-ind-under-huden-i-sverige>
- Moe, H., & Madsen, O. J. (2021). Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27(6), 1584–1598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211048969>
- Neff, G., & Nafus, D. (2016). *Self-tracking*. MIT Press.
- Pedersen, A. M., & Bossen, C. (2021). *Data work in healthcare: An ethnography of a BI unit*. [https://doi.org/10.18420/IHC2021\\_006](https://doi.org/10.18420/IHC2021_006)
- Savolainen, L., & Ruckenstein, M. (2022). Dimensions of autonomy in human–algorithm relations. *New Media & Society*. OnlineFirst. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221100802>
- Schmidt, K., & Bannon, L. (1992). Taking CSCW seriously: Supporting articulation work. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, 1, 7–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00752449>
- Schmidt, K., & Bannon, L. (2013). Constructing CSCW: The first quarter century. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, 22, 345–372. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10606-013-9193-7>

- Star, S. L., & Strauss, A. (1999). Layers of silence, arenas of voice: The ecology of visible and invisible work. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, 8, 9–30.  
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1008651105359>
- Strauss, A. (1985). Work and the division of labour. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 26(1), 1–19.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4106172?seq=1>
- Syvrtsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Tanweer, A., Fiore-Gartland, B., & Aragon, C. (2016). Impediment to insight to innovation: Understanding data assemblages through the breakdown-repair process. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(6), 736–752.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1153125>
- Westh, A. (2019). *3F'erne siger nej til chip i armen for at kunne udføre jobbet* [The 3F'ers say no to a chip in the arm to be able to do the job]. Fagbladet 3F.  
<https://fagbladet3f.dk/artikel/3ferne-siger-nej-til-chip-i-armen-kunne-udfoere-jobbet>



# Disconnection or hyperconnectivity?

*Remote work and the case of Italian south working*

ALESSANDRO GANDINI

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF MILAN, ITALY

## ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis, and the ensuing diffusion of remote work, revived the debate about work meaningfulness, leading many workers to question their hyperconnected worklives. In Italy, this discussion has been animated by the “south working” proposition, which promotes moving towards the south of the country to work remotely and enjoy a slower pace of life and lower costs of living, while contributing to the revitalisation of rural and nonmetropolitan areas. Through digital ethnographic research that employs a variety of data sources, in this chapter I reconstruct the debate around south working across Italian mainstream and social media. I critically discuss the role that hyperconnectivity, disconnection, and digital work lifestyles play in this conversation, reflecting on the significance of the south working proposition in context of new aspirations for a “good life” that are distinctive of the post-pandemic scenario.

**KEYWORDS:** disconnection, Italy, meaningful work, remote work, south working

---

Gandini, A. (2024). Disconnection or hyperconnectivity? Remote work and the case of Italian south working. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 215–232). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-11>

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis, and the ensuing diffusion of remote work practices on a global scale, contributed to reviving the debate about work meaningfulness in Western societies. Calls for a “disconnection from work” have multiplied in recent years; phenomena such as the so-called Great Resignation generated lively discussions, especially – albeit not exclusively, as we will see – in the US (Gittleman, 2022). Online, the *r/antiwork* subreddit – a lively discussion forum that hosts conversations about working conditions and job quality – has grown exponentially in numbers between 2020 and 2021, signalling an increase of interest in the topic. In the same timeframe, the hashtag *#quietquitting* has gone viral on TikTok, promoting minimal engagement with work beyond one’s immediate duties (Scheyett, 2023). This comprehensive set of instances points to the development of a broad conversation about work and its meaning as a by-product of the pandemic crisis, which places disconnection – from high-paced worklives in high-cost cities, towards a better work–life balance – at the centre of the discussion.

An interesting context to observe in relation to this issue is Italy. At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the shift to remote work was accompanied by the popularisation of the “south working” proposition. South working is a self-declared movement that advocates moving to the southern regions of Italy to work remotely, supported by digital technologies, with the goal of recuperating a healthier and more balanced lifestyle. Developed in its legal status as a registered trademark and a same-name association, founded in March 2020, it represents a spin to the term “smart working”, which acquired an all-encompassing meaning and relevance in the Italian context during the pandemic to broadly indicate all kinds of remote work practices (Gandini, 2021).

Through digital ethnographic research that employs a variety of data sources, in this chapter I reconstruct the mainstream and social media debate around the south working proposition. Materials presented in the text include the following: 1) web pages of the South Working association, which comprise of a set of “stories of south working” by workers who decided to embrace the lifestyle promoted by the movement and a selection of press articles covering the initiative; and 2) a set of posts obtained from YouTube and Facebook by means of qualitative digital methods (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017) for the purposes of inquiring about the framing, reception, and wider discussion of this proposition across a variety of media sources, as well as by users themselves. In particular, I investigate the role that technology played in this conversation, aiming to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1.** In which ways have the themes of disconnection and hyperconnectivity been discussed and situated within the south working debate?

**RQ2.** To what extent did the framing and reception of the south working proposition engage with – or depart from – other disconnection-related issues, such as digital detox?

In seeking the answers to these questions, I adopt a wider conception of disconnection than what research in digital disconnection studies typically does. Here, disconnection is not understood as being solely from digital media per se, but rather (also) from what digital media serve as a means of access to – in this case, to work.

Findings highlight that the issues of disconnection, hyperconnectivity, and digital work lifestyles were largely peripheral to the discussion that followed the launch of the south working initiative. This resulted in a debate where the economic, technological, and social regeneration of rural, deprived, and deindustrialised areas took a primary position, leaving in the background the actual questioning of work meaningfulness, practices, and routines that is ultimately at the core of the south working proposition. By illustrating this case, I aim to establish a more solid link between disconnection and digital work research (see also Fast, 2021; Bagger, Chapter 6 in this volume; Scott Hansen, Chapter 10 in this volume), suggesting that the south working debate is evidence of the extenuating difficulty to reconcile, on the one hand, the growing endeavour for disconnection from hyperconnected worklives by many workers, and on the other, the difficulty in imagining an alternative to the fixed time–space structure and work organisation models of the twentieth-century workplace.

In the remainder of the chapter, I first discuss the growing relevance of work disconnection debates and then present the south working proposition in this light, outlining its popularisation in the Italian context. Then, I illustrate the main aspects that characterised the south working debate at the start of the pandemic, building on the different data sources introduced earlier. In the concluding section, I reflect on the broader significance of the south working proposition in relation to the academic debate, digital work lifestyles, and aspirations of the “good life” in the post-pandemic scenario.

## **Disconnecting from work: A post-pandemic trending topic**

Quit my job last night, it was nice to be home to make the kids breakfast and take them to school today! Off to hunt for a new opportunity, wish me luck :) (Hestolemysmile, 2021)

This is the most upvoted post appearing at the time of writing on the *r/antiwork* subreddit, a forum hosted on the Reddit platform that discusses working conditions and job quality – and that, in so doing, actively encourages people to, in short, “disconnect from work”. Published in October

2021, this post is exemplary of the popularisation of a discussion on work disconnection that is a significant by-product of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis across Western countries. The US has been a (somewhat unexpected) centre-piece of this lively conversation: In addition to the “anti-work” subreddit, which has obtained large mainstream media coverage in the past few years (see also Rogers, 2022), the Great Resignation phenomenon – which grasps the unprecedented number of workers who quit their job in the aftermath of the pandemic outbreak in search for new opportunities and, particularly, a better work–life balance (Gittleman, 2022) – has been an object of wide discussion and contention. The actual significance of the Great Resignation is still disputed from a statistical perspective (Gittleman, 2022); yet, together with another popular Internet trend – TikTok’s #quietquitting, which promotes minimal engagement in work beyond one’s immediate duties – it is evidence that a growing amount of workers in different parts of the Western world have begun questioning their relationship with, and the meaning of, their work, following the pandemic crisis.

Not coincidentally, many of these workers are employed in the so-called knowledge economy, which represents the backbone of present-day postindustrial societies in the West. Within this context, the advancement of digital technology contributed to revolutionising the pace and scale of work. On the one hand, the datafication and monitoring of work has qualitatively intensified (Moore, 2017); on the other hand, a delinking between the execution of work and its time–space organisation has occurred because of the diffusion of the Internet, which has also exacerbated the perception of a growing generational divide in work cultures (Gandini, 2020). Comprehensively, it may be said that the pandemic crisis has made more visible to workers the contradiction between the “mythology” of work as a self-fulfilling activity (Fleming, 2015) and the growing perception of pointlessness that accompanies many jobs in the corporate economy (Graeber, 2018), leading to the development of a conversation on work meaningfulness from a more systemic – and somewhat less individualised – perspective.

Prior to the pandemic outbreak, the academic debate had recorded a growing tension between hyperconnected work practices and the proliferation of self-help activities (e.g., “digital detox” programmes) that call for a more mindful use of digital technology – also beyond work and more broadly in one’s everyday life (Fast, 2021). Yet, as also argued by Fast (2021) and Bagger (Chapter 6 in this volume), there continues to be a lack of work-oriented disconnection studies as well as of disconnectivity-based work research, which demands further expansion. In the same article, Fast (2021) distinguished between three modes through which to read the relationship between work and disconnection: 1) disconnection “for work”, that is, calls to slow one’s pace of work in order to work better and more productively; 2) disconnection “at work”, that is, the study of those practices that entail disconnection during

work or while working; and 3) disconnection work outside the wage relation, that is, domestic work. The case of south working, which is explored in this chapter, represents an interesting example to peruse these tensions and expand our understanding of the evolving relationship between disconnection and work in the post-pandemic setting.

## South working: An introduction

Following the imposition of localised restrictions in the Lombardy region, on 8 March 2020, Italy entered a nationwide lockdown that would last until 4 May. Contextually, the Italian government mandates the recourse to “smart working” for all companies and public services, except for health-related occupations and a small number of other “essential” jobs. It is on this occasion that most of the Italian public gets acquainted, somewhat for the first time, with remote work practices (Gandini & Garavaglia, 2023). Within this context, the term “smart working” becomes a household topic of discussion, being used to indicate all kinds of practices in relation to remote work and working from home, without any distinction among specific arrangements (Gandini, 2021).

The sudden and unplanned, large-scale diffusion of remote work practices imposed by the pandemic crisis brought to the fore a lively debate in the Italian public opinion concerning work cultures and work–life balance. A survey promoted by a national online news media network in July 2020 (Today.it, 2020) showed that 20 per cent of respondents answered the question, “How has the experience of lockdown changed your way of approaching life?” by stating that they “want to change their life, doing fewer things but more meaningfully”, while 14 per cent declared that they “were giving too much importance to work”, and 6 per cent expressed the desire to “move house, outside the city or to the countryside”. This trend of disengagement from work “as it used to be” has continued beyond the heightened phase of the pandemic, as a significant number of voluntary resignations from employment has been recorded, making Italy a peculiar example of Great Resignation outside the US (Coin, 2023).

Thus, it is no surprise that the so-called south working proposition found nationwide resonance within this context. South working is a self-described movement and a same-name association founded in March 2020 by Elena Militello, a 27-year-old Sicilian researcher and activist who relocated from Luxembourg to Sicily during the lockdown period, and Mario Mirabile, an urban policy consultant. As the official website ([www.southworking.org](http://www.southworking.org)) outlines, south working calls for an engagement into “new ways of working, starting from the territories and enabling a new balance between personal and professional life”. In so doing, it aims at “bridging the economic, social and territorial gap between North and South, between industrialised and marginalised areas of the country, through a process of reactivation of traditionally peripheral territories”. This promotes 1) the creation of advanced digital



infrastructure across the country, so as to allow workers to choose where they want to work from; 2) the improvement of mobility infrastructures, so that workers can be no more than one hour away from a high-speed rail or airport connection; and 3) the development of social infrastructures and local community services, such as coworking spaces and other public and private spaces of collaboration and care, to support workers in their personal and social needs. Interestingly, the goal of the association is not merely to advance the diffusion of remote work, but to enable a systemic process of social change, fostering more balanced work practices and the revitalisation of previously deprived or abandoned areas of the country – including, as said, building new digital infrastructure and thus expanding the connective potential of the south. This is also reflected in the “charter” of south working, which outlines the values and principles that define its activity and to which adherents must abide by. Among these are found, in particular, the voluntariness of south working, which maintains that this must not consist in delocalisation or outsourcing of staff imposed by companies as a cost-effective strategy, but should originate from the free will of workers themselves.

South working gained significant mainstream media attention throughout the early phase of the pandemic. This is also owed to the fact that it touched upon an open nerve of the Italian labour market, which is characterised by a “dual nature” across the north–south divide and a significant south-to-north migration flow of workers motivated by economic reasons (Biagioli et al., 2004). This is exemplified by the city of Milan, which attracts large numbers of (especially young and knowledge-based) workers from the south who decide (or, as we will see, are somewhat forced) to move to an urban area that offers more professional opportunities, but where costs of living are considerably higher than the rest of the country and comparable to those of other major European cities (Bonomi, 2008). Within this setting, south working successfully appeals to the ideal of striking a better work–life balance without leaving one’s place of birth, aiming at changing the narrative around economic migration in Italy precisely at a time when many workers experienced a temporary break from their usual work routines, and were therefore more sensitive to the idea of considering significant lifestyle changes. It is estimated that around 45,000 workers in Italy relocated back to their home towns to work remotely during the early phase of the pandemic, some temporarily, some permanently, many of them to the southern regions (Svimez, 2020).

## **“Stories of south working”: The workers’ voices**

At the time of writing, the South Working website hosts a set of 19 “Stories of South Working” recounted by workers themselves, whereby they describe their experiences and perceptions of working remotely following the pandemic outbreak. These testimonies span between April 2020 and March 2022 and

feature eight male workers, nine female workers, and two couples, for a total of nine men and twelve women. The vast majority of those are workers who relocated to the south of Italy to live and work following the pandemic outbreak, with the intention of making this a permanent move. In addition, there is a story of temporary south working by a female project manager in her 30s who lives and works in London, but who spent part of the pandemic period in Sicily; the story of a 28-year-old engineer who was living and working in Spain prior to the pandemic, and relocated to a small “borgo” near Verona, in the north-east of Italy; and a story of “nomad work” (Ehn et al., 2022; Thompson, 2019) more generally intended – that of Davide, who engaged in a journey of 2,500 kilometres by foot across Italy, looking for places along the way to work remotely. These last two are the most recent stories in chronological terms and signal an evolution in the scope of the association, towards a proposition that focuses chiefly on nomad work as a lifestyle choice that seeks a better work–life balance, while nonetheless conditioned on the presence of high-speed digital connectivity.

The various testimonies largely mirror one another and share a common format, as workers recount their south working experience, highlighting pros and cons of their lifestyle choice. Among the advantages, many underline the possibility to “come back home” and live closer to their family and friends. Many also stress the possibility of enjoying more of the “small things” that the south of Italy can offer, such as the colours of the landscapes, the proximity to the sea, or the good weather. Some maintain that south working enabled them to live more flexible and efficient lives, giving them the chance to cultivate more closely their personal interests and to save time – particularly on commuting – and money. It may be said that, for many of these south workers, the main driver has been the aspiration of a new kind of “good life”, which finally reconciles with their (oftentimes forced) decision to leave the south in search for work when they were young adults. See how Claudia, a sales advisor, described it:

It would be ideal to no longer have to choose between work and family. South working represents the right solution to pursue and achieve one’s professional goals, without renouncing to live in the places of one’s heart.

The negative aspects of south working also largely tended to repeat themselves across the south workers’ stories. Many underscored that south working can be socially isolating and lamented the lack of face-to-face meetings with colleagues, as well as the reduction in sociality compared with office life. Yet, these narrations tell of a successful disconnection from high-paced routines, as these downsides are a somewhat necessary price to pay in exchange for the upsides of living in the south – which mirrors trends in disconnection studies concerning abstention from social media (Jorge, 2019). Some contradictions, however, were also present: An issue encountered by many south workers, for instance, is the difficulty to “interrupt work” at the end of the workday, and

to efficiently separate their professional and private lives as a result of working from home. Paola, a graphic designer from Basilicata, underlined that “often it becomes late in front of the computer without realising it”. This reveals the existence of an extenuating tension between the call to disconnect from high-paced, city-based worklives that animates the south working proposition on the one hand, and one’s actual work–life balance while working remotely on the other, as many workers still engage in hyperconnected work routines while actively practicing a form of disconnection from work.

Although these stories are also a promotional tool for the association, they do not obfuscate the potential shortcomings of the south working proposition. Some workers noted that they miss the vibrant cultural offer of the city – of Milan in particular; others underscored the necessity to be “better organised” at work in order to actually succeed in south working. Some of these stories also include practical suggestions about how to make their south working decision a successful one. Many emphasised the necessity of accessing quality broadband, again highlighting a tension between disconnection and (hyper) connection that seems to be at the heart of this lifestyle choice. Others expressed the desire for greater availability of local coworking spaces, so as to access a physical workplace regularly and have contact with other south workers. Alice, a Germany-based project manager who relocated to Sicily, maintained the following:

South working is certainly feasible, but upon certain conditions – first of all the structures. In Palermo there are few coworking spaces. I tried to look for some and the ones I found did not meet my needs, or were too far from the area where I live, also considering that taking public transport in Palermo is an adventure!

Comprehensively, these “stories of south working” aim at presenting the south working proposition as the enabler of a process of positive social change that would improve the quality of work and life and revitalise the south of Italy. Antonio, a Sicilian engineer who moved back to Palermo after years living in Turin, outlined quite explicitly that he “had always thought that the job he aspired to did not exist in Palermo”, while now he is “proud to represent the change towards a work model that fosters delocalisation”. Yet, arguably the appeal of the south working proposition rests primarily upon an affective dimension rather than a practical one, as it builds on the promise of reconciling the proximity to one’s family with one’s career ambitions. As Maria, a Sicilian project manager, recounted:

Our parents have been telling us for years to leave because there are no opportunities here, and every time we leave, we leave our hearts here to obey the mind and pursue our career options. If I could no longer choose between heart and mind, and if job opportunities could be separated from [where] the company headquarters [are located], it would be ideal.

## Mainstream media coverage of south working

Since the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, a variety of media outlets have taken great interest in the south working proposition. At the time of writing, the South Working association's website lists 61 media appearances on local, national, and international outlets spanning between June 2020 and February 2022. These include national outlets such as *La Repubblica* (8 articles), *Corriere della Sera*, and *Sky News Italy* (2 articles each), as well as magazines and newspapers from different cultural standpoints and areas. Also noteworthy is the number of articles published by local outlets across the south, particularly from Sicily (17 in total), as well as the presence of five articles from international media sources. Among these entries is an open letter penned by the South Working founders, addressed to the (at the time) Minister for the South and Territorial Inclusion, Mara Carfagna, which summarised the main claims raised by the association regarding the revitalisation of the south of Italy.

Many of these articles are centred on one of the founders, Elena Militello, who frequently appeared as a guest on television shows or in press interviews in the early phase of the pandemic. Others discussed south working more generally as part of the diffusion of remote work practices following the pandemic outbreak, reflecting on their long-term prospects. Some feature other “stories of south working” beyond those published on the association's website, presenting the workers' experiences and discussing advantages and disadvantages. To investigate in greater depth the media coverage of south working beyond the selection of press articles listed on the association's website, a set of 1,516 Facebook posts by pages and verified profiles, based on the search term “south working” (in Italian language) and published between March 2020 and September 2021, was retrieved via Facebook's research data collection platform CrowdTangle. Of the top-ten articles retrieved and ordered by the “Total Interaction Rate” metric, which accounts for the total amount of interactions (likes and other reactions), four are from newspapers of national relevance (*La Repubblica*, *Huffington Post Italy*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, and *Il Sole 24 Ore*); one is from a multi-media national news outlet (*TGCOM24*); one is from a popular, online-only, national news media (*Will Media*); and the remaining four are local media from the south. Overall, these sources attest to a largely positive media framing, which nonetheless entails a more doubtful nuance. The article with more interactions in this sample (which also appears on the South Working press list) is from *La Repubblica* (Smorto, 2020), published on 6 November 2020, which presents a variety of “stories of south working” recounted by workers themselves. The overall tone of this entry is hopeful: It presents south working as the opportunity to enjoy working remotely from one's place of origin, and places it in the context of a narration that highlights how some workers would have never thought it possible to relocate to their place of birth before retirement. A similar, hopeful

tone also characterises some of the other articles in this list, particularly that by *TGCOM24* (2020), which goes as far as stating that “for some it [south working] is a dream come true”. Among the somewhat doubtful ones, instead, we can find the second article by interaction count, by *Huffington Post Italy* (Moncalero, 2020). This presents a selection of stories of workers who left Milan during the pandemic to relocate to the south, while continuing to work remotely for companies located in the north. These testimonies are presented in the context of a discussion that flags working from the south of Italy for employers that are actually based in the north of the country. The narration is heavily stereotyped, as it emphasises the pleasure to bathe in the sea after work, or to conduct meetings from the pinewood, implicitly signalling the risk of the emergence of a new kind of socioeconomic cleavage. Interestingly, two other posts in the sample focus on the downsides of the south working proposition for big cities. One (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 2020a) is a video debate that discusses the prospects of the city of Milan following the pandemic and the diffusion of remote work, questioning whether it will ultimately lose its attractive allure. Another (*RomaToday*, 2020) questions the impact of remote and south working practices upon the costs of renting in the city of Rome.

Overall, this analysis suggests that the south working proposition has enjoyed a largely positive media framing; yet, this is enmeshed in stereotypical depictions of remote work while leaving the issue of work disconnection in a largely peripheral position of the debate, while the primary focus remains the question of the north–south divide in the Italian labour market. In turn, this is also exemplary of the continuing tension around the role of digital media in work–life boundary management, between (hyper)connectivity on the one hand, and social connection, belonging, and the social isolation deriving from remote work on the other, which raises further questions about the kind and depth of (re)connection that digital media actually facilitate (Bagger & Lomborg, 2021). Furthermore, technology is largely portrayed throughout these articles as a neutral aid to support remote work practices; a more comprehensive discussion of digital lifestyles and how they fit with south working practices is markedly lacking.

## **The social media conversation about south working**

Starting from the Facebook posts about south working previously collected and analysed, a digital ethnographic exploration of the comments posted by users alongside these articles has been conducted to investigate the users’ reception of south working. For the most part, these mirror the tone of the articles discussed: Most of the comments primarily revolve around the north–south divide and discuss what kind of impact the south working proposition, as well as the diffusion of remote work more broadly, might have in Italy beyond the pandemic. Yet, interestingly, some diverse viewpoints also emerge.

Many users highlight the risk that employers might find south working to be an occasion to reduce salary costs, and they fear that working remotely from the south of Italy could be the harbinger of a broader process of delocalisation and outsourcing of work, which will ultimately end up being detrimental for workers. Some underline that companies might impose a difference in salaries between workers who reside in places where there are notably different costs of living. Others maintain that workers in the south should be working for companies in the south, not for companies in the north. Some also underscore the necessity to create an entrepreneurial class in the south, in order to make sure this area of the country flourishes. Many wish the south working proposition to succeed in fostering social change and improving the quality of life and work in the south of Italy, rendering rural and peripheral areas more appealing and thus restraining economic migration flows from the south to the north. Some remain doubtful as to whether south working will continue to be a feasible proposition after the pandemic but are open to the possibility of a permanent change of habits. Yet, many underline the necessity to increase the digitalisation of the south for the south working proposition to be feasible, since many areas still suffer a significant technological divide. Again, it is noteworthy that the issue of healthy digital work lifestyles remains largely in the background of these conversations; yet, hyperconnectivity seems to be featuring more frequently in this discussion.

To further expand this analysis, using the YouTube Data Tools suite (Rieder, 2015), a list of 500 videos based on the search term “south working” was retrieved in September 2021. Among the top-ten videos ordered by comment count that contain the term south working in the video title, three videos are from mainstream media outlets: the first one (top of the ranking) is a feature by LA7 (2020), a national private television broadcaster, that showcases the story of Ludovica, a graphic designer from Naples who relocated to her hometown on occasion of the pandemic outbreak. Her story is very similar to those enlisted on the association’s website. On the one hand, she stated that, thanks to south working, she was able to enjoy the possibility of spending more time with her family. Yet, on the other hand, she also highlighted that she found it difficult to separate her work time from her private life, as remote work schedules prove more hectic than imagined. The tone remained positive overall, as she maintained that south working allows her to live closer to her family, and the practical issues of distance work are a bearable burden vis-à-vis the possibility to see her loved ones more often. The second one (third in the overall ranking) is a news video from RAI, the Italian public service broadcaster, which showcases an interview with Elena Militello, one of the South Working founders (RAI, 2020). Then, at position nine, is a video by *Il Sole 24 Ore* (2020b), the leading Italian economics newspaper, which features a set of interviews with workers who decided to relocate to Calabria following the pandemic outbreak. This is framed in the

context of a romanticised view of south working, which suggests that the pandemic has seen an “inversion trend” in south-to-north migration flows powered by digital technologies and remote work.

The other videos in the sample are more varied: These include a TEDx Talk (2020) by South Working founder Elena Militello, as well as videos from “native” YouTube channels that discuss economic development, project management, and the south in general, which mention the south working proposition. The only video in this list with relatively numerous comments (30) is the first one – Ludovica’s interview at LA7 (LA7, 2020). Looking at these comments, we can observe the presence of a conversation that is largely similar to the discussions encountered on Facebook, whereby users primarily focus on the north–south divide in the Italian context and warn against the risks of delocalisation and outsourcing of work that the south working proposition might trigger. See how this user (interestingly, a self-declared supporter of Lega, the main right-wing populist party at the time) highlights that south working should be about ensuring that the wealth created in the southern regions may be reinvested in the same areas, without getting “lost” to the north:

The big cities of the south are unfortunately a little in degradation, but the hinterland of the south has much potential and advantages, meanwhile there is less crime, a healthier and economically more convenient environment than in northern Italy. We need to think about relaunching our regions because they are our home, and not go to enrich the northern regions, and I say this as a convinced Lega supporter. Now we often hear in the news that the north suffers from Smart Working and for university lessons from home (a sacrosanct and obligatory thing for 2020!), But think for a moment that the money that we southerners do not spend in the north are spent here in our regions creating wealth in our home! (LA7, 2020)

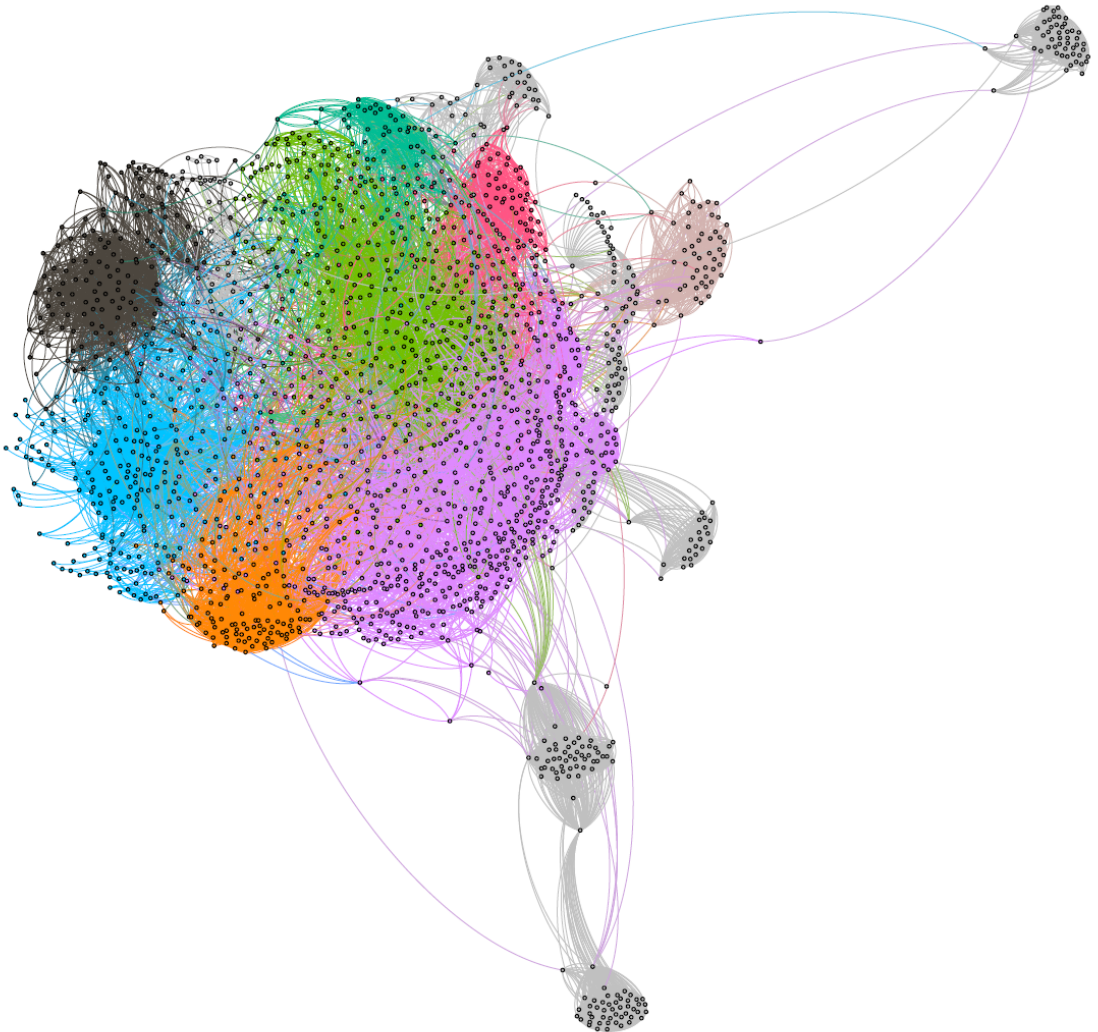
Comments tend to focus on remote work practices more generally: Some note that these can be very detrimental in particular for food businesses in densely populated office areas, while others underline that the isolation of working remotely does not constitute an increase in the quality of life. As an example, see the comment below:

But we are all smart working and in the meantime the bars are starving, all closed, [and we are] at home without contact with colleagues. Horrible! “The quality of life increases” .... beautiful slogan! “The possibility of choice” 😊 (LA7, 2020)

To further probe these trends, and locate this conversation in a broader context, a set of “related” videos starting from the most-commented video in the sample (labelled here as “seed 1”) was also collected via the YouTube Data Tools suite (crawl = 1, iterations = 5). This allowed the exploration of a broader set of connections among videos that are cognate to the south

working discussion on YouTube, and which most frequently appear on users' pages when searching for this topic. From this data collection, a total of 1,952 videos connected by 18,296 edges was retrieved and visualised in a network graph (see Figure 11.1) elaborated through the software Gephi.

**FIGURE 11.1** Video network from "seed 1"



*Comments:* The network shows the clustering of videos in groups, based on their "relatedness", calculated through the "modularity" measure on Gephi. Each colour represents a group of similar ("related") videos.

Taking inspiration from existing research on algorithmic cultures on YouTube (Airoldi et al., 2017), the videos included in this data collection were grouped on the basis of their "modularity" score, which reflects the "relatedness" of the content observed. Figure 11.1 visualises this elaboration, by way of



differently-coloured clusters (for a methodological discussion of this approach, see also Caliendo & Gandini, 2017). This allows the exploration of the relative positioning of content about south working on the YouTube platform vis-à-vis other types of content, and thus the investigation in greater depth of the broader cultural imaginary within which the south working proposition appears on this platform. Out of this analysis, six main clusters emerge. The qualitative inspection of the videos included in these clusters enables the following categorisation:

- Purple cluster (19.9% of the overall sample): this contains a set of videos about Italian people and wealth, with a generically populist tone
- Green cluster (14.5% of the overall sample): this is a set of videos from news media and personal blogs, mostly about work and smart- or south working
- Blue cluster (10.6% of the overall sample): this contains how-to videos, mostly of a medical or professional nature
- Black cluster (9.2% of the overall sample): videos included in this cluster showcase excerpts of television programmes, mostly about politics
- Orange cluster (7.4% of the overall sample): this cluster includes a diverse set of videos about politics and the pandemic
- Pink cluster (7% of the overall sample): videos included in this cluster concern work, generally intended
- Dark green cluster (4.3% of the overall sample): this cluster contains videos about finance and economics

This suggests that videos related to south working on YouTube are part of a wide set of content on work and politics, which intersects with the discussion about the pandemic (as evidenced by the blue cluster). Interestingly, the biggest cluster of these related videos (purple) consists of videos about Italians and wealth, and which bears a largely populist tone. What is *not* present, again, is content about work disconnection and digital work lifestyles. In consideration of the different elements of evidence presented here, it may be argued that disconnection does not hold a central position in the debate around the south working proposition; topics such as disconnection, hyperconnectivity, and healthy digital work lifestyles are largely in the background of this conversation. This is indeed quite striking, as the tension between hyper- and disconnection in relation to remote work that emerges from the individual stories of south workers remains unproblematised across the mainstream and social media conversation, while at the same time, the south working movement actively focuses on the promotion of a healthier work–life balance and a more meaningful work life. In the next, concluding section, I discuss these insights more in depth, questioning how south working may be a useful example to expand our understanding of the role of disconnection in the context of the debate on work meaningfulness that followed the pandemic.

## Concluding discussion

Through the case of south working in Italy, in this chapter I have probed the role of disconnection and digital work lifestyles in the debate around work meaningfulness that unfolded as a by-product of the pandemic crisis. Aiming to put the issues of work–life balance and work meaningfulness at the top of the political agenda, and thus fostering practices of systemic cultural change around work, the south working proposition might be considered exemplary, elaborating upon Fast’s (2021) terminology of a fourth potential facet in the relationship between disconnection and digital work research: “disconnection *from* work”. As seen, south working posits an example of disconnection from what digital media serve as a means of access to – in this case, to work – which adds to the existing dimensions that substantiate this relationship. Yet, tension exists between disconnecting from work as an existential practice and the necessity of connection to continue to practice work as a means for making a living. Alongside the examples of “anti-work” and “quiet quitting” previously discussed, the south working debate is ultimately evidence of the extenuating difficulty to reconcile, on the one hand, the growing endeavour for disconnection from hyperconnected worklives that appeals to many workers, especially in the knowledge economy, and, on the other hand, the difficulty in imagining an alternative to the fixed time–space structure and work organisation models of the twentieth-century workplace. Issues such as disconnection and digital work lifestyles ultimately appear little in the mainstream and social media discussion of south working, being obfuscated by the broader contextual circumstances of the Italian labour market.

Contextually, and relatedly, as an example of an emergent nomad work practice in a context characterised by a labour market with peculiar features, south working embodies an aspiration to a new kind of “good life” that delinks from the prioritisation of work as an existential practice. The emphasis posed on this aspect – both in the stories of south working as well as in the mainstream and social media narration about it – signals that south working has touched an open nerve in the Italian debate about work, as it has been perceived as a movement that seeks to subvert the mainstream narrative around work and turn a crisis into an opportunity for social change. Yet, this aspiration is largely perceived to be difficult to translate in practice. In the mainstream and social media debate that followed its popularisation, the south working proposition has ended up being framed in a somewhat patronising discourse around work, whereby the south of Italy is taken as a place that urban, knowledge-based, middle-class workers would improve by way of their counter-migration process. Nonetheless, the south working proposition and debate are also evidence that matters of (dis)connection are a pivotal component of the discourse around work and the “good life” that has been affirmed in the post-pandemic scenario, together with a renewed tension between urban and rural cultures and the

contradictions that concern the movement of workers with different lifestyles from one place to another – and back.

Existing research on nomad work practices (Ehn et al., 2022; Thompson, 2019) maintains that digital technology represents a key support to the quest for a lifestyle that prioritises leisure as opposed to being centred primarily on work. Yet, this position harbours a contradictory relationship with technology, as striving for a closer relationship with nature oftentimes comes together with the (perhaps implicit) promotion of a hyperconnected lifestyle and large-scale digitisation of rural areas. While animated by positive intentions, south working may be seen as an example of this contradiction – which inevitably reflects in the mainstream and social media debate around it. Seen from this perspective, the south working proposition arguably shares some similarities with – and therefore some of the same critiques of – the processes of “rural gentrification” that characterise the inflow of middle-class income workers in nonmetropolitan areas (Nelson et al., 2010). Critical views of these processes emphasise the risk of inter-class conflict and the frequent nature of capital investment that these forms of relocation entail (Phillips, 1993). Some of these issues also apply to the south working proposition: Many south workers emphasise the possibility to spend less on accommodation and thus valorise their (family-owned, most commonly) real estate possessions. The same goes for technological divide: The huge difference in lifestyle that separates urban-based, usually young knowledge workers may also be a legitimate concern, especially in cases where the relocation towards the south does not entail a reconciliation with family ties. In such cases, south working practices might be the driver of positive social change – such as through the wider availability of community services, shared workspaces, and the like – as much as they can widen the existing tension between the worldviews of urban middle classes and rural or non-metropolitan inhabitants, which is reflected in significantly different electoral choices (Gandini, 2020). Nonetheless, the south working movement has arguably had the great merit of fostering a broad conversation around work meaningfulness and social change in the Italian public opinion that, until its appearance, was completely absent, while at the same time trying to put the issue of “disconnecting” from the high-intensity worklives of urban knowledge professionals under the spotlight.

In terms of how interesting the south working example may prove to be, the contribution of this chapter remains limited to a specific case and a peculiar cultural and geographic context. A different set of data, for instance, coming from interviews with south workers beyond the association’s website testimonies, or from similar cases in other parts of the world, would significantly expand the discussion of the extent to which disconnection and healthy digital work lifestyles are engaged with in the south working proposition. The persistent tensions around work cultures that the pandemic crisis has accelerated and brought to light also demand further attention and

monitoring in the years to come. Ultimately, the issues of work–life balance and job quality today cannot be fully addressed without taking into account a healthier, more balanced and wiser use of digital technology in (and in the access to) work, escaping the paradoxical dimension of striving to disconnect (in search for a better work–life balance) while at the same time producing new kinds of hyper-digitalised worklives.

## References

- Airolidi, M., Beraldo, D., & Gandini, A. (2016). Follow the algorithm: An exploratory investigation of music on YouTube. *Poetics*, 57, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.05.001>
- Bagger, C., & Lomborg, S. (2021). Overcoming forced disconnection: Disentangling the professional and the personal in pandemic times. In A. Chia, A. Jorge, & T. Karppi (Eds.), *Reckoning with social media* (pp. 167–188). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Biagioli, M., Reyneri, E., & Seravalli, G. (2004). Flessibilità del mercato del lavoro e coesione sociale [Flexibility of the job market and social cohesion]. *Stato e mercato*, 24(2), 277–314. <http://doi.org/10.1425/14634>
- Bonomi, A. (2008). *Milano ai tempi delle moltitudini* [Milan in the age of multitudes]. Mondadori.
- Caliandro, A., & Gandini, A. (2017). *Qualitative research in digital environments: A research toolkit*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315642161>
- Coin, F. (2023). *Le grandi dimissioni* [The great resignation]. Einaudi Editore.
- Ehn, K., Jorge, A., & Marques-Pita, M. (2022). Digital nomads and the Covid-19 pandemic: Narratives about relocation in a time of lockdowns and reduced mobility. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221084958>
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnective work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Fleming, P. (2015). *The mythology of work*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gandini, A. (2020). *Zeitgeist Nostalgia: On populism, work and the ‘good life’*. John Hunt Publishing.
- Gandini, A. (2021). Lo smart working e il “nuovo normale” del lavoro [Smart working and the “new normal” of work]. In E. Colombo, & P. Rebughini (Eds.), *Acrobati del presente: La vita quotidiana alla prova del lockdown* [Acrobats of the present: Daily life tested by lockdown] (pp. 93–116). Carocci.
- Gandini, A., & Garavaglia, E. (2023). ‘Another work routine is possible’: everyday experiences of (unexpected) remote work in Italy. *Culture and Organization*, 29(5), 397–415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2023.2201003>
- Gittleman, M. (2022). The “great resignation” in perspective. *Monthly Labor Review*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48716838>
- Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit jobs: A theory*. Simon & Schuster.
- Hestolemysmile. (2021, October). *Quit my job last night, it was nice to be home to make the kids breakfast and take them to school...* [Online forum post]. Reddit. [https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/q82vqk/quit\\_my\\_job\\_last\\_night\\_it\\_was\\_nice\\_to\\_be\\_home\\_to/](https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/q82vqk/quit_my_job_last_night_it_was_nice_to_be_home_to/)
- Il Sole 24 Ore. (2020a). *Milano riparte: lavoro, immobili, trasporti* [Milan restarts: Work, real estate, transports]. <https://stream24.ilssole24ore.com/video/italia/milano-riparte-lavoro-immobili-trasporti/ADwYNFm>
- Il Sole 24 Ore. (2020b). *South Working, la Calabria fra le destinazioni più gettonate dai nuovi lavoratori agili* [South working: Calabria among the most popular destinations for new agile workers] [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugDexoA2W-M>
- Jorge, A. (2019). Social media, interrupted: Users recounting temporary disconnection on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119881691>

- LA7. (2020). *South working, tornare al sud lavorando per il nord* [South working, returning to the south working for the north] [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBgFGNIpN-U>
- Moncalero, N. (2020). Storie di south-working: “Cara Milano lavoro per te, da Amalfi. E la sera un bagno a mare” [Stories of south-working: “Dear Milan, I work for you, from Amalfi. And by the evening, a bathe in the sea”]. *Huffington Post Italia*.  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.it/life/2020/07/04/news/storie\\_di\\_south-working\\_cara\\_milano\\_lavoro\\_per\\_te\\_da\\_amalfi\\_e\\_la\\_sera\\_un\\_bagno\\_a\\_mare\\_-5250182/](https://www.huffingtonpost.it/life/2020/07/04/news/storie_di_south-working_cara_milano_lavoro_per_te_da_amalfi_e_la_sera_un_bagno_a_mare_-5250182/)
- Moore, P. V. (2017). *The quantified self in precarity: Work, technology and what counts*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315561523>
- Nelson, P. B., Oberg, A., & Nelson, L. (2010). Rural gentrification and linked migration in the United States. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 26(4), 343–352.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2010.06.003>
- Phillips, M. (1993). Rural gentrification and the processes of class colonisation. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 9(2), 123–140. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(93\)90026-G](https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(93)90026-G)
- RAI. (2020). *South working: lavorare dal Sud - La Vita in Diretta Estate* [South working: Working from the south – “La Vita in Diretta” Summer] [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RR7-jOHJ00>
- Rieder, B. (2015). *YouTube data Ttools* (Version 1.42) [Software]. <https://ytdt.digitalmethods.net>
- Rogers, R. T. (2022). Reddit ‘antiwork’ forum booms as millions of Americans quit jobs. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/1270ee18-3ee0-4939-98a8-c4f40940e644>
- RomaToday. (2020). *Tra lezioni online e south working il Covid 19 svuota le case per i fuorisede: a Roma offerta più che raddoppiata* [Between online classes and south working, Covid-19 empties the houses of off-campus students: Supply in Rome more than double].  
<https://www.romatoday.it/politica/crollo-affitti-fuorisede-roma-coronavirus.html>
- Scheyett, A. (2023). Quiet quitting. *Social Work*, 68(1), 5–7. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swac051>
- Smorto, G. (2020). Bentornati al Sud con il posto al Nord [Welcome back to the south with a job in the north]. *La Repubblica*.  
[https://www.repubblica.it/venerdi/2020/11/06/news/bentornati\\_al\\_sud\\_con\\_il\\_posto\\_al\\_nord-272872892/](https://www.repubblica.it/venerdi/2020/11/06/news/bentornati_al_sud_con_il_posto_al_nord-272872892/)
- Svimez. (2020). *Ricerca Svimez sul numero dei South Workers* [Svimez research on the number of south workers].  
[http://lnx.svimez.info/svimez/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2020\\_11\\_16\\_south\\_working\\_com.pdf](http://lnx.svimez.info/svimez/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2020_11_16_south_working_com.pdf)
- Tedx Talks. (2020). *South working: attrarre energie, ridurre i divari territoriali* | Elena Militello | TEDxCataniaStudio [South working: Attract energies, reduce territorial inequalities | Elena Militello | TedxCataniaStudio] [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNGwacEcIXQ>
- TGCOM24. (2020). *South working: lavorare al Nord vivendo al Sud (o dove si desidera)* [South working: Working in the north living in the south (or wherever you want)].  
[https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/tgcomlab/lavoro/south-working-ovvero-lavorare-al-nord-vivendo-al-sud-o-dove-si-desidera-\\_20989926-202002a.shtml](https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/tgcomlab/lavoro/south-working-ovvero-lavorare-al-nord-vivendo-al-sud-o-dove-si-desidera-_20989926-202002a.shtml)
- Thompson, B. Y. (2019). The digital nomad lifestyle: (Remote) work/leisure balance, privilege, and constructed community. *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 2(1), 27–42.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41978-018-00030-y>
- Today.it (2020). *What’s Next, il nostro futuro post-covid* [What’s next, our future post-Covid].  
<https://www.today.it/speciale/post-coronavirus/what-s-next-survey-societa-video-giugno-2020.html>

# Children and youth

Few topics in media research are as contested as those concerning young people. Issues of parental mediation, young people's use of social media, and schools' use of technology always evoke strong sentiments. As this text is being written, countries around the world are imposing regulations to reduce children's screen time, and the Nordic countries are seeing intense debates over screen use in schools.

Despite this, there are still substantial research gaps in this field. There is a particular need for studies that depart from the concerns of harm and addiction – which often dominate, as we saw in Part I of this volume – and delve into how connectivity and disconnectivity are felt and navigated among youngsters, parents, and teachers. In this section, three chapters delve into precisely these dilemmas, illuminating four key observations.

## **A study of tensions**

To study young people's digital lives is to study tensions. Victoria Andelsman Alvarez (Chapter 12) shows how parents use digital technologies but also feel obliged to create times and spaces free from digital media. Mehri S. Agai (Chapter 13) focuses on young people's internal discussions around

connectivity and disconnectivity, and how they might want to limit their use of digital devices but do not do so. Signe Sophus Lai and Lucas Cone (Chapter 14) describe the tensions emerging from a massive influx, in a largely unregulated manner, of commercial apps and websites in schools.

## **The impossibility of disconnection**

Linked with the tensions and dilemmas, the chapters eminently demonstrate the inescapability of connectivity. Lai and Cone show how the responsibility for dealing with datafication falls on the shoulders of teachers, students, school leaders, and parents, who lack the power to control – or even understand – the implications. In Agai's chapter, we gain more insight into how young people experience connection as inescapable. Agai argues that disconnection should not be seen as a product, a distinct break, but more as a process, a spectrum of attitudes and mental efforts to distance oneself from digital connectivity.

## **Theoretical and methodological inspirations**

Together, the chapters of Part III illuminate how studies of young people can benefit from attention to context and diverse methodological and theoretical inspiration. Both Andelsman Alvarez and Agai draw on feminist perspectives: Andelsman Alvarez on theories of care and Agai on feminist thinking of affective theory and dissonance. The chapters also combine different methods to offer a rich description. In addition to interviews, Andelsman Alvarez's participants walked her through their phones, apps, and screen-time modules. Lai and Cone offer a thick description of a day in the life of a student and a teacher – based on interviews, audio recordings, observations, and diaries – and connect questions of connectivity to a political economy of the digital.

## **Lived experiences in the post-Covid reality**

The studies in Part III are all based on relatively recent investigations. Together, the chapters illuminate the post-Covid reality of intense datafication and offer insight into the lived experiences and moral imperatives that characterise digital media use in the lives of the young. The chapters add to the story we are telling in this edited volume: that neither digital backlash nor digital disconnection are simple entities, but indications of conflicting norms within complex realities.

# Navigating the moral imperatives of parenting in the age of (dis)connection

*A care-minded approach to digital media use by parents in Denmark*

VICTORIA ANDELSMAN ALVAREZ

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

## ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I examine how digital (dis)connection intertwines with and relates to care in the practices of parents living in Denmark. I ask the following questions: How do parents strive to care for their children with and without digital technologies? And what can feminist care perspectives do for theories of disconnection? This chapter is based on 20 in-depth interviews with parents of children aged 0–12. Parents' experiences demonstrate how digital technologies can help create both the preconditions and the context for care. The use of technology does not come without tension, however, as parents perceive that it can also interfere with an active good life and compete for their attention. Taken together, parents' practices and discourses of (dis)connection offer insight into the moral imperatives surrounding digital media use in the family.

**KEYWORDS:** care, dependency, disconnection, moral imperatives, parenting

---

Andelsman Alvarez, V. (2024). Navigating the moral imperatives of parenting in the age of (dis)connection: A care-minded approach to digital media use by parents in Denmark. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 235–256). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-12>



## Introduction

To keep up a “good life” for themselves and their children, parents need to use digital technologies. At the same time, in recent years, parents have been encouraged to take care of their “digital health” as well as that of family members by creating times and spaces free of digital media (Mascheroni et al., 2018). This contributes to what has been called the “disconnection turn”, that is, the belief that digital disconnection is no longer a luxury, but rather a moral obligation (Fast, 2021). While research abounds on the types of technology rules and mediation strategies parents establish for their children, less is known about parents’ own qualms and struggles over technology use (Clark, 2011; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

Even in the best of circumstances, raising a child is challenging, and the wealth of technological innovation currently available to parents has the potential to ease or complicate these challenges (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Through examining parents’ multifaceted relationship with digital media, in this chapter I explore the tensions that exist between demands for self-regulation and family life’s inherent relationality. In doing so, I look at how digital (dis)connection intertwines with and relates to care. In particular, I ask the following questions: How do parents strive to care for their children with and without digital technologies? And what can feminist care perspectives do for theories of disconnection? Empirically, this chapter is based on 20 in-depth interviews with parents of children aged 0–12 living in Denmark. Theoretically, it draws on feminist approaches to care to look at how parents try to improve the lives of their children both by incorporating and rejecting digital technologies (Tronto, 2013; Mol et al., 2010; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

The care-minded approach I take in understanding the empirical material grounds my argument in the lived experiences of parents and offers insight into the moral imperatives surrounding digital media use in the family. Additionally, this approach allows me to see parents’ contradictions and inner conflicts as an intrinsic part of caring for children in the digital age rather than as failures of care. In this way, I aim to articulate how the seemingly opposing forces of digital dependency and the expectation of disconnection in family life present parents with a series of dilemmas that lead to specific media-use patterns. Concretely, I find that, in their everyday life, parents attempt to develop a more sustainable relationship with people and technology by orchestrating daily life using digital devices, creating caring spaces with and without technology, keeping human connections through technology, and balancing adults’ and children’s attention demands. In doing so, this chapter illustrates how digital technologies can both provide the preconditions and context for care while simultaneously posing a threat to what parents conceive as good parenting.

In the following, I first outline the specific literature on digital disconnection and dependency that forms the backdrop of the analysis. In the next section, I relate these two concepts to a feminist notion of care to outline what

disconnection studies can learn from care's relational and situated approach to practices. Next, I provide a brief description of how data were collected and analysed and introduce the research participants. I then continue with an analysis of interview excerpts, offering interpretations of the dilemmas that permeate families' relationship with digital technologies. I find that digital technologies play several, somewhat contradictory, roles in parents' accounts: "personal assistants", means for human connection, obstacles to an active good life, or competitors for attention. Finally, in the discussion section I examine the implications of my findings for (dis)connection research, showing that parents' practices enact a moral order pertaining to digital media use in the family.

## **(Dis)connection and digital dependencies**

With the integration of digital devices and screens into our daily lives, discussions on responsible media usage have become commonplace. The recent "disconnection turn" (Fast, 2021) is spreading through the general public, where disconnection is viewed as both a right and a duty to live more meaningful lives (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). In other words, there is an increasing sense that leaving or taking a break from digital media is a moral obligation and the solution to various problems, such as media (over)dependency or screen "addiction". People are therefore urged to unplug from digital devices to create periods and spaces in their lives where digital media are not present.

As others in this edited volume have noted, however, disconnective practices do not usually represent a binary choice of usage or non-usage. Rather, disconnection presupposes connectivity, since its practices are usually the result of users reevaluating the meanings and values of digital media in ways that reshape their place in everyday life (Bagger, Chapter 6 in this volume). This suggests that disconnection is part of a moral economy of digital media use, that is, "a web of affect-saturated values" that relate to one another (Daston, 1995: 4). Yet, the moral boundaries of this "emerging symbolic battlefield" are not fully defined, partly because of digital media's relative novelty (Fast et al., 2021). That is, disconnection is one of many competing and even incompatible priorities that people must balance in a complex sociotechnical landscape.

Indeed, the widespread negative reactions to digital media expose how unprecedented it is for a media regime to become so integrated into as many aspects of daily life that it punctuates "everyday experience, sensations, emotions, and sociality" (Paasonen, 2021: 10). Over the past few decades, digital media have transformed how we organise and understand sociality, and mobile devices have become a necessary part of the management of social relationships, including child-rearing (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Mascheroni, 2020; Paasonen, 2021). An always-on, always-reachable culture has emerged, where connectivity is not a personal choice but rather a social expectation.

If we were cut off from digital media, not just our personal connections would suffer. Because connectivity has grown infrastructural, shaping “the conditions for relational life”, individuals hoping to disconnect also risk being left out from other important areas of sociality (Paasonen, 2021: 9). 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 (Dencik & Kaun, 2020; Paasonen, 2021). As a result, we are now witnessing the rise of a new form of digital participation which is no longer purely voluntary but rather “coerced” (Barassi, 2019: 419). Digital technologies, scholars argue, “are intertwined with the things we love the most and the things we need to keep up a decent human life” (Jansson & Adams, 2021: 15). To completely disconnect from digital media, one would need to disengage from modern society, since today’s personal, socioeconomic, political, cultural, organisational, and bureaucratic structures all generate digital dependence.

## Care

Digital technologies are, therefore, increasingly integral to maintaining the “living web of care” for humans (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2019). Here, care is understood as a diverse range of affects, ethics, and practices that bring humans and non-humans together in the activity of nurturing that which is necessary for life’s sustenance and flourishing (Hjorth & Lupton, 2021; Chatzidakis et al., 2020). Within care, the subject is not a self-sufficient or independent actor; people are always mutually interconnected, vulnerable, and dependent, often in asymmetric ways. Hence, the capacity to act is not possessed by individuals, but rather emerges through and within relationships. This approach departs from the “autonomous man” who is “free from the tangles of relationality” (Drichel, 2019: 6). Agency is understood here as always distributed and always more than human; it is people’s relationships with other people and things (including digital technologies) that opens or closes humans’ capacities for flourishing (Hjorth & Lupton, 2021).

Care is characterised by three dimensions, as illustrated in the earlier definition: care as everyday labour, an affective relation, and an ethico-political sensitivity (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). The first dimension refers to what is involved in *doing* care, or in caring as “the practical engagement of contributing to restoring, sustaining, or improving something” (Mol & Hardon, 2020: 185). Caring includes not only material, but also immaterial tasks related to communication, the maintenance of connections, and the production of sociability. Secondly, the affects that mediate these relations, while not always positive, are integral to care situations, as an “oppressive burden, as joy, as boredom” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 5). Finally, the disposition to care is never neutral, leading to its ethico-political dimension

(Mol, 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Care, as a practice, continually attempts to sustain and improve lives. While feminist theorists leave the definition of what counts as a “good life” productively open, care practices *themselves* always have ethical implications because, when engaging in caring activities, positioning is inevitable (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). That is, when we care for someone, we enact certain standards of what a “good life” is.

This last point is best developed by Annemarie Mol, who has contrasted what she calls the “logic of care” with the “logic of choice”, namely, a rationale that assumes that we are autonomous individuals and celebrates individual choice. The two logics reflect two sets of normative values on what a “good life” is. While the logic of choice values autonomy and equality, “in the logic of care attentiveness and specificity are good and neglect is bad” (Mol, 2008: 74). Care is not a matter of making well-informed decisions, but of attempting to attune knowledge and practices to complex lives in order to live “as well as possible” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). In caring, then, determining what is “good” to do depends on the situation, and as things change, new adaptations are required. Additionally, when multiple “goods” are simultaneously at stake, caring involves mediating between them (Mol & Hardon, 2020).

### **What can feminist theories of care do for disconnection studies?**

The logic of care described above does not necessarily provide a better alternative to the logic of choice in every situation. In everyday life contexts fraught with dilemmas like the ones studied by research on parenting and disconnection alike, however, care as a concept is better able to deal with uncertainties and respond to new problems, frictions, and complications. A logic of care may therefore be mobilised in discussions about digital (dis)connection to negotiate with the rationalised logics of both popular discourses and academia.

Additionally, this feminist perspective on care and agency can help disconnection literature grapple with the dialectics of digital connection and disconnection. It does so by avoiding dichotomies and staying with the unsolved tensions and relations (Jansson & Adams, 2021). Based on this approach, it is apparent that where and how we use digital technologies, as well as who and what we use them with, shape our experiences and feelings on digital (dis)connection (Lupton, 2022).

As the world becomes increasingly digitally dependent, a care perspective reveals the ways in which we seek to ground ourselves again. We do so not by disconnecting or becoming independent but by developing (or attempting to develop) sustainable relations with each other and with other-than-human things, such as digital technologies. If dependency is inevitable, “emancipation, when it concerns care, might be less about breaking with ties and attachments than about recognising and fostering some modes of (inter-)dependence

more than others” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2019: 38). From this perspective, grounding ourselves implies maintaining and repairing our relationships with people and things, as well as attending to the normative ideals that help us define which attachments are worth nurturing and preserving.

## Family and digital technologies

If at all grappling with the concept of care, discourses on digital (dis)connection focus on “self-care”, where the “disconnecting agent” is typically a young, self-reliant individual (Bagger, Chapter 6 in this volume). This ignores digital technology’s social entanglements and reiterates an idea of human beings as fully autonomous creatures who can command their interactions with others and make decisions about where, when, and how to direct their attention (Harmon & Mazmanian, 2013). In studying family life and how digital technologies are part of (or excluded from) it, this chapter follows Bagger’s (Chapter 6 in this volume) suggestion to look beyond the individual media user towards the organisations and institutions in which everyday life takes place.

As a unit of analysis, the family is significant because it is a social structure that is enacted through care practices. The family is also a space where more and more responsibility for care is allocated. A combination of intensive parenting becoming the main parenting ideal and concomitant changes in the Nordic welfare state contribute to this phenomenon. Intensive parenting, as an ideal, expects parents to devote their full attention to children’s needs, emotions, and behaviours around the clock (Lee et al., 2010). In Denmark, this ideal of the child-attentive parent is complemented by an increasing expectation that parents will contribute to the state’s citizen-making project (Gilliam et al., 2017). Thus, parents are not merely responsible for their children at home, but also for ensuring that optimal conditions are created for the child’s development in childcare and educational institutions (Dannesboe et al., 2018).

Most research on the use of digital media in the family focuses on parents’ mediation strategies to protect their children from media’s harms (Jennings & Wartella, 2012; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Mascheroni et al., 2018). Consistent with the discussion on digital dependence outlined above, studies that *do* look at the role of digital media in parenting find that digital media has become increasingly entangled with parenting practices (Lim, 2019; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Lupton et al., 2016; Mascheroni et al., 2018). Technology may seem empowering when it enables people to manage their daily lives; however, scholars warn that, because of the availability of technologies, parents are now expected to use them to be constantly attentive to their children’s safety, activities, and feelings in the hope that this will optimise their (uncertain) future (Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020).

## Methods

To examine the dilemmas that parents face surrounding digital technology, between October 2021 and March 2022, I conducted individual and couple in-depth interviews with 13 parents of children aged 0–12 living in Denmark. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions to get to know participants and their context, as well as to probe different aspects of their experiences with digital technologies. Additionally, I included a walkthrough component to the interviews, whereby participants gave me a tour of their phones and walked me through their screen-time modules as well as other relevant apps (Light et al., 2016).

After institutional ethics approval, I recruited participants through my personal networks as well as Facebook parenting groups. This study is part of a larger ongoing project on digital parenting where parents are interviewed three times in a year. At the time of writing, I recruited 13 participants – 4 fathers and 9 mothers – all of whom gave written informed consent. Table 12.1 presents a summary of the participants' characteristics, as conveyed by them during the interview sessions. It is important to note that the majority of participants reside in the Capital Region of Denmark, have higher education, and work full-time jobs. This limits the generalisability of findings to other socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Yet, researching the parenting practices of privileged families can offer valuable insights into the prevailing parenting ideals and norms within contemporary Danish society, frequently presented as universal and deeply ingrained within institutional structures (Bach, 2016).

I carried out interviews with individual parents as well as one joint interview in the case of a dual-parent household (Henrik and Anna, see Table 12.1). In total, twenty interviews are part of this article: twelve first interviews and eight second interviews. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed in English. To enhance readability, some of the normal stumbling in verbal speech has been removed from the quotes included in the analysis. This includes false starts, fillers (e.g., uh, um, you know, and, like, so), and some repetition of words. In cases where a long stretch of words has been deleted, three dots appear in brackets to indicate this. Furthermore, the transcripts and any other data were anonymised, and all the names used in this article are pseudonyms (see Table 12.1).

**TABLE 12.1** Overview of interview participants

| <b>Pseudonym<br/>(gender)</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Children</b>     | <b>Education</b>          | <b>Job</b>                                      | <b>Parenting<br/>Status</b> |
|-------------------------------|------------|---------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Julie (F)                     | 30–39      | 3 (ages 5, 3, 3)    | MA                        | Freelancer<br>(Copenhagen)                      | separated;<br>main carer    |
| Carla (F)                     | 30–39      | 1 (age 4)           | MA                        | Tourism<br>(Copenhagen)                         | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Sofie (F)                     | 30–39      | 2 (ages 0, 3)       | Higher<br>education       | Pharmacist (Jutland)                            | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Helena (F)                    | 30–39      | 3 (ages 12, 8, 5)   | PhD                       | Postdoctoral<br>researcher<br>(Copenhagen)      | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Laura (F)                     | 30–39      | 1 (age 4)           | Professional<br>education | Restaurant manager<br>(Copenhagen)              | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Anna (F)                      | 30–39      | 2 (ages 7, 12)      | Higher<br>education       | Communications/<br>design (Jutland)             | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Emil (M)                      | 40–49      | 1 (age 1)           | Higher<br>education       | Theatre lighting<br>designer<br>(Copenhagen)    | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Jens (M)                      | 30–39      | 2 (ages 4, 1)       | Higher<br>education       | Director of<br>communications<br>(Copenhagen)   | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Morten (M)                    | 30–39      | 1 (age 2)           | PhD                       | Front-end developer<br>(Copenhagen)             | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Luise (F)                     | 30–39      | 2 (ages 6, 4)       | Higher<br>education       | Business<br>development and<br>sales (Brønshøj) | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Tania (F)                     | 30–39      | 2 (twins,<br>age 2) | Higher<br>education       | Start-up<br>(Copenhagen)                        | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Sara (F)                      | 40–49      | 2 (ages 2, 4)       | MA                        | PhD Candidate<br>(Copenhagen)                   | dual-parent<br>household    |
| Henrik (M)                    | 30–39      | 2 (ages 7, 12)      | Higher<br>education       | Teacher (Jutland)                               | dual-parent<br>household    |

In order to describe participants' experiences regarding digital (dis)connection related to care, a coding scheme was developed iteratively from the empirical data and initial theoretical concepts. A major focus of the first cycle of coding was on parents' explicit discourses of disconnection and their practices or strategies for doing so. However, as I read and re-read the full

empirical material in search of patterns and classifications, what emerged as important were the tensions between the need to use digital technologies to support a good life and the expectation that parents attend to their children undisturbed by digital technologies. Thus, I reorganised and reconfigured my first-cycle codes and their associated coded data in subsequent coding iterations. I eventually developed a more select set of themes or extended phrases that indicate what a data unit is about or what it means (Saldana, 2021). The final set of themes and subthemes are summarised in Table 12.2.

**TABLE 12.2** Themes and subthemes

| Themes                                   | Sub-themes                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Digital technologies as enabling care    | Digital technologies as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “personal assistants”</li><li>• means for human connection</li></ul>      |
| Digital technologies as a threat to care | Digital technologies as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• hindering an active good life</li><li>• competing for attention</li></ul> |

## Analysis

In this section, I explore how digital (dis)connection intertwines with and relates to care in the practices of parents of children 0–12 living in Denmark. In particular, I ground the analysis on parents’ daily struggle to develop sustainable relations and to care for children with and without digital technologies.

### Digital technologies as “personal assistants”

Julie is the main carer for her three daughters aged three to five. In our first encounter, we discussed how she uses digital technologies throughout what seemed to be a hectic day. Julie juggles dropping off and picking up her three kids at different daycares, working from home as a freelance translator, and volunteering online for a local charity. When I asked her what she would do if she did not have digital technologies, she promptly replied: “Oh my god, let’s say I wouldn’t be able to manage a life with three kids. That’s crazy!” Digital technologies have become pervasive and infrastructural in Julie’s life, shaping the conditions for everyday parenting, from grocery shopping online when children are asleep to consulting the doctor.

Her daughters, Julie explained, grew up with digital media and expect her to use it to take care of their everyday needs and wants: “they are used to ‘mommy check your mobile and buy something, mommy check your mobile, make a playdate’”. Because they grew up in a media-saturated environment,



Julie “can’t really imagine like... going back 10, 20 years ago, without a smartphone”. These comments demonstrate, as has been voiced by others looking at the ambivalences surrounding digital (dis)connection, that digital technologies allow people to orchestrate daily life (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). They are, as Julie vividly put it, “like a personal assistant helping me to memorise and organise everything. Really everything. From shopping, to kids, to playdates, activities, everything”. These technologies are weaved into social life, including the expectations of toddlers who have only known a world where everything is one click away.

While Julie felt her daughters’ expectations pressured her to be online, Henrik, a father of two living in rural Jutland, explained that because many of the things he needs for parenting are accessed primarily through his smartphone: “your life is worse if you don’t have these things”. In the context of discussing how he used Facebook to access parents’ groups from his children’s classes, he explained that “the biggest challenge” for him was that he kept being “addicted, as to what is going on”. Thus, it is not that he is addicted to the screen itself, but rather that he has to always be online to have the information he needs to enact being a “good parent”. It is important to him to be part of those groups, even if he would prefer to leave Facebook, because “there’s types of information that you need, you need them to be accessible”. While he has been contemplating getting a “dumbphone” for a while, he feels like not being connected “is kind of like being handicapped, sometimes”. These comments exemplify some parents’ dilemmas when it comes to technology: They feel like they have to choose between two undesirable options – in this case, being on Facebook or forgoing important information regarding their kids’ lives. Agency is at the heart of this dilemma. Not being on Facebook might diminish one’s capacities to know and do things: “It’s impossible to lead a life if you don’t have these things. And of course, it’s not, but sometimes it feels that way” (Henrik).

While it may be *possible* to live without digital devices, these technologies shape the conditions for contemporary relational life. For instance, Jens, who worked part-time as a communications’ director at a small company, explained that if he did not have access to his e-mail and calendar, “it would be difficult to be so flexible” in deciding when to work and whether to do it from home or the office. This flexibility has allowed him to be more responsive to the situation at home, for example, by working from home when a kid was sick or leaving a little later for work on a slow morning. Thus, digital technologies participate in the “articulation work” of parenting, that is, the continuous efforts required to weave together often disparate social worlds such as home and work (Strauss, 1988).

Digital technologies also enable the creation of caring times and spaces. Parents were mindful of clearing enough physical and mental space to allow time for what they saw as the most valuable aspects of parenting, such as playing

together, being a comforting presence for children or helping them navigate their emotions. In this context, a tightly scheduled routine may offer a sense of calm for overstretched parents. It provides them with a sequence of tasks they can do habitually, “without thinking”, leaving space for quality time (Morten). To keep track of these schedules, participants maintained physical and digital calendars, and some of them shared the digital ones with their partners “so we know, and we can plan things around, so we don’t forget” (Tania).

In the spirit of creating time and space for care, some parents, such as Julie and Laura, also had intricate systems with alarms to portion time and make sure they were not only punctual, but that the time they spent together with their kids was enjoyable:

I could feel that in the morning, we started to stress a little bit... And to make sure it was a nice environment for him in the morning with me not stressing around, I started setting an alarm for when we have to get up the latest [...] to have a watch that says when he has to get dressed in the morning [...] he finds the whole thing about the alarm actually very reassuring because then he can just *be*... and then he knows when the alarm rings that we have to start getting dressed for the day. And then there won’t be any stress. (Laura)

Like Hjorth and Lupton pointed out, it is not only cutting-edge technologies – such as the care robots or artificial intelligence that captivate popular attention – that shape and participate in care (2021). In their everyday lives, parents use mundane and well-established digital media and devices, such as a smartphone’s alarm app, to address what they identify as their family’s needs and to create space for intimacy. With the alarm, Laura explained, her son Ralph knows that “in the morning we will be getting up, having time to cuddle, still having good time to eat breakfast”. Moreover, the set routine was a way of teaching Ralph boundaries and to take responsibility: “So you know that of course we can, like, have fun for a whole hour. But then you have to get up”.

Remarkably, when asked whether digital media can help take care of children, most parents replied with a categorical “No”. Upon being pressed to elaborate, they would insist that digital technologies did not “care for” children, in Tronto’s (1998) sense of assuming responsibility to meet the child’s needs, nor could they provide care in the sense of meeting children’s emotional requirements. As Helena put it: “in the word ‘caring’, there’s also... some kind of emotion, and an iPad or a phone can’t display emotions, and it can’t substitute a real person”. Rather, technology, according to parents, is a tool or even a “personal assistant”, as mentioned earlier, enabling *them* to do the caring in ways that help children become self-regulating and reflexive people.

## Digital technologies as means for human connection

The previous examples show how even as parents' discourses expose notions of care as pre-technological (something developed in the next section), their practices demonstrate that such care also requires the use of digital infrastructures to support a good life. Technology, therefore, helps create the preconditions for care. In this section, I discuss another use of technology that demonstrates how digital media help create the context for care: technology's role in enabling and maintaining family relationships.

When I asked Tania, a Portuguese mom, what the role of technology in the family was, she distinguished between its logistical role, which she believed was dispensable, and its use to stay in touch with people living outside Denmark. For her, "getting us closer to each other is probably the one thing that I would say we are able to do now". More generally, participants mentioned their relational tasks as reasons why they could not fully unplug from digital technologies. The thought of disconnecting was, in fact, anxiety-producing for some, like Sofie. She explained that when she broke her phone some years ago, she felt "paranoid" by the inability to contact her parents, her partner, and her brother. The negative affects produced by the lack of connection were also expressed by Laura. She said that while pregnant, she would get "really pissed" at her husband when he was not available on his phone, fearing she would go into labour and be unable to contact him.

Moreover, in the families studied, connection to digital technologies allows parents to care both for their children and others by "working *on* these relations – trying to establish or maintain them – and *with* these relations" (Muusse et al., 2021: 1590). That is, part of parenting is to be a nexus between children and older relatives, particularly grandparents, which is increasingly achieved with digital technologies.

From the moment I started recording, Carla made it clear that she and her husband had hard and fast rules when it came to their son's screen time: "We do not use screens with him", she explained. There was only one explicit exception to this rule, which she mentioned immediately after: "We only use our phone to call our parents once a day, my mom in the morning, and his [husband's] parents once a week and my dad twice a week, something like that". This one exception was very important to Carla, who mentioned it several times during our interviews and considered it the reason why her child, Leo, had developed a relationship with his grandparents, especially her own mother who lived in Italy: "It is nice to see that they can actually have a relationship even though they are far away". Moreover, for non-Danish parents, like Carla but also Julie, digital communication with grandparents was a way to transmit cultural identity and let their children practice the languages of their families. This illustrates how the care enabled by digital technologies encompasses not just material tasks, but also immaterial ones related to social interaction, communication, and maintaining relationships.

Previous research widely recognises digital media as essential to the maintenance of transnational families, cultural identities, and support networks (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Hjorth et al., 2020; Wilding et al., 2020). However, a care-minded approach argues that technologies do more than that. Because they are part of the practices that generate our reality, technologies can be considered as participating in “doing family” in the sense of “performing” or “enacting” the family. The boundaries of who is part of the family and who is not are being produced relationally and through the use of digital technologies.

As Carla’s comments attest, digital technologies are used to bridge the distances between “here” and “there” and create intergenerational connections. Danish participants who lived in different cities than their relatives also mentioned this type of use. Yet, parents’ use of technology to create and maintain relationships with older generations went beyond bridging long distances. Jens and Morten would send pictures to grandparents to share their children’s daily activities and development. This was especially important to them when their children were less than a year old and changed faster than the grandparents could witness during their visits. Sofie, for her part, printed digital photos to create family albums that she praises for helping her daughter recognise all her relatives.

Thus, regardless of whether they were part of transnational families or not, parents’ engagement with digital technologies results in “digital kinning” (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). That is, they use media to maintain support networks and nurture connections with relatives. As Tania put it: “I use WhatsApp a lot, because obviously, *that’s family*. And it’s valuable because of that”. This is the case even in the most screen-averse households, such as Carla’s. Digital media take part in family routines and rituals, from Leo’s breakfast with grandma to Laura’s FaceTime “wine nights” with her sister, and in doing so, they also re-produce what it means to be a family.

### **Digital technologies as hindering an active “good life”**

When asked what some of their favourite things to do as a family were, parents almost unanimously replied with an outdoor activity like going to the playground or a nearby forest. The good life here is an active life, usually away from screens. Anna, for instance, explained that she thought of themselves as a “quite analogue” family and longed for a time without digital technologies:

I want to just travel back in time and live in the 80s again, where just... I was bored, you know? Back when kids, they weren’t stimulated all the time [...] I don’t know, maybe I’m just like really romantic about it, because I have this idea that you use your fantasy.

Being bored was mentioned by multiple parents as an experience they had growing up. It was understood as a positive thing to go through and as something that screens hinder. Thus, parents either imposed screen time limits or – more often, especially with older children – encouraged their offspring to not (over)use their devices in the hope that boredom would spark creativity. As Sofie explained about her daughter: “Of course she has to learn technology but, in the meantime, she also has to learn it is ok to get bored and think by yourself or get creative or play something else”. Luckily for her daughter, she has company. The other parents in the neighbourhood, Sofie explained, share her understanding that “it is good to get outside”. Therefore, the neighbourhood children are all encouraged to “play outside or go cycling or play ball” (Sofie).

This appreciation for an active life and the outdoors was seen by Julie, who lives in Copenhagen but is originally from China, as particularly Danish. She believed she had to learn to incorporate the outdoors into her parenting – partly through using social media to look at what “local families” do:

They like to take kids to the... like, nature! Forest! [Laughs] play sands or, you know, go to the beach. And the kids are not afraid of the cold or something. For me, it's like “oh my god! Wintertime!” It is cold and I don't feel I want to go out and I... I know that they go out in kindergarten. But for the weekend I still feel like “Ah, let's get to stay at home”. And then I see... Okay, all the other parents running around with their kids outside. And I feel like “Okay, that's something I need to learn”.

It is interesting to note that Julie learnt the value that Danish families give to spending time outdoors by being online and curating her social media in a way that would give her a glimpse of what families around her do. Thus, it is her use of digital media to learn how to parent “appropriately”, according to local standards, that taught her the importance of time outdoors (and offline) in Danish family life.

## **Digital technologies competing for attention**

Sometimes, then, care also has to do with creating digitally disconnected times and spaces. The dinner table is particularly relevant here, and mothers were usually the ones enforcing them as phone-free spaces. Helena, for instance, said, “I have a rule that there's no screen time while we eat”. Morten, for his part, explained: “My wife sometimes tries to convince me to do phone-free periods. She really wants us to not spend time on our phone at the table”. A device-free family meal is a way to create a space of togetherness and conversation, where no one is distracted by the outside world.

Distraction is in fact a keyword when talking about (and with) parents about technology. In popular media, parents' (dis)connection to digital media is seen as a matter of attention – or lack thereof. Parents are accused of being “constantly present in their children's lives physically, but they are less

emotionally attuned” (Christakis, 2018). I also found a similar normative discourse in some of my interviews:

So, the problem I see with parenting today and the use of that is that first of all you are not a good example if you yourself are glued to your screen and not paying attention to, you know, your child calling for you or playing [...] What is he learning from that? (Carla)

Being “glued to your screen” is understood here as a moral breach of what is expected from parents. There are (few) good uses of technology, like Carla’s mom “establishing a relationship via the technology” with her grandson. There are also bad uses of technology, which distract and distance parent and child. Thus, Carla’s experiences emphasise that parents’ feelings about digital (dis)connection depend not only on whom they use digital technologies with but also on where and how they use them (Lupton, 2022).

Furthermore, Carla’s comment demonstrates that the risk of parents being absorbed by mobile devices while in the presence of their child is not simply getting “distracted”, but what this communicates to the child. This resonates with the experiences of other parents, who emphasised that they needed to manage their engagement with digital media in order to be good examples. Seeing his pre-teen daughter (over)use her smartphone, for instance, was for Henrik a “good reminder” to put his phone in his pocket. Here, the parent is expected to provide a model for digital (dis)connection, rather than impose strict rules on children’s screen time. In order for their children to become self-regulating and thoughtful, parents sought to be attentive and good role models, balancing their own need for digital connection with their kids’ need for attention.

However, the cases above reveal that wanting to be a good example emerged from family connections, not necessarily from parents’ individual determination. They arose relationally. Parents’ disconnective practices were the result not of conscious self-imposed restrictions, but of how they thought they may be seen by their children. Laura put it nicely when she reflected:

When you have a kid, you just see yourself from the outside. That’s also why I’m suddenly so aware that every time I sit with my phone – it doesn’t always mean that I put it down – but how aware I am of how he sees me.

Laura went on to contrast her smartphone use with her father reading the newspaper when she was growing up, exposing some thought-provoking views on the relation between media and distraction:

I grew up with a dad who just read the newspaper instead, we can talk about... is it better to look in a phone than look in a newspaper? [...] But it’s the whole thing about disconnecting from your kid and the kid learning to see you as someone who’s approachable. And, are you approachable when you sit with your phone? I don’t know... probably not. And then I can pay for that psychiatry session when he gets older!

Providing care here is all about attentiveness and responsiveness. Once again, Laura's comment exposes how the risk of (dis)connecting has to do with what you communicate to your child by refraining from giving them attention. Being absorbed by media communicates that you may not be approached, creating a distance between parent and child – with consequences so severe as to require a “psychiatry session” in the future. For participants, being perceived as unapproachable was problematic because, according to their own accounts and in line with the imperatives of intensive parenting, caring for a child involves showing availability and affirmation. Morten had a similar perspective: It was inattentiveness, not digital devices themselves, that were the problem. “Being present in the moment”, as he called it, can be hindered by a book as much as by a phone. The issue is withdrawing attention from people.

Furthermore, it is not solely media's “addictive” content that has the potential of disconnecting a parent from their child, but its materiality. Here, handheld devices like smartphones may in fact be less estranging than traditional newspapers, which restrain parents' physical field of vision. “At least with the phone I'm not, like, completely covered”, Laura elucidated. “With the phone, I can still see what he does. Like, my whole peripheral vision is not hidden behind a newspaper”. Again, it is not about the difference between analogue and digital technologies but about the extent of what parents can see and attend to while consuming media:

It's the same with my husband. When he opens his computer, he's hidden behind the computer. And that makes a difference, I think, because that means that you can't see the other people around you, they can't see your expressions. And I think for a kid, it's important to see how your parents react when they [the kids] say something to you.

Thus, media's physical features play a role in structuring attention, as well as parents' and children's fields of vision, in ways that may deter or encourage human connection.

## Concluding discussion

In our technologically saturated age, parenting is a complex and morally challenging activity. In this chapter, I have discussed the struggles and dilemmas that permeate Danish parents' relationships with digital technology. By mobilising a care perspective, I found that parents attempt to develop more sustainable relations with people and technology by using digital devices as personal assistants to orchestrate daily life and keep human connections. Digital technologies, however, are experienced as threatening care if they hinder an active “good life” or compete for attention. Participants constantly balance what they consider valuable uses of technology and its risks. In doing so, parents enact notions of what a “good parent” and a “good life” are. This exposes a moral order or system of values and priorities surrounding digital media use in the family.

Parents' accounts reiterate that digital technologies are weaved into sociality in ways that make them unavoidable. This is not simply because media are "addictive", but because they are *helpful*. As one participant, Henrik, put it, "your life is worse if you don't have these things". Technology plays an important role in how parents orchestrate their daily lives with kids, and at least some parents praise it for making completing a myriad of responsibilities easier and even possible. Moreover, individuals delegate tasks to digital technologies to make space for the things they value most. These valuable practices include using media to nurture relationships with family members, including those at a distance, resulting in "digital kinning" (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). In this way, parents' ongoing efforts to forge connections, aided by technology, structure kids' place in the family. They do so by allowing children to form intergenerational relationships and enacting the family as a social unit even when members live far apart.

When parents mentioned disconnecting from digital media, the disconnection practices they reported were usually temporary, even in screen-averse households. Moreover, these practices resulted from a desire to prioritise other types of connections. Thus, similar to Vertesi and colleagues' (2016) study of personal data narratives, this chapter finds that people combine devices, practices, and social ties in a "locally-adjudicated" way to embody an appropriate relationship with digital technologies in parenting. Just like with parenting, there are collective moral expectations and affective elements to digital media use (Daston, 1995). What parents do with technology, what they say they do, and why they do it are, therefore, articulated in moral economies or systems of values that parents mobilise in their attempts to take care of their children in the "right way" (Vertesi et al., 2016). That is, by attempting to balance connection and disconnection, parents aspire to be(come) good parents – to give their children a "good life", whatever this means for them. In practice, however, this sometimes involves negotiating incompatible priorities.

In parents' narratives, the moral imperative of digital disconnection is intertwined with the values and norms associated with intensive parenting (Lee et al., 2010). In explaining why they value disconnection, parents point out that children need parental attention for their development and that being "attached to the phone" communicates to the children that they are unapproachable. Moreover, breaking away from digital technology was framed by nostalgia for their own childhood. Yet, parents' narratives also recognise the value of digital connection in parenting. This is not only for efficiency; there is also the expectation that parents will connect their children with older relatives by digitally initiating and maintaining contact.

Any apparent contradictions, however, do not necessarily indicate a failure of care. Parents' reflexiveness and their work mediating between different values are integral to raising children. This is because, in caring, determining what is good to do depends on the context and changes as the situation unfolds



(e.g., as children grow up) (Mol & Hardon, 2020). By balancing the need for digital connection with their children's attention demands, participants sought to nurture self-regulating and thoughtful children by themselves being attentive, responsive, and comforting. In their practices, then, parents strived for what was locally good (Mol & Hardon, 2020: 196). In the words of Sofie, determining what is good parenting in a particular situation is sometimes a matter of "just feel[ing] it in my stomach and heart".

Thus, even as parents' discourses show nostalgic notions of a good life and care as pre-technological, their practices evidence that such care also requires digital infrastructures to support that good life and maintain relationships. Taken together, parents' experiences show how digital technologies can help create both the preconditions for care – by assisting in orchestrating everyday life – and the context for care – by supporting the construction of the family as a social unit. But technology's participation in daily life is not without its tensions. Technologies can pull families together, but parents feel they may also pull them apart. As a result, parents constantly strive to balance these two opposing forces, sometimes leading to negative affective reactions, such as guilt or frustration.

Using a feminist care perspective to study digital practices has implications for disconnection studies. A logic of care is a powerful lens for negotiating the rationalised logic of both popular and academic discourses. This is because the care approach demands that we part ways with the "autonomous man" as disconnection's agent (Drichel, 2019). Instead, it requires that we address our digital, as well as interpersonal, dependence. In doing so, it avoids portraying humans as fully self-governing creatures who can choose where and how to focus their attention. This exposes how relationships may make it harder to disconnect, for instance, if we are attentive to a message from a loved one. But it also reveals how the will and ability to disconnect may, in fact, be motivated by relationships, for instance, in the case of parents who said they felt they had to disconnect from their phones to be "a good example". Because we are not autonomous beings, then, a care perspective exposes that it is the *way* in which we relate to other people and things, including digital technologies, that opens or limits our potential for (dis)connection.

Parents tread a delicate line between digital connection and disconnection informed by societal norms of what a "good parent" should do. Further research could expand on these findings by examining the consequences of the moral economy surrounding digital (dis)connection on the time and space dimensions of parenting. Specifically, studies could focus on the time pressures experienced by parents who must postpone social reproductive and logistical tasks typically performed on their phones until their children are away or asleep. From a feminist perspective, such research would also provide valuable insights into how the imperatives discussed in this study might be unequally – and potentially unfairly – distributed among family members. Additionally, the present study reveals that "good parents" aim to

cultivate self-regulating and thoughtful children through their own attentiveness and responsiveness. This can be seen as fostering a specific parenting style that aligns with the values promoted by the Danish welfare state, which prioritises the early cultivation of children's social skills, adaptability, and self-expression (Gilliam et al., 2017). Therefore, future research on digital parenting may shed light on how the “micro” moral order of digital (dis)connection interacts with broader moral frameworks, particularly in relation to the role of (digital) parenting in shaping future citizens.

A care approach also warns us against binaries and clear-cut solutions. Living in the digital age often involves conflicts and contradictions. Those hoping to (dis)connect, including parents, are constantly learning about and calibrating between diverse local or situated “goods”, (Mol & Hardon, 2020). Since digital dependency is inevitable, the path to emancipation is not to break all our attachments to technology. Rather, it requires that we recognise and foster certain modes of (inter)dependence more than others.

Grounding the analysis in the situated doings and meanings of parents helps bring this point home. Despite being conflicted – or as a result of being conflicted – parents’ practices illustrate how we may try, in everyday life, to ground ourselves. We do so by relentlessly attempting to forge sustainable connections with people and things so that we can be “present in the moment”, as Morten put it, while still getting things done.

To conclude, in this chapter I took a care-minded approach to studying parents’ experiences with digital media. I explored the following questions: How do parents strive to care for their children with and without digital technology? And what can feminist care perspectives do for theories of disconnection? The analysis revealed tensions between the use of digital media to support good parenting and the expectation that parents take care of their children undisturbed by technology. In parents’ accounts, digital technologies are assigned several – sometimes contradicting – roles as “personal assistants”, means for human connection, obstacles to an active good life, and competitors for attention. On the one hand, the chapter illustrates that parents use digital media to orchestrate daily life and nurture family relations. On the other hand, it also demonstrates how adults’ need for digital connection must be balanced with children’s attention demands. Additionally, parents were keen on limiting technology to pursue nostalgic notions of what a good childhood is.

Taken together, parents’ practices and discourses of (dis)connection enact certain standards of what the “good life” is, exposing a moral order surrounding digital media use in the family. As the chapter illustrates, then, a care-minded approach to disconnection studies can be useful in exposing our interdependences as well as the affectively and morally charged territories that digital media users encounter. This is a necessary first step in understanding how other people, things, and moral imperatives influence whether and how people (dis)connect.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the “Datafied Living” project, funded by the European Research Council (grant no. 947735).

## References

- Bach, D. (2016). Ambitious parents as ideal or disorder: Doing good parenthood in Denmark and Singapore. In A. Sparrman, A. Westerling, J. Lind, & K. Dannesboe (Eds.), *Doing good parenthood: Ideals and practices of parental involvement* (pp. 53–64). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46774-0\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46774-0_5)
- Baldassar, L., & Wilding, R. (2020). Migration, aging, and digital kinning: The role of distant care support networks in experiences of aging well. *The Gerontologist*, 60(2), 313–321. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnz156>
- Barassi, V. (2019). Datafied citizens in the age of coerced digital participation. *Sociological Research Online*, 24(3), 414–429. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780419857734>
- Beckman, C. M., & Mazmanian, M. (2020). *Dreams of the overworked: Living, working, and parenting in the digital age*. Stanford University Press.
- Chatzidakis, A., Hakim, J., Litter, J., & Rottenberg, C. (2020). *The care manifesto: The politics of interdependence*. Verso Books.
- Christakis, E. (2018, June 16). The dangers of distracted parenting. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/07/the-dangers-of-distracted-parenting/561752/>
- Clark, L. S. (2011). Parental mediation theory for the digital age. *Communication Theory*, 21(4), 323–343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2011.01391.x>
- Dannesboe, K. I., Kjær, B., & Palludan, C. (2018). Parents of the welfare state: Pedagogues as parenting guides. *Social Policy and Society*, 17(3), 467–480. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1474746417000562>
- Daston, L. (1995). The moral economy of science. *Osiris*, 10, 2–24. <https://doi.org/10.1086/368740>
- Dencik, L., & Kaun, A. (2020). Datafication and the welfare state. *Global Perspectives*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2020.12912>
- Drichel, S. (2019). “THE MOST PERFECTLY AUTONOMOUS MAN”: Relational subjectivity and the crisis of connection. *Angelaki*, 24(3), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1620446>
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnective work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Fast, K., Lindell, J., & Jansson, A. (2021). Disconnection as distinction: A Bourdieusian study of where people withdraw from digital media. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 61–90). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.003.0004>
- Fisher, B., & Tronto, J. C. (1990). Toward a feminist theory of caring. In E. Abel, & M. Nelson (Eds.), *Circles of care: Work and identity in women’s lives* (pp. 36–54). State University of New York Press.
- Gilliam, L., Gulløv, E., Olwig, K. F., & Bach, D. (2017). *Children of the welfare state: Civilising practices in schools, childcare and families*. Pluto Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1jktscx>
- Harmon, E., & Mazmanian, M. (2013). Stories of the smartphone in everyday discourse: Conflict, tension & instability. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1051–1060. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2470654.2466134>
- Hjorth, L., & Lupton, D. (2021). Digitised caring intimacies: More-than-human intergenerational care in Japan. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(4), 584–602. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920927427>
- Hjorth, L., Ohashi, K., Sinanan, J., Horst, H., Pink, S., Kato, F., & Zhou, B. (2020). *Digital media practices in households: Kinship through data*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Jansson, A., & Adams, P. C. (2021). *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.001.0001>

- Jennings, N. A., & Wartella, E. A. (2012). Digital technology and families. In A. L. Vangelisti (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of family communication* (pp. 460–474). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003043423>
- Lee, E., Macvarish, J., & Bristow, J. (2010). Risk, health and parenting culture. *Health, Risk & Society*, 12(4), 293–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698571003789732>
- Light, B., Burgess, J., & Duguay, S. (2018). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 881–900. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816675438>
- Lim, S. S. (2019). *Transcendent parenting: Raising children in the digital age*. Oxford University Press.
- Livingstone, S., & Blum-Ross, A. (2020). *Parenting for a digital future: How hopes and fears about technology shape children's lives*. Oxford University Press.
- Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. J. (2008). Parental mediation of children's internet use. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 52(4), 581–599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150802437396>
- Lomborg, S., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Advancing digital disconnection research: Introduction to the special issue. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1529–1535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211057518>
- Lupton, D. (2022). The quantified pandemic: Digitised surveillance, containment and care in response to the COVID-19 crisis. In S. Pink, M. Berg, D. Lupton, & M. Ruckenstein (Eds.), *Everyday automation: Experiencing and anticipating emerging technologies* (pp. 59–72). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003170884>
- Lupton, D., Pedersen, S., & Thomas, G. M. (2016). Parenting and digital media: From the early web to contemporary digital society. *Sociology Compass*, 10(8), 730–743. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12398>
- Mascheroni, G. (2020). Datafied childhoods: Contextualising datafication in everyday life. *Current Sociology*, 68(6), 798–813. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392118807534>
- Mascheroni, G., Ponte, C., & Jorge, A. (2018). *Digital parenting: The challenges for families in the digital age*. Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:norden:org:diva-5398>
- Mol, A. (2008). *The logic of care: Health and the problem of patient choice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203927076>
- Mol, A. & Hardon, A. (2020). Caring. In J. R. Bowen, N. Dodier, J. W. Duyvendak, & A. Hardon (Eds.), *Pragmatic inquiry: Critical concepts for social sciences* (pp. 186–204). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003034124>
- Mol, A., Moser, I., & Pols, J. (2010). Care: Putting practice into theory. In A. Mol, I. Moser, & J. Pols (Eds.), *Care in practice: On tinkering in clinics, homes and farms* (pp. 7–27). transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.14361/transcript.9783839414477.7>
- Muusse, C., Kroon, H., Mulder, C. L., & Pols, J. (2021). Frying eggs or making a treatment plan? Frictions between different modes of caring in a community mental health team. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 43(7), 1581–1597. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13346>
- Paasonen, S. (2021). *Dependent, distracted, bored: Affective formations in networked media*. MIT Press.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2019). Care in spite of carelessness. In J. Brouwer, & S. van Tuinen (Eds.), *To mind is to care* (pp. 24–41). <https://v2.nl/publishing/to-mind-is-to-care>
- Saldaña, J. (2021). Coding techniques for quantitative and mixed data. In A. J. Onwuegbuzie, & R. B. Johnson (Eds.), *The Routledge reviewer's guide to mixed methods analysis* (pp. 151–160). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203729434>
- Strauss, A. (1988). The articulation of project work: An organizational process. *Sociological Quarterly*, 29(2), 163–178. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1988.tb01249.x>
- Tronto, J. C. (1998). An ethic of care. *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, 22(3), 15–20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44875693>
- Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice*. NYU Press.
- Vertesi, J., Kaye, J., Jarosewski, S. N., Khovanskaya, V. D., & Song, J. (2016, February 27). Data narratives: Uncovering tensions in personal data management. *Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*, 478–490. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2818048.2820017>

Wilding, R., Baldassar, L., Gamage, S., Worrell, S., & Mohamud, S. (2020). Digital media and the affective economies of transnational families. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(5), 639–655. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1988.tb01249.x>

# "I feel like a peasant among goddesses"

*Digital disconnection as affect and process among Norwegian youth*

MEHRI S. AGAI

DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION SCIENCE AND MEDIA STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN, NORWAY

## ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I propose that the concept of affective dissonance is theoretically helpful to account for young people's sentiments of digital disconnection. This proposal is empirically substantiated through an analysis of qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 17 Norwegian youths, based on the following question: How do young people react to invasive connected media? The findings illustrate that affective reactions to digital impulses appear to be an integrated part of young people's daily management of digital connectivity. Although these experiences may lead to negative experiences, they do not necessarily lead to disconnection practices. From young people's perspectives, digital disconnection not only involves being physically separated from connectivity but also encapsulates attitudinal shifts and mental distancing. Based on these findings, this chapter posits that disconnection is also an affective state that does not necessarily transform into action or practice, but is as much about the potentiality to act. This chapter thus recognises digital disconnection as a process based on youths' perspectives, acknowledging its affective facet, and contributing to a broader conceptualisation of disconnectivity beyond acts and practices.

**KEYWORDS:** digital disconnection, disconnectivity, affect, affective dissonance, youth

---

Agai, M. S. (2024). "I feel like a peasant among goddesses": Digital disconnection as affect and process among Norwegian youth. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 257–274). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-13>

## Introduction: Disconnection as affect and process

Attention to affect has been slow to arrive in disconnection studies despite the so-called “affective turn” (Clough & Halley, 2007) in the social sciences and the growing strand of inquiry within the field of audience engagement (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). While the academic literature on digital disconnection may not have a long tradition like audience engagement studies, there is a growing consensus that digital disconnection encompasses a continuum of actions. From social movements to infrastructural obstacles that make disconnecting impractical (see Lai & Cone, Chapter 14 in this volume), a broad spectrum of behaviours can be categorised as digital disconnection. Syvertsen and Karlsen’s exploration of digital detox camps (see Chapter 15 in this volume), as well as micro and mundane actions that may be considered a form of digital disconnection, further illustrate the breadth of this phenomenon. Moreover, such understandings emphasise the spatiotemporality of disconnection, considering it a product or behavioural endpoint with specifics on how, where, and when it occurs. That is not to say that affect has not been discussed in the literature.

The affective dimension of disconnection has been highlighted through depictions of sensations occurring before disconnection, such as discomfort, remorse, fear, and feeling overwhelmed or exhausted (Baym et al., 2020; Maslen, 2022), and reactions after disconnection (Syvertsen, 2020). These entries are considered in terms of preconditions, often unobservable aspects of practices of disconnection, which have illustrated that ambivalence is prominent in users’ sentiments on disconnection (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019).

While not explicated in the literature, ambivalence as a state is probably the closest to illuminating the affective aspect of digital disconnection. The notion of ambivalence illustrates that disconnection practices lie along a continuum (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019), encompassing various practices (Baumer et al., 2015; Wyatt et al., 2002) and attempts to regulate and manage connectivity (Baym et al., 2020). This shift in phrasing reflects the evolution from viewing digital disconnection as binary to recognising users’ efforts to navigate constant connectivity without necessarily severing ties completely. Sentiments of wanting to disconnect but being unable to do so and feeling obligated to disconnect but being unable to afford it demonstrate that digital disconnection extends beyond mere behavioural outcomes. Scholars have noted users’ ambivalence, especially in the face of temporal conflicts between smartphone use and other activities (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). Further examination by Ytre-Arne and colleagues (2020) revealed that users often struggle to balance these demands, resulting in ineffective time-management strategies. This underscores the complexity of navigating digital disconnection and the importance of acknowledging these conflicting feelings.

Still, I deliberately note that ambivalence is “closest to illuminating” because despite acknowledging its importance, the literature often falls short

in delving into the wide range of affects and feelings that ambivalence encompasses. Instead, it tends to stop at merely implying that the online world is complicated. In his classical work on ambivalence, Merton (1976) noted that socially structured roles dispose people to both embrace and reject in parallel, whether it be people, objects, or norms. Building on Merton's line of thinking, Smelser (1998) noted that ambivalence acts as a way for us to describe how it is that people can make sense of seemingly contradictory or conflicting ideas or objects they must relate to. Ambivalence is, therefore, a way to describe the human capacity for adapting to the world around them. Applying Merton and Smelser's thinking to digital ambivalence can help in considering the term so that it is valuable analytically. Moreover, and importantly for this chapter, it provides a foundation for when users' disconnection sentiments are analysed beyond the articulations of ambivalence to dive into the affective aspects and feelings that compose ambivalence (i.e., anger, disappointment, and disgust) and their intertwinement with the relational and social dynamics that make them feel that way about disconnection.

Karppi and colleagues' (2021) recent contribution advocating for reformulations of disconnection illustrates that disconnection also takes on an intrapersonal dimension. In response to critics of disconnective practices, such as political potentialities that challenge digital capitalism, Karppi and colleagues (2021) depicted how disconnection commodities allow users to attune to connectivity. They proposed understanding disconnection not as an exclusively "hard break", but also a *mood* to disconnect. Aligning with this perspective, in this chapter I propose a conceptualisation of disconnection that encompasses affect and acknowledges the preconditions of disconnection as much as the observable product itself. Recognising the affective facet of digital disconnection becomes essential for understanding the spectrum of attitudes towards connectivity and individuals' mental efforts to distance themselves from constant connectivity. Accounting for these more abstract and "silent" ways of disconnecting is necessary, especially because such intrapersonal processes and changes might be the only ones available when connectivity, for most of us, in one way or another, is not escapable.

With this chapter I thus aim to offer an affective facet to conceptualisations of digital disconnection, recognising the preconditions of user practices promoting the *process* of disconnection, an area deemed understudied as opposed to the observable *product* of disconnection. To illustrate this point, I draw on qualitative interviews with 17 Norwegian youth, documenting their digital disconnection experiences in everyday life and capturing affective sentiments surrounding their encounters with invasive connected media. Affective sentiments are focused on by asking the following question: How do young people react to invasive connected media?

The concept of affective dissonance is helpful as a theoretical stance to justify my argument that disconnection is closely linked to qualitative, felt



aspects of life, particularly affective experiences. Hemmings (2012) described affective dissonance as a perceived disconnect or discrepancy between the experience of self and society's normative knowledge, which creates a space for action and can "move us". Hemmings emphasised that to know differently, one must feel differently. Therefore, understanding the disconnection process involves recognising its affective experiences and dissonance as they drive individuals to act and initiate the shift toward disconnection. Disconnection thus also concerns the potential to act, making the disconnection process and the affective experience that initiated the shift pivotal to understanding disconnection as a concept.

Approaching affect from a philosophical standpoint, this chapter emphasises the impersonal nature of affect. Specifically, it follows Spinoza's understanding of affect and readings of his work by Massumi (2015). According to Spinoza, affect refers to the energies transmitted through bodily encounters and the body's strength and capacity to "affect and be affected" (Massumi, 2015). This perspective melds seamlessly with the notion of affective dissonance, establishing a conceptual framework that accentuates the latent potency of affect.

The chapter proceeds to engage with affective theory and affective dissonance, portraying disconnection as potentiality. Following a presentation of the methods and the dataset, the analysis presents informants' sentiments on affective encounters with digital content, their questioning of the connectivity trend among their peers, and their changing values and attitudes, illustrating disconnection as a process with affective dissonance as its outset. In the final section, I demonstrate the inclusion of affect in conceptualisations of disconnection. I recognise disconnection as a process – a balancing act understood as occurrences of heavy dissonance or turbulence that may require efforts to regain balance in order to continue the mode of "being with connectivity".

## **Theoretical framework: Defining the affective and affective dissonance**

### **Defining the affective**

In this theoretical framework, I aim to conceptualise the affective dimension of digital disconnection, drawing upon the philosophical ideas of Spinoza as interpreted by Massumi (2015). In this context, affect refers to energies transmitted between bodies, encompassing human and non-human entities, including inanimate objects like technology. Spinoza's perspective of bodies as entities with inherent potential to affect and be affected provides a sensible understanding of the affective dimension in disconnection (Massumi, 2015).

To ensure clarity, it's important to understand the distinction between affect and feelings. While feelings are commonly understood as individual emotional experiences, affect is fundamentally relational, generating an atmosphere that

circulates in the interstices between bodies. This apersonal understanding of affect challenges traditional psychological views that often consider affect as solely embodied in individuals (Hipfl, 2018).

Spinoza's differentiation between sad and joyful encounters sheds light on how affective meetings can diminish or strengthen a body's power to act (Massumi, 2015). In sad encounters, bodies do not coincide, reducing strength and hindering one's capacity to act. In contrast, joyful encounters resonate between bodies, enhancing their ability to act (Deleuze, 1992). It is essential to acknowledge that affective encounters can elicit a mix of affections. As such, the separation between sadness and joy in the context of digital disconnection becomes more complex and less binary, often resulting in an ambiguous and messy mix of emotions.

Expanding on Spinoza's ideas, Massumi (2015) delved into the process of affective meetings, proposing two overlapping aspects. The first involves a particular sense of the quality of the experience, followed by an increased or decreased capacity to act. Understanding this process is crucial for grasping the concept of disconnection, as it involves a momentary encounter with digital content that creates potentiality and triggers an affective shift. These ruptures in the daily flow of digital impulses, which Massumi (2015: 50) referred to as microshocks, accumulate and direct the body towards different tendencies, resulting in deviations from habitual ways of being.

A philosophical approach to affect provides valuable insights into the disconnection process. It facilitates an understanding of how various aspects of connectivity generate these microshocks and, consequently, how individuals adapt their ways of being within the digital realm. Hemmings (2012) took this line of reasoning further, offering a feminist reading of Spinoza's concepts and introducing the notion of affective dissonance.

## **Affective dissonance**

Affective dissonance, articulated by Hemmings (2012), denotes an experience of the disjunction between one's understanding of self and the socially expected self. This dissonance prompts an affective shift, creating a space for action. Hemmings argued that this space of opportunity lays the foundation for critical thinking and contemplating alternative realities. Feminist approaches, as presented by Hemmings, aim to challenge normative ideals that are often taken for granted as "common sense". This understanding of affective investment in normative ideals can be applied to other contexts, including disconnection, where such investment influences how individuals perceive and experience digital interactions.

In the realm of digital media, users undergo a process of domestication, habituating themselves to the use of technology and navigating within the context of connectivity (Silverstone et al., 1992), implying that disconnection occurs within users' everyday norms. However, disconnection also occurs

when users consciously engage in mental efforts to mobilise actions that deviate from the norm. Observable practices, such as participating in detox camps, downloading apps, or deleting personal profiles on social platforms, exemplify these deliberate disconnection efforts.

Hemmings' conceptualisation of affective dissonance allows such seemingly contradictory aspects of disconnection to coexist. By embracing discomfort as a precursor to curiosity and a challenge to the status quo, affective dissonance aligns closely with the process of disconnection. From this perspective, disconnection represents a challenge to an objective way of being, involving an attempt to break free from the naturalised connectivity experienced in everyday life and potentially adopting alternative practices.

From a feminist perspective, the recognition of feeling ill-fit with social expectations of connectivity marks the moment when normative ideals are questioned, and disconnection practices are initiated. Including an intrapersonal aspect in understanding disconnection emphasises how users can be affectively engaged, reacting to content on social and connected media at a broader level, manifested as an internal monologue, affective dissonance, and a precursor to observable disconnection practices. Moreover, disconnection entails a felt experience that creates potential for change, not solely limited to external actions but encompassing an affective dimension.

## Methods

This chapter presents the findings from a doctoral project that delved into the experiences of young people in navigating connectivity and their efforts to disconnect digitally. The study involved semi-structured interviews with 17 young individuals (4 male and 13 female) who discussed their daily media usage and experiences of digital disconnection. The primary focus of this section is to explore their affective reactions and emotionally charged relationships with connected media, and how these affective dimensions may influence their creative momentum, potentially leading to changes in their relationship with connectivity.

The informants, aged 16–19, were selected from high schools in and around a Norwegian city. The chosen age range reflects a stage in life where young people become more autonomous and coherent in their identities, undergoing significant social and relational transitions as they become more integrated with their peers. Additionally, this generation has grown up in a world heavily influenced by digital connectivity, making their perspectives particularly relevant to understanding how people negotiate (dis)connectivity in contemporary society.

The recruitment process initially targeted public schools, and later, snowball sampling was employed to expand the pool of informants. Data collection followed the principle of saturation, ensuring that new information ceased to provide significant insights before concluding the interviews. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, most of the interviews were conducted digitally. The

interviews, conducted in Norwegian, lasted approximately 45 minutes, were audio-recorded, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Only the quotes referenced in the chapter were translated into English. Before participating in the study, informants were provided with a detailed project description and informed about the research ethics involved. Consent was obtained from each informant before proceeding with the interviews.

Ethical considerations adhered to the guidelines set by the Norwegian Centre of Research Data (NSD) to protect the rights and privacy of the participants. Data analysis began with a descriptive and thematic approach to identify recurring patterns aligned with the study's objectives. Subsequently, a more in-depth analysis of the interviews was conducted, and the emerging themes were clustered and situated within a theoretical framework to offer meaningful interpretative perspectives.

For this chapter, the analysis primarily adopted an abductive coding approach (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022; Peirce, 1965), which involves iteratively moving back and forth between data, emerging concepts, and existing theory to develop new theoretical insights. Unlike imposing a predefined theoretical framework, the relevance of affect and affective dissonance surfaced from the initial analysis, revealing critical trends in the data. This approach allowed the informants' perspectives to speak for themselves as authentically as possible. The following quotes are attributed to the informants using pseudonyms, followed by their ages.

## **Analysis**

The following analysis explores the affective complexities that shape disconnection practices and priorities among young individuals in the digital realm. It seeks to highlight how affect and affective dissonance play a crucial role in the disconnection process.

### **Affect and forced availability**

A consistent tendency in the material was forced availability and the associated affective reactions it entailed for the informants. A constant oscillation between positive and negative affects characterised the affective encounters with connectivity. The informants experience a mix of joy and sadness, anxiety and curiosity, challenging the idea of a straightforward binary connection. Instead, it shows that their affective experiences exist on a continuum of reactions. Although many referred to social media when discussing this pressure, several also stated that mobile phones were problematic because they violated a private boundary. Many reported that the continuous availability of smartphones fostered an ideal of availability, and statements such as "You feel like you have to live up to something special" (Sarah, 17) and "It's exhausting to feel that you always have to pay attention and be avail-

able” (Billie, 17) were common. The informants also identified aspects of the digital youth culture that cause pressure and arouse reactions. For example, here is the expression of Arry (17) when referring to posting pictures:

I feel pressured to post mainstream photos, where you have to pose a certain way. It's really exhausting and negative for me. [...] I wish I could just have one day without the pressure or stress of meeting the expectations set by the media.

Arry expressed despair towards constantly being reminded of the dominant focus on self-representation that characterises her youth culture. Although she had been distraught by the content on social platforms, wanting to avoid the trend, she still posted photos. Her experience illustrates the intricate relationship between her smartphone and social media.

Like other informants, Arry's statement shows that the affective relationship between smartphones and their content produces a mixed reaction that is not solely sad or joyful. She exclaimed that she wanted to leave; however, she stayed because the affective reactions circulating between her and her smartphone's content have left her confused, in a messy state of ambivalence.

Another issue emerged from Arry's comments regarding the constant availability of messaging, which also caused affective reactions among other informants. The fast-paced nature of messaging was highlighted as a stressor, as several informants expressed feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of messages received. This left little room to put their phones down, even if desired. Sumera (18) was one of these informants:

People expect you to post something and be there right away if something's going on. You're always supposed to be available. I never really get a break from social media, even though it's precisely the constant connection that I want to avoid, for sure.

Availability becomes especially difficult to handle when many messages appear simultaneously, and even more so when they are from friends. In such cases, a large proportion of the informants admitted feeling overexposed and nagged: “When you get 11 messages at once, it's tiring” (Sarah, 17). For example, Billie (17) expressed:

It [mobile phone notifications] can be draining. Once something happens, everything just blows up in there. I get all scrambled in the head when notifications come from every direction and so many friends are waiting for my response. It also doesn't look good if I've seen the message and don't respond. Yeah, it gets overwhelming.

Based on Billie's insights, the intensity of reactions associated with relationships, particularly those with friends and peers, increases when the connection feels forced. It can be exhausting to put off responding to messages, knowing

that the sender is aware that the message has been seen. Notifications, which can come in rapid succession from several places, are followed by affective reactions that are tied to our innate need for acceptance and fear of being left out. Hence, despite the desire to disconnect, the informants found themselves entangled with their devices and the content they provide.

Several informants mentioned this idea when sharing thoughts on why ambivalence is so intense even with a great desire to disconnect, as Sarah (17) explained:

Once I've done that [turned off the phone], it feels really good to let go of all the hassle that comes with social media. But, it can get lonely, and I often find myself thinking I need to hop back on to chat with someone. [...] It can get lonely without people my age around. To put it in words, it sort of feels like when you switch off, you're all alone in the whole world. So, while it's nice to drop the hassle, it can also feel quite lonely at the same time.

The affective reactions in Sarah's quotes neither mobilise nor pacify the intensity and power. Instead, they show that the affective encounter with the expectation of availability, manifested in various ways, entails alternating between joyful and sad encounters. At one moment, the informants change from anxious reactions and a desire to disconnect. Then, in the next moment, they are anxious, wondering if something fruitful may result from waiting, being available, and over-exposure. If they do not expect something positive, then they fear the consequences of pausing. Thus, affective encounters with connectivity are characterised by a shuffling of degrees of feeling and in-between and at the same time, rather than a binary either/or connection (Sundén, 2018).

## **Affect and agency**

In this part of the analysis, mutual affective reactions between informants and their connectivity with smartphones are demonstrated, drawing upon Spinoza's theoretical framework of affective encounters characterised by notions of sadness and joy, as articulated by Deleuze (1992). This particular lens helps explain how affective states impact fluctuations in the agency of the informants. Furthermore, the analysis delves deeper into this point, shedding light on the dynamics of affective encounters produced by connectivity and how they manifest as both dissonance and potentiality. To illustrate this point, specific instances are presented wherein informants engage in introspection and initiate the questioning of prevailing connectivity trends among their peers, a process prompted by their contemplation of personal habits and experiences.

In some cases, the trend among peers and the youth culture was explicitly mentioned: "There's this social expectation to stay connected" (Kara, 16);

“There’s a trend you just get pulled into” (Annie, 19). However, most young people’s view of the connectivity norm surfaced when they mentioned specific aspects they had experienced as annoying and frustrating.

Joseph (18) believed that comparisons were one of the worst aspects of social media for young people his age. After considering the personal benefits, he decided he did not want to participate in the comparison culture that made him feel bad. For instance, he specifically mentioned Facebook:

I limit my use of Facebook to avoid comparing myself to others. So, I stay off the homepage as much as possible, where you can just keep scrolling endlessly. [...] It might sound odd, but I react to the interactions between girls. They are, how should I put it, they seem so overly fond of each other [...] It’s just too much, and it makes me jealous. I feel like a peasant among goddesses.

According to Joseph’s depiction of how affects are triggered, there is a correlation with existing literature which suggests that young individuals refrain from using social media to avoid unfavourable comparisons with others. Additionally, Joseph also noticed a connection between this behaviour and the tendency to waste time. Therefore, as an 18-year-old, Joseph concluded that social media offers him nothing of interest:

I feel like I don’t get anything out of it. When you learn a language, like French, you end up being able to speak and write more French at the end of the day. But with social media, you don’t really learn anything new. When you knit, you end up with new mittens – there’s a result to your action. It’s important to me to see some sort of payoff from the time I spend on things. I don’t get much out of social media, and I can’t grasp why others spend their time on it either.

Other informants touched on similar points, but then more related to safeguarding their inner life rather than productivity. Here is a quote from Kara (16):

I’m honestly growing tired of Snapchat, where it’s just photos being sent back and forth. I want to distance myself from it. If friends send something, I’d prefer it to be something they want to share with me or tell me about, not just selfies. It’s ridiculous that we keep doing that.

Joseph and Kara’s statements illustrate a duality between their desire to disconnect and the notion of something beyond themselves. It’s hard to believe that they haven’t initially reacted affectively to the trend they’re involuntarily part of, which they express dissatisfaction with. Their narratives about connectivity reveal two parallel processes: Their affective reactions and their reflections on connectivity as something bigger than themselves, which they can now observe from an outside perspective.

In line with Massumi (2015), the affective encounter between the informants and their mobile phone content constitutes a “microshock” that stores an opportunity for distance and reflection. Inherent potential lies in this reflection, similar to affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012), initiated by curiosity. This notion recalls the concept of feminist curiosity articulated by Enloe (2004), who stated that curiosity requires energy instead of ideas based on “common sense” that preserves energy because we do not question them. According to Enloe (2004), not being curious benefits someone else’s agenda. Therefore, we can only challenge what is seen as “normal” by being curious.

If combined with Hemmings’ (2012) idea of affective dissonance that sparks reflexivity, feminist curiosity explains what happens affectively when digital content does not coincide with our desired ways of being with connectivity. Thus, without an affective reaction toward the self not fitting into a normative trend, the potential for disconnection would not be available to the informants, nor would change be within reach.

An additional facet of affective dissonance concerns temporality. Numerous informants expressed feeling disconnected from the connectivity trend in which they had previously been involved. Consequently, these individuals spoke as former proponents who were once swept up in the trend but now approach it with greater reflection, understanding, and a feeling of acquired agency.

For example, Fay (16) said she was significantly exposed to the pressure a year previously, but was now in a new position after deleting prime stories on Instagram. She says she got tired of blogging and did not want people to know what she was doing all the time:

Before, I felt pressured to showcase my popularity through numerous streaks and likes. I don’t feel that way now, but when I look around, I see many young people still under that pressure. One of my friends, who lives elsewhere, uses Snapchat heavily. I think she has four stories up. [...] It seems like a need for validation or something – maybe they haven’t gained the confidence they need and seek affirmation from others.

Notably, she referred here to an earlier incident in which she was absorbed by the trend of exposing herself and posting her private life, a well-known issue regarding youth identity and self-representation (boyd, 2015; Mascheroni et al., 2015; Vanden Abeele, 2015). However, she is now distanced from it. She talks about the youth trend and another friend in the position she left behind a year ago. The distanced perspective was initiated by experiences of affective reactions that moved and created the potential for reflection. Fay’s narrative fits well into feminist thinking, highlighting that “what is deemed natural hasn’t been self-consciously created” (Enloe, 2004: 1).



## Affect and reconfiguration of values

This part of the analysis concerns a later phase in the informants' disconnection process, explicitly dealing with their changed consciousness and attitudes, resulting in new priorities. Their experiences thus reveal how affective dissonance triggers critical reflections and reconfigurations of values and attitudes toward digital media use. One trend in the material was that the informants were more aware of their social media usage and desire after reflecting. Here is an expression by Mathilda (17):

I saw a video about someone who created a distraction journal to boost efficiency. Every time she got distracted, she'd draw a line. She mentioned how each time she picked up her phone, it was out of a perceived need. Since then, I've become quite aware of my aimless mobile use, though it hasn't led to me using my phone any less. The only difference is now I'm quite mindful of the moments when I feel the urge to check my screen for new messages.

As per Mathilda's statement, she recognised her reliance on her phone, but it didn't necessarily translate to reduced usage. However, she has taken charge of her phone usage, which has shifted her relationship with it. Although her mobile usage remains unchanged, Mathilda's newfound self-awareness has given her greater agency, resulting in a more harmonious relationship. The power dynamic in their bond is more balanced, to more advantageous outcomes for Mathilda.

Like Mathilda, other informants shared that they are conscious of their usage. As Arry (17) reflected, "I'm in the bubble, but I have a reflective relationship with it because I'm aware that I'm in it and I know what makes me anxious". This portrayal highlights that disconnecting from connected media does not necessarily lead to liberation from its influence. However, it does cultivate a deeper understanding of the mixed feelings that play a role in regulating our connectivity and making it more manageable.

Closely related to consciousness were informants' expressions that they had changed specific values due to increased awareness of their use. A reappearing sentiment was the importance of being present in physical contact without being engrossed in a smartphone. For example, statements such as "It's rude; you just don't" (Sarah, 17) were reoccurring. In some cases, informants were concerned with safeguarding family relations, while others focused on being present with friends.

Jamila (16) announced that she experienced the smartphone as a disturbing factor and had chosen to put it away when being with family and friends. She expected others to do the same:

Where do I begin? I had a friend over just before Christmas. I thought it'd be nice to catch up, share recent happenings, and have a good conversation. But she just sat on her phone, chatting with friends from other schools.

I felt so annoyed and rejected. It's bizarre how people are glued to their phones even when they're with others, and that's not something I want to subject anyone to!

According to Jamila, being on a mobile phone doesn't equate to being with friends in real life. She believes it's impolite to divide one's attention between their phone and companions. Interestingly, her experiences align with research on phubbing, which shows how young people are adversely affected when others prioritise their phones over social interaction (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016). Several informants, among them Jamila, have undergone a shift in their attitudes and values regarding the use of mobile phones and connectivity. This has led them to re-evaluate their priorities and express a desire to engage in activities that are personally fulfilling, rather than those facilitated by social media or mobile devices. For instance, Annie (19) stated that she wishes to prioritise activities that have a positive impact on her well-being and that are meaningful to her.

Regarding the situation mentioned, the disconnection occurred due to a shift in priorities and energy caused by a change in consciousness and values. Annie's statement aligns with the concept of authenticity, which is commonly cited as a key reason for digital disconnection (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). In other cases, a transformation in values led to a reluctance to use certain platforms.

For instance, Joseph (18) had strong opinions about TikTok, explaining that it was a platform he did not install because it did not coincide with his ideas about what is useful to him. He did not want to be a part of it. For him, TikTok represented the devil:

To be honest, TikTok scares me. It's like it has tapped into our human nature, our herd mentality, and our fear of being left out, and now it's got us hooked. The fact that kids as young as eight are on it is alarming. I think it's the devil.

This statement indicates that informants respond differently as their awareness and values evolve. While some may exhibit slight modifications and occasional "breaks" from their mobile devices and certain aspects of the digital social realm, others may refuse to engage with social platform applications that conflict with their principles. This finding indicates that disconnection occurs as a series of gradual actions, including an inner mental distance and subtle forms of breaks that can occur in everyday situations, rather than drastic actions like deleting a platform.

Overall, the empirical analysis shows how affective dissonance serves as a bridge between theory and lived experiences. It illustrates how affect and affective dissonance can explain and illuminate the affective reactions, reflections, and changed consciousness of young individuals navigating the complexities of disconnection in the digital realm.

## Concluding discussion

In this chapter, I have investigated how young people respond to the pervasive presence of invasive connected media, with a central, overarching research question: How do young people react to invasive connected media? Through my empirical inquiry, I have shown that affective reactions to digital impulses are deeply ingrained in the daily navigation and management of digital connectivity for young individuals. These affective experiences hold transformative potential, inciting dissonance as they challenge established habitual interactions with digital media.

The underpinnings of Spinoza's affective theory and Massumi's ideas on affective dynamics have considerably informed the analysis presented. Spinoza's framework helped interpret informants' mixed affects towards connectivity, reflecting their efforts to regain agency over affective states by changing digital habits. On the other hand, Massumi's conceptualisation of affective dynamics was employed to explore informants' instantaneous reactions to digital interactions, like the influx of mobile notifications. This framework also aided in unravelling the ambivalence the informants exhibited towards digital connectivity and disconnection, viewing such encounters through the lens of affective dissonance. Together, these theories facilitated a deeper exploration and a more holistic understanding of digital disconnection as a nuanced, affectively charged process rather than a fixed state, emphasising the critical role of affect in mediating young people's digital (dis)connectivity.

While affective encounters can undoubtedly have a significant impact, it is essential to recognise that they do not necessarily result in explicit disconnection practices. In fact, as I learned from speaking with young people, digital disconnection encapsulates a process of shifting one's mindset and values, as well as adopting a more intentional approach to usage, reflecting a nuanced affective-driven navigation of digital connectivity. Ultimately, digital disconnection can be considered a chance to engage in critical thinking and explore ideas of alternative realities.

As we have observed, the nature of disconnection practices is not rigidly fixed. It varies depending on individual circumstances and contexts. Sometimes, embracing an alternative approach to being with connected media may manifest in disconnection practices, while on other occasions, it may not lead to explicit disconnection. Based on the findings, I advocate for a nuanced conceptualisation of disconnection as an intricate process, demanding a delicate balancing act to address instances of dissonance and turbulence in the interplay between individuals and their digital connectivity, be it in their mental or behavioural engagements.

Based on the data collected, it is clear that young people cultivate a charged relationship with connectivity, mainly through their smartphones. Interactions with digital media can sometimes result in brief instances of microshocks, when some aspects of their digital experience do not align with

their personal preferences, eliciting dissonance. The frequency and intensity of these microshocks can be influenced by the continuous connectedness, leading some to opt for disconnection. The affective response to these occurrences can be diverse, with some finding them pacifying, and others mobilising. This underscores the intricate role that affects have in shaping disconnection. Connectivity, in its ever-present nature, thus lays the foundation for potential disconnection.

The crux of the matter lies in the empowerment these affective encounters confer upon young individuals – to disconnect and chart their own course within the digital landscape. By becoming active agents, they can customise and mould their experiences with relevant digital media and content, thus engaging in a circular process where being affected by the digital world influences how they, in turn, affect the digital realm. This iterative process alters the equilibrium of the affective bond between the individual and connectivity, ultimately forging novel, habituated ways of engaging with digital media.

Curiously, the notion of “acting” within the framework of disconnection thus transcends mere observable behaviours, encompassing a spectrum of attitudinal shifts and mental distancing. Consequently, the disconnection process culminates in various internal or external acts, each with distinct intensities. Disconnection practices may manifest as profound transformations in everyday digital use. At the same time, more subtle forms of mental distancing and internally regulated relationships with digital media also represent viable forms of disconnection. As such, disconnection materialises as a multifaceted spectrum encompassing attitudes, cognitive efforts, and diverse practices. To fully appreciate its complexity, it is therefore essential to embrace a holistic perspective that recognises disconnection beyond mere visible outcomes.

However, I acknowledge the inherent limitations of this study. Notably, the skewed gender representation within the sample warrants caution in giving the whole picture of the affective dimension of digital disconnection. Including a broader range of male informants and expanding the participant demographic to include diverse age groups, even adults, would undoubtedly enrich the comprehension of the affective aspects of disconnection.

Given the profound impact of digital media on the lives of 16–19-year-olds, it is also essential to consider disconnection as an integral part of their developmental journey. The decision to focus on young people within this age range aligns with their formative stage of identity development. At this juncture, connectivity assumes heightened significance as the quest for identity information and a sense of belonging among peers becomes intertwined with digital interactions, notably facilitated by smartphones. During this stage of life, individuals place significant emphasis on peer relationships and the need for social acceptance, seeking validation and recognition from their immediate social circles (Brown, 2008; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). As a result,

the influence of peers and peer responsibility is heightened, often surpassing other external responsibilities, creating an environment where self-oriented responsibilities become paramount in digital interactions (Livingstone & Third, 2017). This heightened emphasis on peer connections and identity development most likely intensifies their affective experiences and responses to digital impulses (boyd, 2015; Livingstone et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, disconnection as a process holds relevance across age demographics, as affective encounters resonate with individuals from various walks of life. Thus, I advocate for further research that builds upon the multifaceted notion of disconnection, exploring its dimensions as an embodiment of dissonance, potentiality, and a transformative process.

## References

- Baumer, E. P., Guha, S., Quan, E., Mimno, D., & Gay, G. K. (2015). Missing photos, suffering withdrawal, or finding freedom? How experiences of social media non-use influence the likelihood of reversion. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115614851>
- Baym, N. K., Wagman, K. B., & Persaud, C. J. (2020). Mindfully scrolling: Rethinking Facebook after time deactivated. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120919105>
- boyd, D. (2015). *It's complicated*. Yale University Press.
- Brown, B. B. (2008). Peer groups and peer cultures. In T. Willoughby (Ed.), *The handbook of adolescence* (pp. 74–103). John Wiley & Sons.
- Chotpitayasunondh, V., & Douglas, K. (2016). How “phubbing” becomes the norm: The antecedents and consequences of snubbing via smartphone. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63, 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.018>
- Clough, P. T., & Halley, J. (Eds.) (2007). *The affective turn: Theorizing the social*. Duke University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1992). *Expressionism in philosophy: Spinoza* (M. Joughin, Trans.). Zone Books.
- Enloe, C. (2004). *The curious feminist: Searching for women in a new age of empire*. University of California Press.
- Hemmings, C. (2012). Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation. *Feminist Theory*, 13(2), 147–161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643>
- Hipfl, B. (2018). Affect in media and communication studies: Potentials and assemblages. *Media and Communication*, 6(3), 5–14. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i3.1470>
- Karppi, T., Chia, A., & Jorge, A. (2021). In the mood for disconnection. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1599–1614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211034621>
- Kuntsman, A., & Miyake, E. (2019). The paradox and continuum of digital disengagement: Denaturalising digital sociality and technological connectivity. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41(6), 901–913. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719853732>
- Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., & Lemish, D. (Eds.). (2019). *The international handbook of children, media, and culture*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Livingstone, S., & Third, A. (2017). Children and young people's rights in the digital age: An emerging agenda. *New Media & Society*, 19(5), 657–670. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816686318>
- Mascheroni, G., Vincent, J., & Jimenez, E. (2015). Girls are addicted to likes so they post seminaked selfies: Peer mediation, normativity and the construction of identity online. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research*, 9(1), Article 5. <http://doi.org/10.5817/CP2015-1-5>
- Maslen, S. (2022). Affective forces of connection and disconnection on Facebook: A study of Australian parents beyond toddlerhood. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(9), 1716–1732. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2027497>
- Massumi, B. (2015). *Politics of affect*. Polity.
- Merton, R. K. (1976). *Sociological ambivalence and other essays*. Simon & Schuster.
- Peirce, C. (1965). Pragmatism and abduction. In C. Hartshorne, & P. Weiss (Eds.), *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Vol. 5) (pp. 112–131). Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Silverstone, R., Hirsch, E., & Morley, D. (1992). Information and communication technologies and the moral economy of the household. In R. Silverstone, & E. Hirsch (Eds.), *Consuming technologies: Media and information in domestic spaces* (pp. 115–131). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203401491>
- Smelser, N. J. (1998). The rational and the ambivalent in the social sciences: 1997 presidential address. *American Sociological Review*, 63(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657473>
- Subrahmanyam, K., & Greenfield, P. M. (2008). Online communication and adolescent relationships. *The Future of Children*, 18(1), 119–146. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20053122>
- Sundén, J. (2018). Queer disconnections: Affect, break, and delay in digital connectivity. *Transformations*, (31), 63–78.

- Syvvertsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The policies of disconnecting*. Emerald Publishing.
- Syvvertsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Vanden Abeele, M. M. P. (2015). Mobile youth culture: A conceptual development. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 4(1), 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157915601455>
- Vila-Henninger, L., Dupuy, C., Van Ingelgom, V., Caprioli, M., Teuber, F., Pennetreau, D., Bussi, M., & Le Gall, C. (2022). Abductive coding: Theory building and qualitative (re) analysis. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 53(2), 968–1001. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00491241211067508>
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2020). An emotional turn in journalism studies? *Digital Journalism*, 8(2), 175–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1697626>
- Wyatt, S., Thomas, G., & Terranova, T. (2002). They came, they surfed, they went back to the beach: Conceptualising use and non-use of the internet. In S. Woolgar (Ed.), *Virtual society? Technology, cyberbole, reality* (pp. 23–40). Oxford University Press.
- Ytre-Arne, B., Syvvertsen, T., Moe, H., & Karlsen, F. (2020). Temporal ambivalences in smartphone use: Conflicting flows, conflicting responsibilities. *New Media & Society*, 22(9), 1715–1732. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820913561>

# A day in the (datafied) life

*Digital education platforms, commercial infrastructures, and the (im)possibilities of disconnection*

SIGNE SOPHUS LAI & LUCAS CONE

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

## ABSTRACT

In classrooms, schools, and homes around the globe, digital education platforms are becoming increasingly vital partners in preparing, conducting, monitoring, and evaluating formal educational encounters. In Denmark, the swift and extensive efforts to digitalise educational practices, institutional administration, and other aspects of schooling have availed a series of questions pertaining to the material and micro-political effects of imbricating public education with commercial digital infrastructures that operate beyond the auspices of democratic control. This chapter combines thick descriptions of school life with (big) data on user tracking to unravel a day in the life of teachers and students intertwined in the digital economies of commercial platforms and datafication. Weaving together accounts of the (datafied) school lives of two individuals – a teacher and a student in Denmark – with visualisations of data flowing from individual and collective devices to platform owners and third-party corporations, we discuss the implications of an unchecked, continuous, and increasing influx of digital education platforms in public primary education as well as the (im)possibilities of disconnecting from the hyperconnected school.

**KEYWORDS:** education, datafication, data infrastructures, digital platforms, welfare state, tracking

---

Lai, S. S., & Cone, L. (2024). A day in the (datafied) life: Digital education platforms, commercial infrastructures, and the (im)possibilities of disconnection. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 275–300). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.  
<https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-14>



## Introduction

In classrooms, schools, and homes around the globe, digital education platforms are becoming increasingly crucial partners in preparing, conducting, monitoring, and evaluating formal educational encounters (Cone, 2023a; Decuyper et al., 2021; Kerssens & Dijck, 2021). Anchored in a global ecosystem of apps, websites, and other software available at little or no monetary charge, the expansive growth in access to the Internet and personal hardware has made it difficult to imagine life in the wealthiest education systems without the involvement of Workspace, Class Dojo, Evernote, Padlet, and Facebook. The extent of this infrastructural dependency became clear to many during the Covid-19 pandemic. As schools were shut down and students and teachers sent home to prevent further spread of the virus, local and global tech companies lined up to keep the wheels of teaching and learning turning, hereby opening a profitable pathway to a future of schooling that explodes the traditional boundaries between school and home (Cone et al., 2021).

The swift and largely unregulated platformisation of teaching and learning processes introduces a variety of issues in relation to the formal responsibilities of the school as an enactment of digital educational forms. These issues are especially salient in school systems marked by high degrees of local autonomy and democratic accountability (Telhaug et al., 2006). As still more aspects of teaching and learning are untethered from cords, buildings, and fixed hours, school administrations and practitioners are frequently left to themselves with challenges of navigating the murky waters of the digital data economy (Bergviken Rensfeldt et al., 2018; Lupton, 2021; Perrotta et al., 2021). While transnational actors, governments, and municipalities have recently gotten increasingly involved in problematising digital technologies in education – a tendency seen in political discussions revolving around limiting or banning the use of digital devices in schools in Denmark and elsewhere – most involvements of platforms in formal education remain bound to what the OECD (2014: 3) describes as a “‘wild west’ of commercial practice”.

In effect, a horde of commercial apps and websites are entering the everyday lives of teachers and students beyond the confines of formal education policies or regulations (Pangrazio et al., 2022). Although some of these were developed for educational purposes, the majority were not. And although some offer a premium or paid version, many are free-to-use platforms that sustain themselves through the dominant business model of the commercial Internet: harvesting and reselling user data (Lai et al., 2023). Taken together, the *de facto* responsibility often falls on teachers, students, school leaders, and parents to control and grapple with the implications of a data economy that they have little chance of, or resources for, understanding. We close our eyes, press “accept all cookies”, and hope for the best.

In this chapter, we combine thick descriptions of (datafied) school life with (big) data on user tracking to unravel a day in the life of two individuals –

a teacher and a student in Denmark – intertwined in the digital economies of commercial datafication (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013; Mejias & Couldry, 2019; van Dijck, 2014). Introducing infrastructural and political economist perspectives to the lived experiences of a hyperconnected school, the chapter weaves together ethnographic accounts of school life with visualisations of data flowing from individual and collective devices to platform owners and third-party corporations throughout the day. In doing so, it addresses a predominant emphasis in existing studies where “most research to date has focused excessively on user practices and experiences of disconnection, rather than on the technical, economic and political infrastructures that shape the (im)possibilities of opting out” (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2022: 3). That is, the (im)possibility of disconnecting is not just a social and personal problem, but also an infrastructural challenge, in the sense that the recent efforts to digitalise education in Denmark and many other spaces is intricately tied to commercial data infrastructures and underlying business logics emerging through the entanglement of public governance and big technology companies. Our analyses thereby provide a foundation for questioning the structural implications of the everyday practices of teachers and students in a political and economic environment where connection, rather than disconnection, is key. Finally, the empirical material serves as a backdrop for discussing, throughout the chapter, the challenges that arise from an unchecked and ad hoc influx of commercial digital platforms in public primary education.

## **Digitalised welfare: Schools and the public teacher**

In recent decades, Danish government agencies have invested heavily in digital infrastructures to increase the efficiency and connectivity of the public sector. The Danish public school system, which serves approximately 540,000 children aged six to fifteen, has not escaped this trend. Lodged in reformatory ambitions up through the 2000s and 2010s to “make digital teaching and learning an integral part of all relevant activities in school” (Danish Government et al., 2013: 16), the introduction of digital technologies has been conceived as a pivotal part of modernising the public school.<sup>1</sup> Invoking the promises of digital technologies to enhance student motivation and individualise teaching and learning processes, these shifts are particularly salient in a tradition of liberal-democratic schooling where the practices, content, and purposes of schooling are closely tied to the teacher as an organic and reflective intellectual (Larsen et al., 2021). By propagating the ability of digital technologies to “continuously monitor the child’s learning, progression in different subjects, and well-being” (Danish Ministry of Education, 2014: 1), a growing body of digital platforms have emerged as a purportedly necessary requirement for breaking open the classroom door to a data-rich future of efficient – and economically feasible – teaching and learning (Flyverbom, 2019; Knox et al., 2020).

As a corollary, the Danish state and local government agencies have played a highly proactive role in promoting the “potentials of digital technologies to make welfare more efficient and cost-effective” (Danish Government et al., 2013: 3). Looking across the last decade, these attempts have resulted in a broad ecosystem of digital platforms that include small Danish start-ups, global tech corporations, and education publishing houses that have overlaid their contents with an intermediary website (Balslev, 2020; Ratner et al., 2019). While the largest actors in this ecosystem<sup>2</sup> are contracted through municipal subscriptions, recent surveys suggest that many of the platforms presently involved in the day-to-day school activities of teachers and students are used on an ad hoc basis outside of formal municipal agreements (The Danish Ministry of Education, 2021). Anchored in mobile applications and desktop websites that are often available at no monetary cost, the relative (if diminished) autonomy of teachers and widespread accessibility of digital platforms mean that the extent of the actual involvement of platforms in everyday schooling is largely unknown – and critically underexamined. While scholars in education have begun exploring how global tech companies are enrolled in the production of educational imaginaries and ontologies (Ideland, 2020; Sims, 2017; Williamson, 2017), the ad hoc nature of digitalisation as a phenomenon enacted across the distributed agencies of everyday life makes it challenging to recognise exactly when and how platforms are endorsed as educational, and how these enactments legitimise and potentially conceal the commercial interests at stake (Bucher, 2018; Pangrazio et al., 2022). By combining ethnographic fieldwork with (big) data on user tracking, in this chapter we hope to elicit some of these problematic entanglements.

## **(Dis)entangling the datafied school**

The discussions in this chapter are based on a merging of empirical material on data infrastructures infiltrated in the digital school, on the one hand, and lived experiences of the same, on the other. As such, we draw on ethnographic methods like participant observations and semi-structured interviews as well as reverse-engineering of datafication processes through scraping of the fundamental infrastructures for data distributions and their ownership structures. This mixing of methods – combining (big) data and thick descriptions (Bornakke & Due, 2018) – serves as a foundation for revealing power asymmetries at the micro level of student–teacher relationships, the meso level of schools and other digitalised public institutions, and the macro level of the welfare state system and its waltz with global platforms. Against a backdrop of qualitative and quantitative ways of studying the digital and datafied school, our discussions problematise the entangled ecosystem of connectedness that individual teachers and students navigate daily in Denmark and elsewhere.

Specifically, the ethnographic accounts of a day in the life of a teacher and a student are based on a four-month long period of fieldwork in a Danish public

primary school in 2019 and 2020 focusing on the use of digital technologies, conducted by Lucas Cone (2023b). Drawing on interviews, audio recordings, observations, and teacher and student diaries, the accounts offer a dramatised illustration of the use of digital technologies as they are involved in the daily lives of one teacher and one student: Evy, an arts and crafts teacher, and Aisha, a fourth-grade student. The dramatisation of episodes from Evy's and Aisha's lives through fieldnotes, diaries, and other forms of empirical material provides a methodological pathway to draw forth how and when technologies are involved in everyday acts of teaching and learning within and outside schools (Braidotti, 2018; Pink et al., 2022).

The visual mappings of data flows are, in turn, based on scraping of the infrastructures for tracking and profiting from user data that are embedded in the ethnographic accounts: For apps on Apple and Android devices, we look at 1) the kinds of data harvested by the apps – for instance, through the app accessing the phone's microphone and recording sound or by tracking the phone's location through GPS coordinates – and 2) the third-party services that are built into the same apps with the capacity to access user data for the purpose of optimising the app, selling ads, building profiles, targeting users, and so forth (for a thorough walk-through of the methods, see Lai & Flensburg, 2020). For websites accessed through desktop devices, we also look at third-party services, in this case through small scripts commonly known as web cookies (see Helles et al., 2020; Libert, 2015). Taken together, these sources allow us to uncover otherwise black-boxed and invisible data infrastructures through mappings of what kinds of data travel to how many and which actors and platforms – including but not limited to the immediate interface that meets the teacher and her student. Moreover, the mappings of data flows are not limited to any one device, nor do they focus on particular platforms, but rather traverse the many technologies and platforms involved in a normal school day.

As a common denominator, the empirical data is structured according to a day in the life of a teacher and student (see, e.g., Thorhauge & Lomborg, 2016). That is, the temporal aspects of a school day – getting up, commuting, being physically present “at school”, and so forth – structure both the ethnographic accounts and the data flows. Focusing on the temporal aspects of digitalisation allows us to highlight when different platforms and hardware are enrolled throughout the day with important implications for datafication processes and commercial practices. In other words, while the data flows target questions surrounding what data and what actors, the ethnographic accounts draw forth the micro-political processes through which certain forms of powerful connectivity are enacted as part of data travelling to and from different actors in the midst of pedagogical and parental relations (Bucher, 2018).

By shedding light on these processes, the chapter contributes to recent discussions surrounding connection to and disconnection from digital platforms and services (Bucher, 2020; Treré et al., 2020) through a material

approach to studying the relationship between infrastructures and individuals. After presenting three empirical sections focusing on a day in the life of, respectively, Evy the teacher and Aisha the student, we discuss the value of this approach in relation to bridging the gap between political economist studies of digital infrastructures, on the one hand (e.g., Lai & Flensburg, 2021; Nieborg, 2016; Winseck, 2019), and the field of digital disconnection, on the other (e.g., Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021; Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). In other words, we consider how the approach can contribute to efforts at understanding and monitoring the ways data infrastructures tie into the everyday lives of individuals and thereby ground future regulatory initiatives or digital public infrastructure projects.

### **07:05 – The uncontained school**

Evy, an arts and crafts teacher employed at a public primary school in the vicinity of Copenhagen, Denmark, is putting a final touch on today's first lesson, scheduled to begin in little more than an hour. For the past couple of weeks, the fourth graders at her school have been creating digital posters about different European countries; today, the plan is to draw maps of their respective countries and place them on their posters. Evy logs in to her Pinterest account using her MacBook and browses through a couple of her favourite arts and crafts pages looking for inspiration. Meanwhile, she pulls up her iPhone to make a post on the school's communication platform, Aula, reminding the students in class 4A to look at maps of the country they are working with. Evy continues to browse through Pinterest before stumbling upon a map of Germany drawn with charcoal, which she copies into a note in Evernote labelled "inspiration for country posters, fourth grade".

Around the same time, the fourth-grade student Aisha is finishing breakfast and getting ready to leave for school with her little brother Osman. While she waits for her brother, she takes her Samsung Galaxy phone out of her back pocket and swipes open a picture just posted by Amira in a Snapchat group called "4A forever". Aisha snaps a picture of her face from below and sends it to the group, writing "tired" across her forehead. Still waiting, she uses her fingerprint to open Aula, the dedicated intranet for her school, looking for any new notifications concerning today's schedule: math in the first lesson, arts and crafts in the second, natural sciences and physical education after lunch. Clicking on the bulletin board function, Aisha opens a message just posted by Evy reminding the class to look at maps of the countries they are making posters of in arts and crafts.

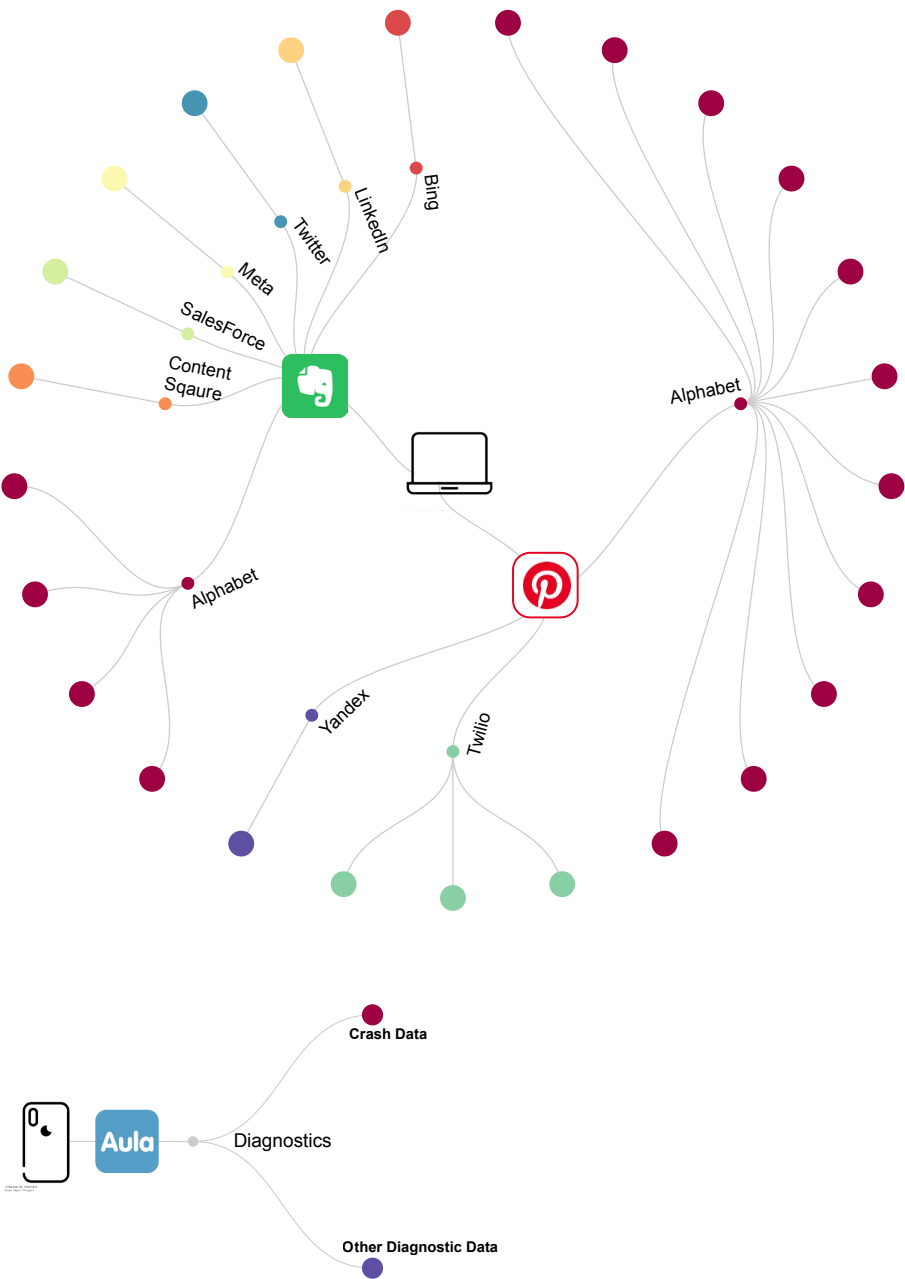
Partly a result of most people's own educational experiences, schools are often imagined as geographically and temporally isolated spaces (Lefebvre, 1991). Following what many of us have learned on the back of "sixteen continuous years of contact with teachers and professors" (Lortie, 1975: 61), dominant discourses surrounding schools are often closely tied to our own apprenticeships in observation: School is something that begins and ends in a building, and teaching is a form of labour that takes place in classrooms, hallways, and faculty lounges. Drawing on the personal accounts of Evy and Aisha, the vignette above illustrates the difficulties of maintaining such ontological boundaries in a profoundly distributed, mobile, and hyperconnected space of formal education. Aided by the affordances (Hutchby, 2001) of digital technologies, Evy and Aisha's involvement in the enactment of schooling are already well under way long before they show up at the school premises. In Evy's case, this enactment unfolds through the use of Pinterest and Evernote for exploring and organising inspiring images online for her lesson later that day, and the communication platform Aula to post a reminder to the students in her class; in Aisha's case, it unfolds through the social media application Snapchat, where she engages with her classmates through a class chat, and Aula, for reading her teacher's post concerning the day's lesson.

The lapse of conventional educational contexts highlighted above is not restricted to the interaction between teachers, students, and the content of lessons. As different platforms such as Pinterest and Snapchat become involved in the enactment of schooling, so too are a wide range of actors and commercial interests that shatter the regulatory capacities and organisation of the school as a bounded organisation under the auspices of the sovereign state. Using the examples drawn forth in the episode above, Figure 14.1a demonstrates how many teachers' and students' proliferating uses of commercial digital platforms involves data infrastructures that far exceed what is normally conceived as the "boundaries" (or regions) of public education. Specifically, the figure illustrates the data flows prompted by Evy's morning routine: At the centre it shows Evy's devices – an iPhone and a MacBook. Surrounding the devices are the various platforms used as part of either communicating with her students about the day's class (the Aula app) or preparing her teaching (the Evernote and Pinterest websites). And finally, it shows the kinds of access to harvest data that the app requests (diagnostics data), the third-party corporations accessing data from the websites, and the number of third-party services or trackers they have for each site (e.g., the Twilio company has three different third-party services on Pinterest). The figure also highlights how websites can use different strategies for cooperating with third-party companies: Whereas Pinterest collaborates with just a few (Alphabet in the US and Yandex in Russia), Evernote has many data partners (including US-based Meta and Bing). As a common denominator, none of these global corporations and their platforms and services were built

for educational purposes, and their businesses do not fall under the jurisdiction of public education policy.

Figure 14.1b, in turn, focuses on Aisha's data flows anchored in her use of the Samsung Galaxy phone. The figure displays Aisha's device at the centre, the apps she uses (Aula and SnapChat), and, for each app, the third-party corporations tying into the specific app (e.g., Microsoft, Mapbox), as well as the kinds of access to data requested by the app (e.g., access to the phone's contacts). Comparing Figures 14.1a and 14.1b, we see that Aula requests several types of access to personal user data on Aisha's phone (through its camera or its storage of media files, such as photos and videos), which it did not on Evy's iPhone. This hints at fundamental differences between the Android operating system (running on Aisha's phone) and iOS (running on Evy's) when it comes to user privacy, in general, as well as restrictions upon app developers and third-party corporations for accessing user data (see Lai et al., 2023). In other words, Evy and Aisha are, as a consequence of the devices they carry, not equals when it comes to the kinds of data that might be harvested about them through their uses of various platforms for formal educational purposes on their personal devices (see also Kollnig, Shuba, Binns, et al., 2022; Kollnig, Shuba, Van Kleek, et al., 2022). In addition, the illustration emphasises a myriad of data points (including location, microphone, device ID, and call information) that have never been part of the otherwise highly datafied educational system (think of grading systems, scores for participation, tests, etc.). As such, these data points do not come under established schemes for handling and protecting information about students (and their teachers), but rather pertain to the terms of services formulated by the commercial corporations that ultimately handle and control them.

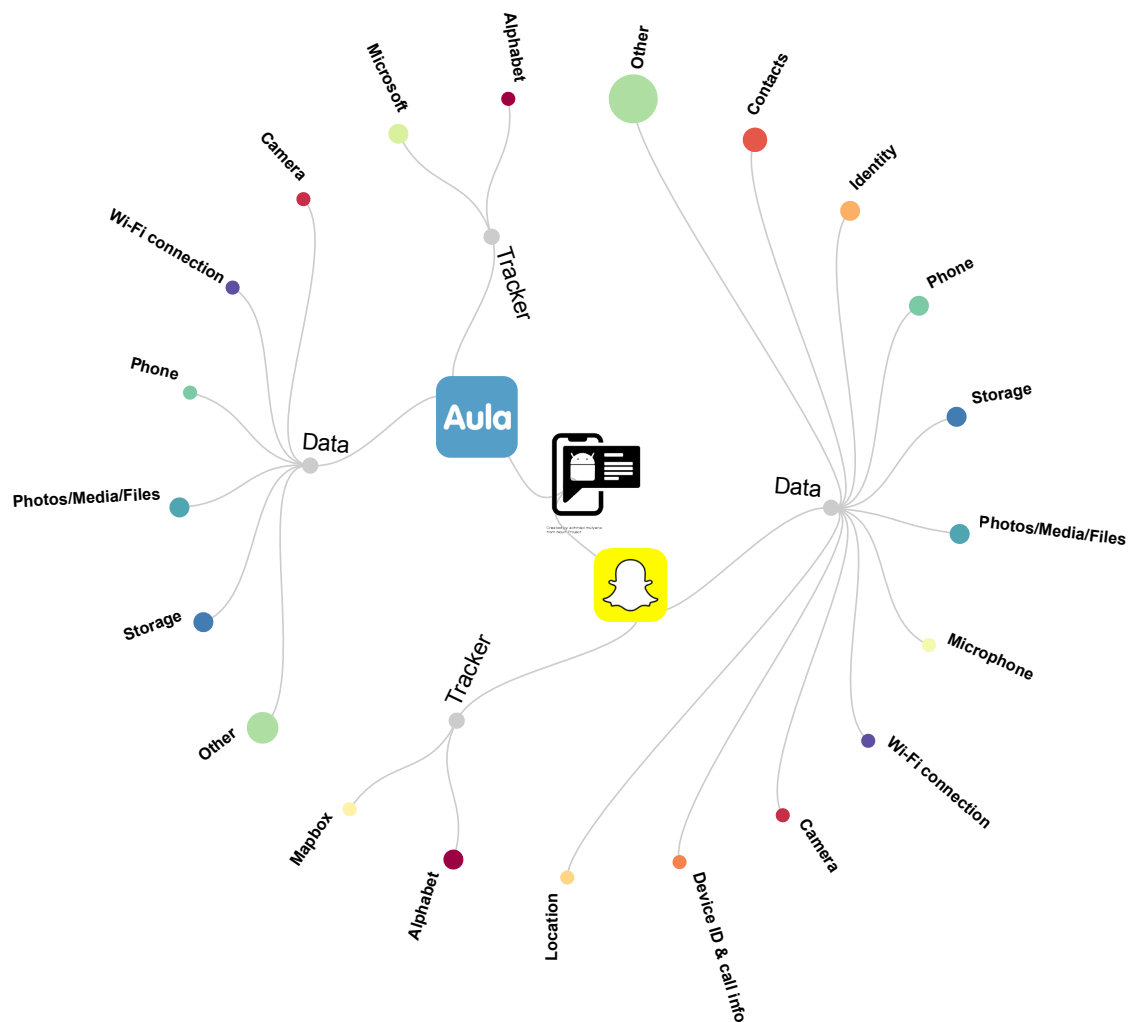
**FIGURE 14.1A** Morning routine of Evy the teacher



*Comments:* The above figure shows Evy's devices – an iPhone and a MacBook – and the platforms she accesses through them: Pinterest and Evernote. For the apps used on the iPhone, it shows the kinds of data harvested through the apps and for the MacBook, it shows the third-party corporations harvesting data from the website.



**FIGURE 14.1B** Morning routine of Aisha the student



*Comments:* The above figure shows Aisha's device – an Android phone – and the platforms she accesses through it: Aula and Snapchat. For each app, it shows 1) the kinds of data harvested through them (e.g., data on "Identity" through Snapchat or data on "Photos/Media/Files" through Aula), and 2) the third-party corporations beyond the app owner accessing the user data (e.g., Microsoft).

As intimated in the episode and the data flows depicted above, the availability and diffusion of platforms in the daily lives of Evy and Aisha make it difficult to sustain any conventional boundaries between the home as a private, and the school as a public (and politically regulated), structure of relationality and authority. In the next vignette, we follow Evy and Aisha into the school to highlight how the distributed economic infrastructure for digital schooling is enacted within the classroom.

### **11:00 – Flooded by platforms**

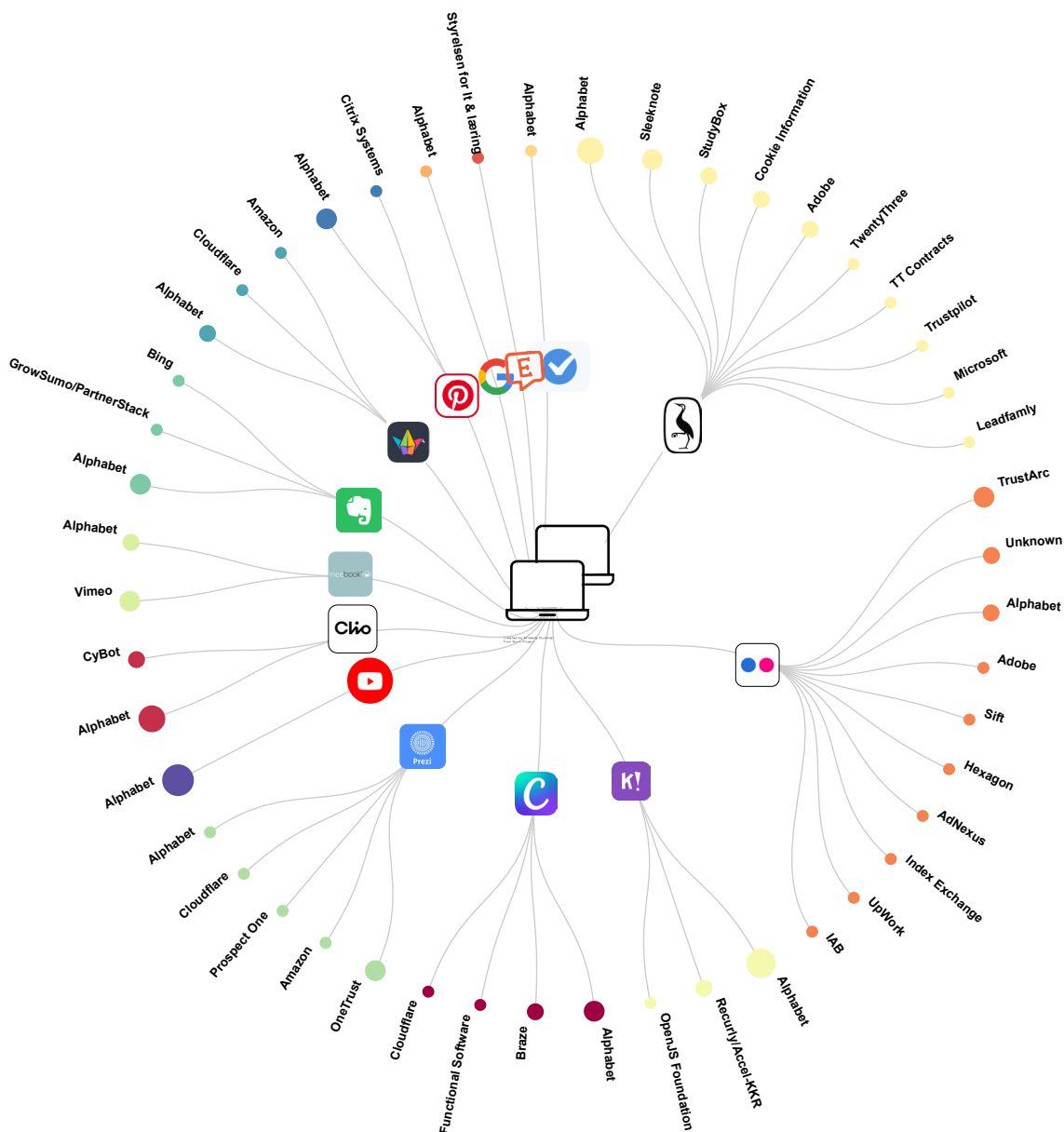
The electronic school bell rings: It's time for the next class. Aisha and two of her friends walk back to their classrooms where they have dumped their phones into a box standing on the table next to the whiteboard; all but two students in class 4A have smartphones. As the students enter the class, Evy asks how they are doing. She turns on the digital whiteboard as the remaining students find their seats. A Meebook page appears titled "Posters", showing an overview of the entire poster lesson. "Today we'll be drawing maps of your countries and adding them to your posters, okay?" Evy presents the exercise and asks Aisha and another student to come with her to pick up computers in the safe located down the hallway. They return after a couple of minutes with 17 Lenovo laptops which they distribute to the class. A couple of minutes later, they have all logged in to Google Classroom and opened Canva, a graphic design application where the students are creating their posters.

Aisha searches Google for a map of Croatia and drags it onto the desktop. After opening a separate window with the map, she begins drawing an outline of the country using the computer's mousepad. "Try using some of the different types of markers in Canva", Evy instructs and shows an example of Germany drawn with charcoal. "You can do all sorts of cool things". Almost finished with her map, Aisha asks Evy what to do next. Evy comes over to Aisha and looks at her screen. "When you're done drawing your map you can add pictures of typical Croatian food". Evy raises her head and continues, this time addressing the entire class. "Before we meet again tomorrow for our poster presentations, I also want you to go home tonight and find a music video from your country. You can use YouTube, just ask your parents to help you. I'll make sure they know about it".

Aisha and her classmates are making posters about different countries around the world, seemingly a simple task, which would once have been carried out using cardboard, markers, scissors, and glue. Today, aided by the affordances of digital technologies, there is no longer a need for sticky materials. Scenic images are just a search away on Google, music and videos shared by others around the world can be found on YouTube, while graphical tools provided by design platforms like Canva make gluing one's fingers together in the effort to create striking artworks an unnecessary nuisance of the past.

The episode stresses how a basic educational activity is flooded by commercial actors, through the platforms they offer as well as the promises of their many uses. Drawing on the ethnographic episode, Figure 14.2 collapses Evy and Aisha's data flows as they find themselves in the same physical location of the school, doing activities through the same platforms, and from dedicated school computers. Like the previous figures, it shows the student's and teacher's devices at the centre, the multitude of platforms that were involved in the episode from which the vignette above originates, and finally the many third-party corporations that harvest data from the sites, sized according to the number of trackers they have installed.

**FIGURE 14.2** Evy's and Aisha's data flows inside the classroom



*Comments:* The figure shows the shared platforms that both Evy and Aisha access as part of the arts and crafts lesson that Evy teaches to Aisha's fourth-grade class and the third-party corporations whose third-party services are integrated into the websites in question. Each third-party is sized according to the number of services they integrate into the site.

The illustration highlights comparative differences between the platforms where, for instance, the global photo sharing database Flickr and the presentation platform Prezi collaborate with several commercial actors for their data infrastructures, whereas platforms like Meebook and Clio, developed by Danish actors, collaborate with less. Unlike Flickr and Prezi, Meebook and Clio were established for educational purposes and, moreover, their national origin means that the parent companies operate more closely under Danish and European regulatory frameworks regarding, for instance, general data protection in and outside the school system. The mixing of these various platforms in the context of just one lesson is a testament to the many options that exist (only the imagination of the teacher sets the limit), the absence of guidelines for educators navigating the forest of digital offers, as well as the lack of official tools for many of the tasks that are now carried out online as part of formal schooling.

Considering aspects of digital welfare in Danish education, the commercial imbrications shown above illuminate the challenges of combining public teacher authority with the operations of private infrastructures working through data capture and commercialisation. To be sure, there is nothing strange in Evy's suggestion toward the end of the episode that the students ask their parents for help completing a task for the following lesson: in this case, finding a music video on YouTube. What matters here is rather the extent to which a "formal" suggestion for homework anchored in a publicly employed profession ends up serving as a pathway for embedding fourth graders in the intricate web of YouTube's, and thereby its parent company Alphabet's, digital ecosystem once they return home. Moreover, longstanding efforts from the public school system to ensure equality in educational offers are tested when the students' ability to carry out homework relies on the existence and quality of personal digital devices within the home as well as the proficiency of the parents to navigate the myriad of platforms used simultaneously for homework and a wealth of other non-educational purposes (YouTube is a good example of just that).

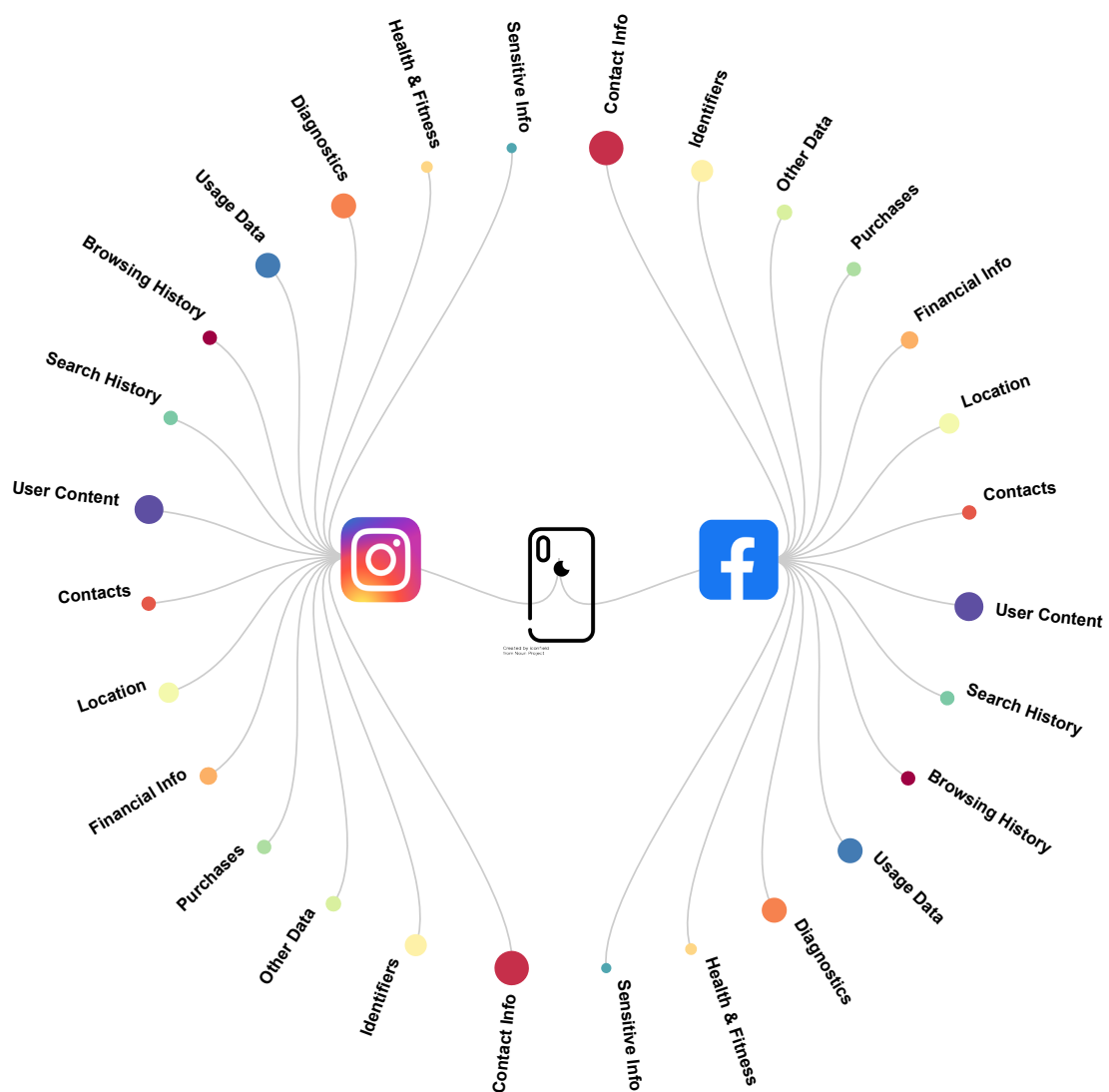
### **19:35 – Old power asymmetries and new inequalities**

Back in her apartment, Evy is scrolling through a Facebook page for arts and crafts teachers in Denmark to find inspiration for organising tomorrow's poster presentations, when a notification appears on her screen: She has a new comment on the Instagram post of a student sculpture she uploaded last week, displaying a one-eyed papier-mâché face put together by a student in one of her classes. "When your student might as well be a professional artist", says the post, which has 130 likes. Evy glances at the comment written by an arts and crafts teacher in England: "Did they use a model or was it just based on imagination?" "Inspiration!" she replies, followed by a heart-shaped emoticon.

A couple of kilometres away, Aisha and her mother are looking for Croatian music videos on YouTube, using Aisha's Samsung Galaxy phone. "How about this one?" Aisha asks, pointing at a video titled "Croatian Traditional Music". Following Evy's instructions posted in Aula earlier that day, Aisha's mother helps her copy the link and post it in the class group. Aisha's mother asks if she has any other homework; they have a small test in English tomorrow. "Just 15 minutes on DuoLingo [an app for training English-language skills] and then you can watch Netflix, okay?" Aisha jumps back onto the couch and launches DuoLingo. "Okay", she says, "but only 15".

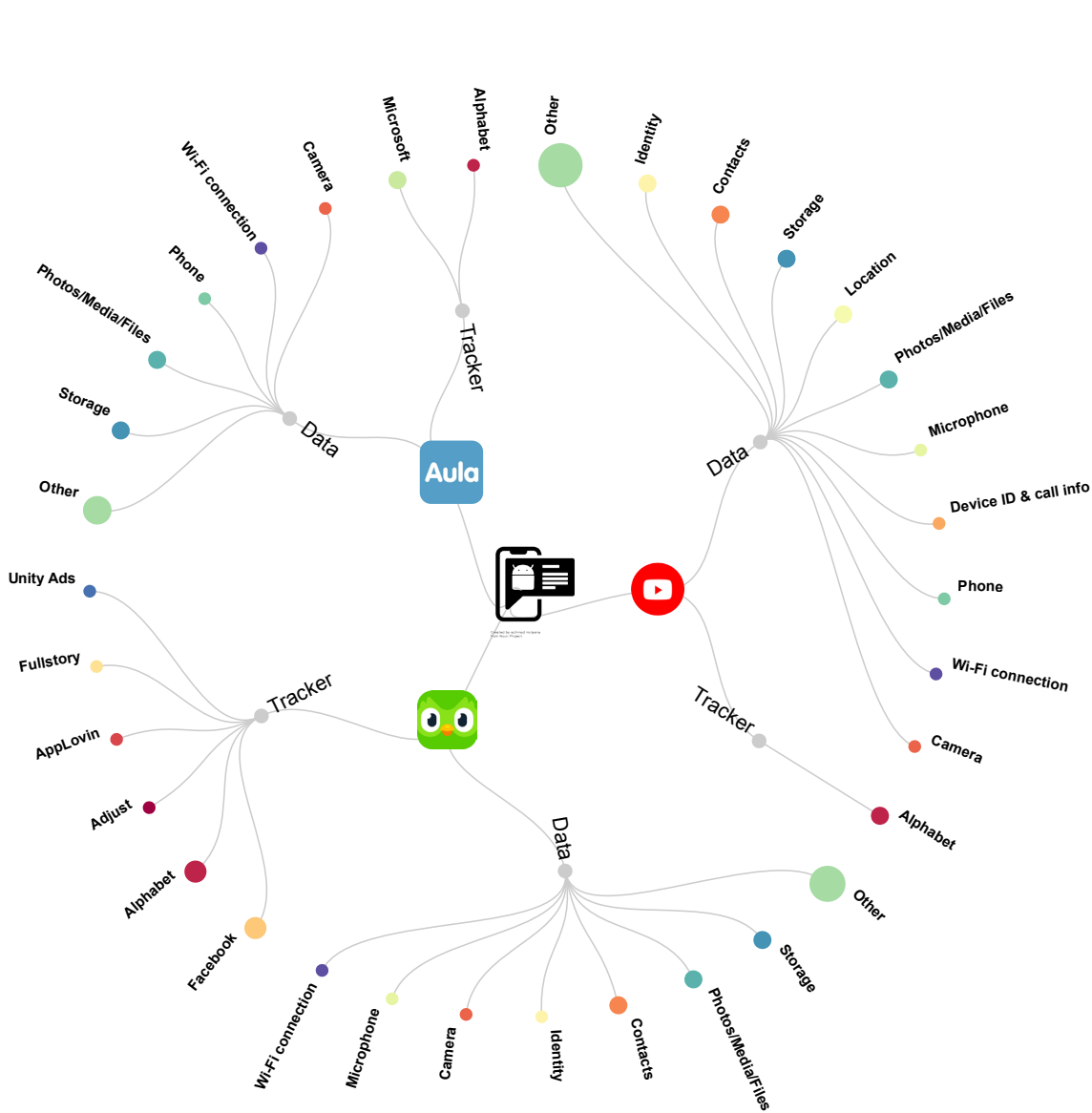
Detached from time and space, Evy and Aisha's involvement in the activities of schooling continue long after the school day officially ends, aided by the affordances of digital technologies and platforms. For some teachers, evenings are when there is room for preparing the next day's class or, as in the case of Evy, scouting inspiration and collecting recognition from peers for all the work put into creating stimulating classes (Cone, 2022). For some students, evenings are spent completing homework assigned by the teachers and browsing the Internet, chatting with friends from school, and spending time on social media platforms. The shift in space – from the context of the school back to that of the home – also often entails a shift in technologies: The educational content travels from dedicated school devices like laptops and tablets to personal ones like smartphones. These shifts are evident in Figure 14.3, which once again splits into two – one for Evy's evening and one for Aisha's, as outlined in the episode above – where the data flows of both Figure 14.3a and 14.3b begin from the personal smartphones rather than dedicated school devices. Our discussions so far have hinted at various critical issues arising at the intersection of these contextual and technological shifts and the underlying commercial data infrastructures supporting schoolwork. These shifts translate into four challenges that we wish to highlight based on the episodes and figures presented in the chapter.

**FIGURE 14.3A** Evy the teacher's data flow back at home



*Comments:* The above figure shows Evy's device at the centre, the platforms she uses, and the kinds of data they collect when returning home from school in the evening.

**FIGURE 14.3B** Aisha the student’s data flow back at home



*Comments:* The above figure shows Aisha’s device at the centre, the platforms she uses, and the kinds of data they collect as well as the third-party corporations accessing the data, when she returns home from school in the evening.



First, when students are assigned homework via platforms like Duolingo or YouTube, the teacher functions both a gatekeeper (for the platforms to reach new users in the form of students, they must first come through the teacher), as well as a politically sanctioned authority (representatives of what is expected of the students from the school). Yet, as the episodes demonstrate, teachers are rarely provided with the necessary knowledge and tools to navigate the “wild west” of commercial digital platforms, nor are they able to gatekeep – or protect – the students (and their data), just as little as the students can grasp the implications of engaging one platform or another on their personal digital devices.

Second, and relatedly, building a data profile of the users of a school computer that shifts hands all day only to return to a locked cabinet is a difficult task (unless the students log in to various systems making identification somewhat simpler). It is, however, much easier to know the user of a personal device that is already identified through the device ID card and a serial number. The kinds of user data that might be gleaned off a school computer is limited compared with the data stored on a personal mobile device that is always with the person who owns it. While the school computer might not have any commercially interesting location stamps, no personal photos, or contact lists, the personal device has all of that and more, which is accessed through, for instance, the platforms that Evy and Aisha use in the evening (see Figures 14.3a and 14.3b). In other words, the many data points visualised in the previous figures are much more critical for user privacy when preparing for classes or doing digital homework outside the physical confines of the school and its dedicated devices (if such devices are available).

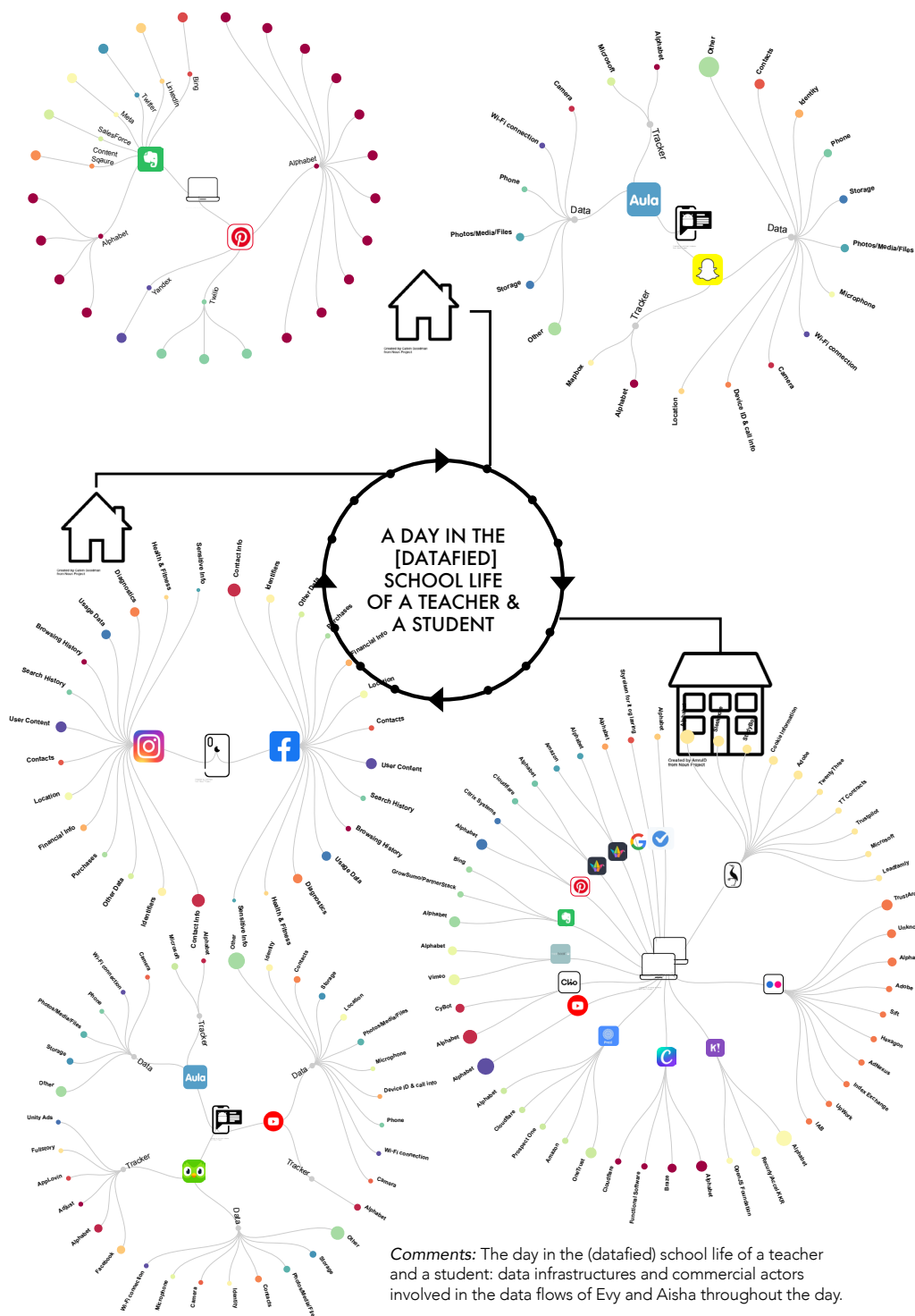
Third, as exemplified in the analysis of the Aula app across devices and operating systems, it matters what kind of device the students (re)turn to once formal lessons are over. Again, the implications in terms of data harvesting and reselling on the part of global third-party corporations trading in what is best described as “human futures” (Zuboff, 2019) are opaque and inaccessible to teachers and students alike. Yet, in Denmark and elsewhere, the differences in pricing between one and the other device are mirrored in differences between users, which in turn leads to new (data) inequalities between those with more, or less, financial means and more, or less, “leaky” devices.

Fourth, as targeted advertisement hinges on logics of profiling users and curating content, the harvested data are returned to the teachers and the students in unrecognisable and alienating formats (Andrejevic, 2011) – both inside and outside of school. As a corollary, existing social differences between targeted users are exacerbated by the serving of content and ads that the users are expected to pay attention to. As such, the commercial rationales of many digital platforms contradict established ideas surrounding the public school system as targeting social inequalities by offering equal educational opportunities.

## Concluding discussion: A day in the datafied life

By engaging in a mixed-method process of “interpreting beyond the appearance of solidity” (Lefebvre, 1991: 92), our chapter demonstrates how the daily lives of teachers and students in a Danish public school have become saturated with commercial digital platforms that challenge central ideals underlying welfare state education: the protection of students from market interests (Andreassen et al., 2021). The chapter has contributed to recent discussions surrounding the (im)possibilities of disconnecting from digital platforms and services by introducing a material approach to the relationship between individuals and infrastructures, thereby also bridging the gap between political economist studies of digital infrastructures, on the one hand, and the field of digital disconnection, on the other (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2022). The day-in-the-life approach adds, moreover, a holistic, ecological, cross-platform and cross-device approach that contrasts most studies focusing on one physical context (e.g., the school), one platform (e.g., Google Workspace), or one device (e.g., desktop computers), as epitomised by the combination of data visualisations in Figure 14.4. And finally, the empirical foundations for the discussions of the chapter answer recent calls from within the field of critical data studies as well as critical educational sociology for empirical studies that “underpin and flesh out” (Kitchin & Lauriault, 2014) consistent critiques of datafication across various spheres of life – in this case, a public primary school.

**FIGURE 14.4** A day in the datafied life



Our analyses in this chapter emphasise the need for 1) an increase in monitoring of when and how commercial platforms are used and legitimised in the day-to-day enactments of public primary education, and 2) regulatory initiatives or digital public infrastructure projects that can address infrastructural weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and hereby enhance public debate as well as professional responsibility. That is, the school system has historically valued high degrees of teacher autonomy and student agency (Telhaug et al., 2006), while the welfare system has focused extensively on protecting children from commercial influence and branding. From this perspective, it is paradoxical that the relative autonomy to choose and access free digital platforms has left municipalities, regions, or even, as of now, the government largely unable to monitor and regulate the extent of teacher and student data extraction by commercial entities (Adams et al., 2021). In effect, many teachers are left with the responsibility of navigating an increasingly complex ecosystem of commercially driven platforms without the regulatory foundation that previous policies pertaining to both education and children's welfare and rights might have provided.

While it is important to remain critical of the infrastructural issues highlighted throughout the chapter, the analyses also draw forth the positive aspects that come with the hyperconnected school. These include providing overburdened teachers with a pedagogical shortcut to a more efficient, productive, and streamlined school day while at the same time meeting the political expectation that they incorporate digital tools and services in the classroom, hereby allowing students to practice digital skills and reaping the creative benefits of digital platforms. While complete disconnection from digital platforms in formal educational contexts does not seem like a plausible response to the challenges discussed in this chapter, the extent of commercial datafication throughout a day in the life of a teacher and student calls for public debates surrounding what we would like the future public school to look like. It also, we argue, emphasises the need for monitoring the influx of commercial digital platforms in public schools, as well as the data practices of different platform providers. In line with historical ambitions of the public school to offer children an opportunity to build critical and democratic capacities by suspending social and economic inequalities, such monitoring could prepare the ground for regulatory initiatives aimed at organising digital public infrastructure projects sustaining the advantages of using digital technologies – for teachers and students – while also building ethically sound alternatives in the form of operating systems, digital services, and platforms.

Our analyses testify to highly complex and opaque data infrastructures intertwining into everyday school lives in ways that are difficult to grasp for researchers and policymakers – just as are they for individual teachers and students. They also emphasise that an infrastructural and political economist perspective on (dis)connection, as well as on broader questions around the

digitalisation of central welfare institutions like the public school, can help explore and explain how technical, economic, and political forces also shape past and future developments. As such, discussions of (dis)connection in the hyperconnected school should not be a question of teacher or student responsibility, critical thinking, or privilege, but rather be based on broader public monitoring of digital platforms and debates concerning the extent of datafication in crucial welfare institutions and professions. Acknowledging the impossibilities of disconnection is an important step in opening the door to discussing more democratic ways of digitalising public education.

## Acknowledgements

All illustrations were made with RAWGraphs by DensityDesign, Calibro, and Inmagik.

## References

- Adams, E., Wurzburg, E., & Kerr, S. L. (2021). The tip of the iceberg: Immaterial labor, technoskepticism and the teaching profession. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 21(1), 126–154. <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/217734/>
- Andreassen, R., Kaun, A., & Nikunen, K. (2021). Fostering the data welfare state: A Nordic perspective on datafication. *Nordicom Review*, 42(2), 207–223. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0051>
- Andrejevic, M. (2011). Surveillance and alienation in the online economy. *Surveillance & Society: Kingston*, 8(3), 278–287. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v8i3.4164>
- Balslev, J. (2020). *Evidence of a potential: The political arguments for digitizing education 1983–2015*. Roskilde University.
- Bergviken Rensfeldt, A., Hillman, T., & Selwyn, N. (2018). Teachers ‘liking’ their work? Exploring the realities of teacher Facebook groups. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(2), 230–250. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3325>
- Bornakke, T., & Due, B. L. (2018). Big-thick blending: A method for mixing analytical insights from big and thick data sources. *Big Data & Society*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951718765026>
- Braidotti, R. (2018). Affirmative ethics, posthuman subjectivity, and intimate scholarship: A conversation with Rosi Braidotti. In K. Strom, T. Mills, & A. Ovens (Eds.), *Decentering the researcher in intimate scholarship* (Vol. 31) (pp. 179–188). Emerald. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-36872018000031014>
- Bucher, T. (2018). *If...then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Bucher, T. (2020). Nothing to disconnect from? Being singular plural in an age of machine learning. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(4), 610–617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720914028>
- Bundsgaard, J., Bindslev, S., Craeli, E., Rusman, A., & Petterson, M. (2019). *Danske elever teknologiforståelse* [Danish students’ understanding of technology]. Århus University Press.
- Cone, L. (2022). Teachers on the market: Professional relations, desires, and ambiguities in digital teacher-to-teacher economies. *Teachers and Teaching*, 28(6), 742–756. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2022.2098272>
- Cone, L. (2023a). The platform classroom: Troubling student configurations in a Danish primary school. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 48(1), 52–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2021.2010093>
- Cone, L. (2023b). *Plug and play pedagogy: Exploring the messy realities of smart technology in a Danish public school*. Aarhus University.

- Cone, L., Brøgger, K., Berghmans, M., Decuypere, M., Förschler, A., Grimaldi, E., Hartong, S., Hillman, T., Ideland, M., Landri, P., Player-koro, C., Rensfeldt, A. B., Rönnerberg, L., van de Oudeweetering, K., & Vanermen, L. (2021). Pandemic acceleration: Covid-19 and the emergency digitalization of European education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 21(5), 845–868. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041211041793>
- Danish Government, Local Government Denmark, & Danish Regions. (2013). *Digital velfærd – en lettere hverdag: Fællesoffentlig Strategi for digital velfærd 2013–2020* [Digital welfare – an easier everyday life: Joint public strategy for digital welfare 2013–2020].
- Danish Ministry of Education. (2014). *Aftale om konkretisering af det fælles brugerportalinitiativ for folkeskolen* [Agreement on the joint initiative for a common user portal for elementary schools].
- Decuypere, M., Grimaldi, E., & Landri, P. (2021). Introduction: Critical studies of digital education platforms. *Critical Studies in Education*, 62(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2020.1866050>
- Flyverbom, M. (2019). Organizations gone transparent. In M. Flyverbom, *The digital prism: Transparency and managed visibilities in a datafied world* (pp. 85–120). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316442692.005>
- Helles, R., Lomborg, S., & Lai, S. S. (2020). Infrastructures of tracking: Mapping the ecology of third-party services across top sites in the EU. *New Media & Society*, 22(11), 1957–1975. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820932868>
- Hutchby, I. (2001). Technologies, texts and affordances. *Sociology*, 35(2), 441–456. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0038038501000219>
- Ideland, M. (2020). Google and the end of the teacher? How a figuration of the teacher is produced through an ed-tech discourse. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 46(1), 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2020.1809452>
- Kerssens, N., & Dijck, J. van. (2021). The platformization of primary education in the Netherlands. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 46(3), 250–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2021.1876725>
- Kitchin, R., & Lauriault, T. (2014). *Towards critical data studies: Charting and unpacking data assemblages and their work*. Social Science Research Network. <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2474112>
- Knox, J., Williamson, B., & Bayne, S. (2020). Machine behaviourism: Future visions of ‘learnification’ and ‘datafication’ across humans and digital technologies. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 45(1), 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2019.1623251>
- Kollnig, K., Shuba, A., Binns, R., Kleek, M. V., & Shadbolt, N. (2022). Are iPhones really better for privacy? A comparative study of iOS and Android apps. *Proceedings on Privacy Enhancing Technologies*, 2022(2), 6–24. <https://doi.org/10.2478/popets-2022-0033>
- Kollnig, K., Shuba, A., Van Kleek, M., Binns, R., & Shadbolt, N. (2022). Goodbye tracking? Impact of iOS app tracking transparency and privacy labels. *ArXiv:2204.03556 [Cs]*. <http://arxiv.org/abs/2204.03556>
- Kuntsman, A., & Miyake, E. (2022). *Paradoxes of digital disengagement*. University of Westminster Press. <https://doi.org/10.16997/book61>
- Lai, S. S., Andelsman, V., & Flensburg, S. (2023). Datafied school life: The hidden commodification of digital learning. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2023.2219063>
- Lai, S. S., & Flensburg, S. (2020). A proxy for privacy uncovering the surveillance ecology of mobile apps. *Big Data & Society*, 7(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720942543>
- Lai, S. S., & Flensburg, S. (2021). Invasive species of the app ecosystem: Exploring the political economy of mobile communication. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 2301–2318. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/16906>
- Larsen, J. E., Schulte, B., & Thue, F. W. (Eds.). (2021). *Schoolteachers and the Nordic Model: Comparative and historical perspectives*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003082514>
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Blackwell.
- Libert, T. (2015). Exposing the invisible web: An analysis of third-party http requests on 1 million websites. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 3544–3561. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3646>

- Lomborg, S., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Advancing digital disconnection research: Introduction to the special issue. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1529–1535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211057518>
- Lortie, D. C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. University of Chicago Press. <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo3645184.html>
- Lupton, D. (2021). ‘Honestly no, I’ve never looked at it’: Teachers’ understandings and practices related to students’ personal data in digitised health and physical education. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 46(3), 281–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2021.1896541>
- Mayer-Schönberger, V., & Cukier, K. (2013). *Big data: A revolution that will transform how we live, work, and think*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Mejias, U. A., & Couldry, N. (2019). Datafication. *Internet Policy Review*, 8(4). <https://policyreview.info/concepts/datafication>
- Moe, H., & Madsen, O. J. (2021). Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1584–1598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211048969>
- Nieborg, D. B. (2016). From premium to freemium: The political economy of the app. In M. Willson, & T. Leaver (Eds.), *Social, casual and mobile games: The changing gaming landscape* (pp. 225–240). Bloomsbury.
- OECD. (2014). *Proposal for an annual summit of the global education industry*. <https://www.oecd.org/education-industry-summit/>
- Pangrazio, L., Stornaiolo, A., Nichols, P. T., Garcia, A., & Philip, T. M. (2022). Datafication meets platformization: Materializing data processes in teaching and learning. *Harvard Educational Review*, 92(2), 257–283. <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-92.2.257>
- Perrotta, C., Gulson, K. N., Williamson, B., & Witzemberger, K. (2021). Automation, APIs and the distributed labour of platform pedagogies in Google Classroom. *Critical Studies in Education*, 62(1), 97–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2020.1855597>
- Pink, S., Ruckenstein, M., Berg, M., & Lupton, D. (2022). Everyday automation: Setting a research agenda. In S. Pink, M. Berg, D. Lupton, & M. Ruckenstein (Eds.), *Everyday automation: Experiencing and anticipating emerging technologies* (pp. 1–20). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003170884>
- Ratner, H., Andersen, B. L., & Madsen, S. R. (2019). Configuring the teacher as data user: Public-private sector mediations of national test data. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 44(1), 22–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2018.1556218>
- Sims, C. (2017). *Disruptive fixation: School reform and the pitfalls of techno-idealism*. Princeton University Press.
- Syvrtsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283.
- Telhaug, A. O., Mediås, O. A., & Aasen, P. (2006). The Nordic model in education: Education as part of the political system in the last 50 years. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 50(3), 245–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313830600743274>
- The Danish Ministry of Education. (2021). *Lærerens digitale hverdag – Kvantitativ kortlægning [The teachers digital everyday – Quantitative mapping]*. <https://www.uvm.dk/-/media/filer/uvm/aktuelt/pdf21/jun/210621-rapporten-laererens-digitale-hverdag.pdf>
- Thorhauge, A. M., & Lomborg, S. (2016). Cross-media communication in context: A mixed-methods approach. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 32(60), 70–86. <https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v32i60.22090>
- Tréré, E., Natale, S., Keightley, E., & Punathambekar, A. (2020). The limits and boundaries of digital disconnection. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(4), 605–609. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720922054>
- Ubaldi, B., González-Zapata, F., & Barbieri, M. P. (2020). *Digital government index: 2019 results*. OECD Policy Papers on Public Governance No. 3. <https://doi.org/10.1787/4de9f5bb-en>
- van Dijck, J. (2014). Datafication, dataism and dataveillance: Big data between scientific paradigm and ideology. *Surveillance & Society*, 12(2), 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v12i2.4776>
- Williamson, B. (2017). Decoding ClassDojo: Psycho-policy, social-emotional learning and persuasive educational technologies. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 42(4), 440–453. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2017.1278020>

- Winseck, D. (2019). Internet infrastructure and the persistent myth of U.S. hegemony. In B. Haggart, K. Henne, & N. Tusikov (Eds.), *Information, technology and control in a changing world* (pp. 93–120). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14540-8\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14540-8_5)
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Public Affairs.



## Endnotes

1. Denmark took fourth place on OECD's 2019 Digital Government Index (Ubaldi et al., 2020) and continuously ranks among the top countries in terms of digitalisation in education (Bundsgaard et al., 2019). In a recent survey conducted by the Danish Ministry of Education in 2021, 96 per cent of the responding teachers stated that they use digital platforms daily or more to communicate with parents, coordinate meetings, organise lesson plans, and other administrative tasks outside the classroom (The Danish Ministry of Education, 2021: 44).
2. This includes Aula, Google Workspace, Microsoft 365, and Learning Management Systems such as Meebook and MinUddannelse.

# Leisure and recreation

Throughout this edited volume, we have shown how both the digital backlash and disconnection are paradoxical phenomena; connection is often inevitable and efforts to disconnect are marked with ambivalence. Now, in the final part, we include studies that are about intentional and voluntary disconnection. In everyday lives saturated with connectivity, leisure is a sphere where many try to regain some disconnected time, yet tensions and dilemmas prevail. The chapters in this section illuminate four key observations.

## **Leisure and recreation are key themes**

The first tourism destinations where patrons were invited to put away their digital devices emerged already in the early 2010s. In 2013, Camp Grounded, a Californian no-gadget recreation camp, was organised for the first time. Trine Syvertsen and Faltin Karlsen (Chapter 15) discuss the case of Underleir, an annual Norwegian holiday camp that draws inspiration both from the Silicon Valley disconnectionist ideology and Scandinavian traditions of “fri-luftsliv” [outdoor recreation]. This is followed up in Chapter 16, where Ana Jorge investigates how Portuguese dead zones – that is, sites with unstable or absent Internet connections, are marketed as tourist locations void of digital media. In his chapter, André Jansson (Chapter 17) discusses disconnection among independent travellers and, more specifically, how cultural capital can explain the predisposition for disconnection among the cultural middle class.

## **Reconnection through disconnection**

While several studies have investigated digital-free tourism, reading is usually studied within the framework of work and productivity. However, Kari Spjeldnæs (Chapter 18) draws on a similar vocabulary as the three previous chapters in her investigation of how literary readers limit digital distractions to make time for concentrated reading. Like the above studies, she discusses temporal ambivalence and how users self-regulate to carve out offline time. Along with the other chapters, she contributes to a critical motive in studies of intentional disconnection: how users try to regain something, to “reconnect”. The participants in these studies have in common that they long for “slow time”, being present in the moment, and achieving a deeper connection to other people, nature, or literature.

## **Nostalgia and romanticism**

These studies are not just about the present but also about the past. The sites in Jorge’s study are romantically located in nature, littered with “authentic” objects, and marketed with nostalgic references on social media. In her chapter, Spjeldnæs describes a nostalgic longing for paper books and uninterrupted reading time. Syvertsen and Karlsen show how Underleir draws on a romantic legacy, with participants learning traditional cooking methods and handicrafts, and activities and conversations centring around retro culture and media forms. Indeed, Jansson suggests that disconnection sentiments and practices are not just contemporary impulses but are part of a broader neo-romantic movement.

## **Identities, values, tensions**

Studies of intentional disconnection tend to be media-centred and individualistic, focusing on the absence of gadgets as the primary motive. The studies in Part IV complicate and add to this subfield through attention to broader contexts and theories. Syvertsen and Karlsen show that the absence of smart-phones was not the primary motive for attending Underleir, but more of a precondition for facilitating the desired atmosphere. Jansson, Jorge, and Spjeldnæs all discuss how disconnection is socially distributed and negotiated. Spjeldnæs’s interviewees consider reading literature an attribute inherent in their conception of themselves as readers and show pride in their self-regulating ability. In her chapter, Jorge shows that not all guests were comfortable in the dead zone, and some did not embrace the idealised promise of disconnected tourism. Paradoxically, while the offline sites embrace disconnectivity, they also promoted the destinations on social media and reflected the push for expanded connectivity in the Covid-19 and post-Covid era.

# Revisiting the past, being in the present, preparing for the future

*Making sense of a digital-free holiday camp for adults*

TRINE SYVERTSEN<sup>I</sup> & FALTIN KARLSEN<sup>II</sup>

<sup>I</sup> DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO, NORWAY

<sup>II</sup> DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, KRISTIANIA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, NORWAY

## ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we explore how participants experience disconnection in practice at a digital-free summer camp for adults. Underleir is an annual week-long camp originating from discussions on the Norwegian social network Underskog and draws inspiration both from Silicon Valley disconnectionist ideology and Scandinavian traditions of friluftsliv [outdoor recreation]. When the camp was first organised in 2014, digital detoxing was not a well-known concept in the Norwegian context, and such camps are still rare in Scandinavia. The study is based on fieldwork, interviews, and online material. In the chapter, we discuss how camp experiences relate to the participants' life course along three temporal dimensions: the past (nostalgia, play), the present (freedom from status games, relaxation), and the future (survivalism, utopianism). The study contributes to the disconnection literature by moving beyond the media-centred issue of how users relate to their gadgets. Instead, the chapter explores how being digital-free is made meaningful within a concrete and unusual holiday setting and relates to the societal and personal values of those attending.

**KEYWORDS:** digital detox camp, disconnection practices, tourism, camp school, outdoor recreation, friluftsliv

---

Syvertsen, T., & Karlsen, F. (2024). Revisiting the past, being in the present, preparing for the future: Making sense of a digital-free holiday camp for adults. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 303–324). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-15>

## Introduction

A literature review of disconnection and digital detox articles from the last decade reveals that studies within the subfield of tourism are among the more prominent (see, e.g., Ayeh, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016; Egger et al., 2020; Floros et al., 2021; Jiang & Balaji, 2021; Li et al., 2018; Neuhofer & Ladkin, 2017; Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021). Alongside a sustained focus on megatrends such as digitalisation and globalisation, increased attention is given in tourism studies to alternative trends such as “responsible”, “slow”, “low-tech”, and “activism” tourism (see, e.g., Doorly 2020). Varley and Semple (2015) criticised scholars’ emphasis on high-tech, immersive holiday products and argued for a greater focus on “slow adventures”, closer to nature and with a less frenetic pace (see also Jorge, Chapter 16 in this volume). From the vantage points of tourism and disconnection studies, in this chapter we discuss Underleir, an annual week-long summer camp for adults originating within an online social network site called Underskog. The camp is inspired by Silicon Valley disconnectionist ideology, and more specifically, Camp Grounded (Beattie, 2020; Sutton, 2020), but it also draws on a Scandinavian tradition of outdoor recreation [friluftsliv], particularly the tradition of camp school [leirskole] as an inclusive and compulsory element in Norwegian primary education (Repp, 1977). Based on collaborative rule-making, smartphones and digital gadgets are discouraged, which places the camp within an international segment of digital detox tourism. Still, the camp is unusual in the Norwegian context. Although tourism in offline areas is common, few sites explicitly promote gadget-free holidays (Syvertsen, 2022).

Despite this aspect, we argue that the absence of smartphones and digital gadgets is not the main point of the holiday but rather a condition for facilitating positive experiences. This study is important because it answers scholarly calls to research disconnection in more domains and in concrete settings where participants interact with each other and not just appear as individual respondents (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021; Sutton, 2020). Through the dimensions of past, present, and future, which emerged during the analysis of the material and are present in the literature, we not only grasp the short-term reasons for needing a digital break, but also how the choice of holiday relates to participants’ memories, current situations, and hopes for life.

We conducted the study in the pre-Covid summer of 2019. It is based on four-day fieldwork at the camp, field dialogues with thirty participants, an interview with the initiator, as well as three in-depth interviews with participants after the camp. In addition, we draw on social and mass media items and online material (see also Syvertsen, 2023; Karlsen, 2023). The research questions are: How do participants implement digital detox practices at the holiday camp? And what are the dominant framings invoked to explain its value? Framing here draws on Goffman’s (1974) social interactionist approach in which meaning is the result of individual and collective negotiations (see

also Kitzinger, 2007; Vliegenthart & Van Zoonen, 2011). It implies that people understand and organise their reality according to how they categorise events, “paying attention to some aspects rather than others” (Kitzinger, 2007: 134).

We begin the chapter with a literature review and a discussion of inspirations and context. Then we discuss methods, before we turn to the analysis of frames invoked by organisers and participants under the headings of past, present, and future. Past includes how the camp activates memories and the possibility of recreating childhood freedoms; present describes how the camp offers participants the opportunity to be in the moment; while future explores motivations related to self-reliance skills and utopianism.

## **Digital-free holidays and camp school**

### **Disconnected tourists**

Although tourism research regarding digitalisation mainly focuses on the benefits, the field is increasingly enriched by studies mapping tourists’ ambivalence to 24/7 connectivity. A standard view is that the virtual element distracts tourists and detracts from environments and people in physical proximity (Ayeh, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016). The motives identified in tourism studies are concurrent with themes identified in studies of digital disconnection elsewhere (see, e.g., Brennen, 2019; Syvertsen, 2020). Studies in this field identify experiences of technological overload and positive motivations involving relaxation, mindfulness, health benefits, nature appreciation, and improved social relations as benefits of a digital detox holiday (Dickinson et al., 2016; Neuhofer & Ladkin, 2017; Rosenberg, 2019).

The motivations found in these studies are predominantly about here-and-now presence; digital tools are restricted to experience JOMO – the Joy of Missing Out (Putra & Bandung, 2019). However, some studies also mention motivations concerning the past and the future. Floros and colleagues (2021: 258) pointed to how a digital-free holiday can function as a “reset button”; a way to travel back in time and invoke positive memories of childhood. Sutton (2020: Chapter 7) showed how Camp Grounded’s participants subscribe to the idea that they live in a “broken America” and discussed how their perceptions are tied up with evaluations of past, present, and hopes for the future.

Cai and colleagues (2019) mentioned four research gaps in digital-free travel based on a survey of disconnection literature: most studies gathered data after the experience; there are few studies of actual tourism experiences; most studies focus on negative emotions and the distress of being unplugged; and few studies focus on named locations and the experiences at these locations. We acknowledge these gaps and contribute to the literature by situating experiences of disconnection in a concrete geographical location approached through ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore, drawing on the broader tradition of disconnection and digital detox studies, the chapter

emphasises positive motivations for going offline and travelling to the camp, including ambivalent perspectives on the role of digital media in everyday life. This is an area where digital-free holiday and tourism studies can benefit from insights from disconnection research.

**Context and inspiration: Silicon Valley meets Norwegian camp school**

The first Underleir camp was organised in 2014 and has been arranged annually since, including during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The first occurrences of the concept digital detox in legacy media in Norway was in 2010. Use of the concept increased rapidly the following years, but it was still not in widespread use at the time the camp was initiated (Syvertsen et al., 2019). Underleir hence represents an initiative from a period when digital detoxing was not widely understood in the Norwegian context.

Situated in the valley of Øksendal in the western part of Norway, the camp is surrounded by farmland and snow-covered mountaintops. It radiates a camp school atmosphere, and the presence of a goat kid on the site adds a flavour of rural tourism (Hjalager et al., 2018). The main building is a lodge dating back to 1899, currently operating as a hotel. There is also an addendum adhering to standards from the 1970s with bunk beds, shared toilets, and showers. The buildings are surrounded by lawns and areas designated for various activities. Figure 15.1 shows the main sign pointing to the camp area.

**FIGURE 15.1** The sign on the main road showing the way to the camp



*Comments:* On your way to camp? The home-made sign placed on the main road signals to participants that the camp is a temporary experience, set in nature, with an opportunity to relive childhood experiences.

*Source:* photo by Trine Syvertsen

The camp lasts a week in July when most Norwegians are on summer holiday. Between 40 and 50 participants usually attend, many of whom have participated in earlier Underleir camps. During the camp, no other guests stay at the hotel; the camp is responsible for meals, and participants take on kitchen chores to reduce costs. There are also tent spots available at lower prices; the idea is that costs should not be an obstacle to attending. The camp facilitates a range of free activities such as ball games, painting, and beading, in addition to professional classes such as wood cutting and archery, where an extra fee is payable to the class holder.

The camp draws on two major sources of inspiration: the disconnectionist ideology of Silicon Valley, and Camp Grounded in particular, and the Scandinavian tradition of nature-based and practice-based education taught through folkehøgskole [folk high school]. Eir Husby, the primary organiser, described how she heard an American podcast about the Californian digital detox event Camp Grounded and posted it on the Norwegian social network Underskog, asking: “What if we had something like this in Norway?” The response was immediate and enthusiastic: “In a matter of half an hour, I had 20 potential attendants and 70 people engaged in the conversation”. Fascination with the idea of a screen-free event and nostalgic memories of past camp experiences were recurring topics. Digital detox, mentioned in the podcast, was part of the discussion from the start, and later also part of the camp rules.

Camp Grounded was established in 2013 as a pioneering event in digital detoxing, known for its ban on work-talk and smartphones and the use of code names to encourage a break from everyday life. In her analysis of Camp Grounded, Sutton pointed to the camp’s proximity to the global technology hub and the Californian historical and ideological heritage of utopian and dystopian sentiments. The Californian tradition of “eco-villages” and ideals of less technologically dependent societies are important backdrops for Camp Grounded (Sutton, 2020). In his analysis of Silicon Valley disconnection activists and technological appliances invented to log off, Beattie (2020) pointed out how the disconnectionists are not technophobes or neo-Luddites; they have a sophisticated view of technology but reject a culture of constant connection and explore practical means of remedying the perils of the attention economy.

While the discussion of camp rules started with Camp Grounded, Eir said they “made it more Norwegian, as it was very American”. They needed to tone it down, “make it more pragmatic, so Norwegians don’t freak out completely” (see also Karlsen, 2023). For Underleir, the Scandinavian tradition of friluftsliv, as simple outdoor life, is an important context. Gelter (2000) argued that although outdoor recreation is found worldwide, a particular word for it and the philosophy is unique for Scandinavia, especially in Norway and Sweden. Friluftsliv is associated with the public right of way – the opportunity for all to appreciate and be in nature with simple everyday means.



With the notion of *friluftsliv* as a backdrop, Eir pointed specifically to the Scandinavian traditions of folk high school [*folkehøyskole*] and camp school [*leirskole*] as essential to establish the context. The tradition draws on cross-national inspirations, specifically romanticism and reactions to urbanisation and industrialisation (Repp, 1977). From the late 1800s, experiments were conducted with nature as a learning arena, and from the 1970s, camp schools gained a place in the Norwegian curriculum. Hence, camp school is an essential reference point for millennials, but also other age groups would most likely have visited one. Repp showed how camp schools combine utilitarian and romantic views of nature with a recreational perspective and beliefs in the positive impact on mental and physical health. He argued that the importance of camp schools lies in integrating past, present, and future: cultural heritage, reflections on current society, and reflections on what should change for the future. Camp schools should last several days, encourage togetherness, and represent a genuine change of environment (Repp, 1977).

Since 2019, going on a four-day trip in natural surroundings is a right by law for Norwegian children (NLE, 2021). The Association for Norwegian Camp Schools states that having nature as a learning arena is important for understanding “Norwegian history and culture”, enhancing “social skills and strengthen friendships”, as well as preparing the pupils to meet “competence goals in the future school” (our translations), in effect illustrating past, present, and future (Setlo, 2020).

## Methods

This study is based on a four-day fieldwork at the camp, around thirty field dialogues, four in-depth interviews conducted before and after the camp, and online material from social networks. We both took part in collecting the material and field dialogues. We participated in activities alongside participants during our stay, including meals, classes, and kitchen chores (see also Karlsen, 2023).

The empirical material consists of notes from the field trip, transcribed interviews, and online discussions from the social network Underskog from 2014 to 2019. The combination of material allowed us to contextualise the event in a longer timeframe, including unsolicited discussions concerning what activities the participants wanted in the camp and the experience they referred to when describing their preferences.

Permission was obtained from organisers prior to the camp, and information was given to participants at the opening meeting run by the organisers. We emphasised that we would take no names and that the participants could refrain from talking to us if they were unwilling to be part of the study. No one expressed any need for that, neither at the meeting nor during our stay. Journalists had visited every year, and the participants generally seemed comfortable being observed by outsiders. In the camp, most were on a first-name

or nickname basis, and we do not know the full names of most informants. We allocated code names to every participant immediately after the camp; thus participants are anonymised except for the leader and initiator of the camp, Eir Husby, who has approved the use of quotes from the interview and read a draft of the chapter. We have translated field notes, as well as statements from participants, from Norwegian to English.

Concerning online material from Underskog, the participants use nicknames, and information about their identity is not revealed in their profile. We have not obtained or stored any other information about the participants, and their nicknames are not used in this text. The motivation for using the material was to provide a historical context of the camp, and the bulk of the material is from 2014 and 2015. One important consideration to take when using online material is whether obtaining informed consent is necessary. In our case, the material does not contain sensitive topics or information about the participants and scores low on other criteria for obtaining informed consent. The use of the material therefore concurs with ethical standards on Internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2017). Several participants at the camp also do not have a profile at Underskog and we did not try to match camp participants to online persona.

Notes, interviews, and online data were analysed using NVivo and manual close reading. Our analytical approach draws on thematic analysis (Johannessen et al., 2018) and analysis of how issues and grievances are framed in social movement studies (Benford & Snow, 2000). We aim to identify how the experiences at Underleir make sense within the analytic framework of past, present, and future, and how digital media absence help facilitate these experiences.

## Analysis

As an introduction to the analysis, we start with a note on the role of smartphones. Norway is a country with high uptake of digital technology, and 99 per cent of the population between the age of 9 and 79 owns a smartphone (MedieNorge, 2022). Unsurprisingly, the smartphone was a recurring topic at the camp, and the participants held diverse views about their intrusiveness and usefulness. We witnessed a few occurrences of smartphone use during the camp, usually by first-timers, where veterans, in a friendly manner, reminded them of the guidelines that state smartphones should not be used during joint activities (Underleir.no, n.d.).

Although not completely out of sight, a common thread was that the absence of smartphones was significant for facilitating camp experiences, but not the primary motive for attending. Some participants warned us to not focus too much on the restrictions, but rather on the attractive experiences and atmosphere. These warnings are a welcoming corrective to the media-centrism that tends to dominate discussions about disconnection and digital-free tourism, and they encourage interpretation of events in a broader context (Hesselberth,

2018; Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen, 2017). What, then, is the experience that people buy into, and how is it facilitated with smartphone restrictions?

### **Past: Camp memories, retro activities, and childhood freedoms**

The Underleir we visited in 2019 was the sixth instalment of the camp. Although the camp is located at the same place, with many returning participants and organisers, it is a fluid construct subject to changes inspired by earlier camp experiences, new ideas and participants, and available resources. This section explores three aspects relevant to the context of the past: camp memories, retro activities and media references, and the possibility of recreating childhood freedoms.

First, regarding camp memories, the online discussions before the first Underleir camp included numerous recollections of camp experiences. Memories from camp school, scout camps, youth camps, Christian camps, and summer camps with the Red Cross were fondly shared: nature walks, ghost stories around the fire at night, and togetherness flourished. The camp aspect was a pull factor for many participants, associated with a positive atmosphere, although less memorable moments were mentioned, such as abysmal food standards.

References to camp experiences were also rife in conversations at Underleir, including memories of adult camps. One participant described a one-week summer camp at a Danish folk high school with no firm smartphone rules, but where puzzles and board games were preferred over digital activities. Others recalled similar settings associated with togetherness and fellowship. One participant told us how her grandparents shared a cabin with three other families and offered pleasant memories of companionship with family, friends, and neighbours. A central element in the recollections was how people stayed together for several days, sharing activities and chores; hence, the experience embodies the characteristics of a classic camp school practised in Norwegian schools (Repp, 1977).

The second aspect where participants related the camp experience to positive memories concerns retro activities and media references. Participants ranged from teenagers to people in their 60s, but the majority seemed of Western, and predominantly Norwegian descent in their 30s and 40s. Hence, most were Millennials (born 1981–1996) or Generation X (born 1965–1980). Compared with earlier generations, Millennials are distinguished by their tech use, well versed in various digital technologies and tools (Vogels, 2019). However, Millennials and Generation X comprise people who remember life before the Internet and attended camp school before digital media became ubiquitous.

A typical conversation piece was cultural artefacts of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, and there was much talk about previous media forms and technologies; at times, the “nerd factor” was high. At the large beading table, which is a central part of the camp, Super Mario (from 1985) in 2D

was a popular motif. Participants evoked old games with joy, poor Internet connection, old standards, the early IT industry, IRC communication, and old phone models. A participant showed his yellow Nokia fold-out, a lightweight version, which only allows for phone calls and SMS. Since the network and mobile connection is volatile and sometimes absent – as it is in many Norwegian mountain areas – the volunteer network running the camp used yellow walkie-talkies, joking about them, saying they are helpful, but also “cool” and “retro”. Hence, as Sax (2016) has noted, users’ relationships with gadgets are often ingrained with beliefs that retro technologies are somehow better and more authentic (see also Jorge, Chapter 16, and Fast & Syvertsen, Chapter 3 in this volume).

The level of self-reflective playfulness was very high in these, as in other conversations. However, there were also several references to analogue culture and the joy of reading paper books and comics, playing board games and doing puzzles, and role-playing face-to-face (Sax, 2016). One participant described her love for printed newspapers and how she and her husband subscribed to several and read them daily at breakfast. Part of the experience was walking to the mailbox to get them, although she missed meeting her neighbours there: They seem to have switched to digital news. The fact that old media cropped up in conversations is interesting in the context of the absence of references to modern media and news items (below).

A third element discussed under the heading of “past” is how participants use the camp to recreate childhood freedoms and escape from the status games of adulthood. We observed that the arrival at the camp did not seem coordinated, even though many had been there before. Most arrived alone, seemed tentative about meeting others, and did not seem to connect with a group. It is very different from your typical conference or seminar, where people immediately look for “their” crowd and use their communication devices to find people they know. Conversations and interviews reinforced this impression. In a conversation with two participants, they agreed that the best thing about Underleir is the lack of cliques: It is uncommon for people to agree beforehand to take the same class, for example.

A key factor to this carefree atmosphere is that the camp removes peoples’ responsibilities. As the organiser Eir explained:

We free people from having to plan the day. Food is served at a certain time, and you get that childhood feeling that things are taken care of around you. [...] We remove so many of the choices people have to make regularly so they don’t need to think about adult stuff. [...] What we talk about is facilitating playfulness, to create that certain “Let’s do something fun!” Then people suddenly become very playful!

According to camp guidelines, the participants must refrain from talking about their jobs. Several participants stated that this probably is even more important

for the experience of social inclusiveness than the ban on smartphones. The absence of work-related talk contributes to the experience of pre-adulthood freedom, and participants elaborated on how this rule enables them to “be themselves”. The first participant we encountered immediately told us: “It is a relief not having to talk about work. You meet people differently, on an equal level”. When we asked what people talk about, he said: “Instead of asking: What do you do? I ask: What are the things you like to do?” A woman later said that what she likes so much is that at Underleir she escapes the questions she dislikes, such as: “What is your job? Do you have children? Do you have a boyfriend? Do you own a house? You know, those things”.

What we can discern so far is that the “past” is present at the camp in various ways. Childhood and carefree summer holidays serve as important reference points for the participants, embodied in physical, analogue activities and references to retro media and technology. Having to refrain from talking about their jobs and status outside the camp also means that sharing memories and earlier experiences is a way for the participants to become acquainted.

### **Present: Structure, spontaneity, freedom from media, and mindfulness**

Reclaiming presence emerges as an overarching goal in studies of digital detox (Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020), and participants described how they use the camp experience to stay in the present. There are four aspects discussed under this heading: A structured time–space design freeing the participants from having to micro-coordinate, an emphasis on autonomy and spontaneity, freedom from media and topical events, and an overall possibility to de-stress and relax.

As noted, having meals served reminded participants of childhood, and structural aspects are also important to facilitate presence. Space, time, and activities are the main structuring principles of the camp – all familiar elements to liberate participants from the strain of coordination. Like a typical digital detox retreat (Hesselberth, 2021) and a typical camp school, Underleir takes place in a remote location and is structured around a daily schedule with fixed mealtimes and activities. Spatially, Underleir draws on the site’s facilities and characteristics: a network of physical meeting spaces where one can meet others and perform various tasks, enabling participants to take a break from daily coordination.

The roofed terrace in front of the lodge was a vital hang-out space; here, one can always drop in and watch life go by, talk to others, or wait for the food bell to ring. Some people hung out there for days, reading and talking to those who dropped by. Gradually, the beading table emerged as an important arena in the evening for drop-in conversations and low-threshold activities. Even later, the outdoor fireplace became an important social hub. As noted by Floros and colleagues (2021: 759), there are many physical barriers to taking

a digital-free holiday: People give up because they cannot navigate the site or access activities without their phones. Destinations “play a fundamental role” in enabling or preventing participants from disconnecting on holiday. At Underleir, there was a high degree of consciousness about spatiality and facilities, and the need for workstations as nodes were discussed in threads, such as “Fiberverksted” [“Fibre workshop”], on the social network site Underskog.

The temporal structure is equally important – meals at 9:00, 13:00, 17:00, and 21:00 structure the day. Even if much is unorganised, the kitchen works perfectly; food is ready on time, there is (almost always) enough, and morning coffee is ready from early on. When we first arrived on Sunday afternoon, everything seemed a bit chaotic: Organisers were setting up activities and several participants seemed a bit lost. We were getting hungry but were far from shops; the pre-camp information had indicated that a fire would be lit for a barbecue, but this did not happen. It suddenly started pouring rain, and since we had put away our phones when we arrived, we had not checked the weather. However, underneath the unorganised atmosphere, the kitchen

**FIGURE 15.2** The lawn with the tables outside and the zipline in the background



*Comments:* Ready for lunch? The four daily meals served at fixed times are important structuring elements. The long tables are typical of camp schools and hiking huts in Norwegian mountains and invite participants to meet and talk with different people rather than forming subgroups. In good weather, the tables are moved outside.

*Source:* photo by Trine Syvertsen

was coming to life with the smell of freshly made waffles. From then on and throughout our stay, meals and mealtimes were the most important structuring activity of the camp (see Figure 15.2).

Creating extraordinary experiences has had high priority in tourism development, but as Large and Schilar (2018) argued, this is no precondition for a meaningful holiday. Adventure is meaningful within the context of individual life stories and tied up with identity and sense of self, and rhythms are recreated in the holiday that resembles everyday life. It is not necessarily about risk, excitement, and adrenaline, but “seeming *unadventurous* and ordinary aspects” (Large & Schilar, 2018: 337) may be as central to the experiences. Temporal rhythms enable awareness of what is going on, presence, and sensitivity towards the place. At Underleir, the time–space structure with meeting places, mealtimes, classes, and activities creates a relaxing and predictable rhythm, which was also useful for creating opportunities for observation and conversations.

Although the structuring elements are important, there is also an emphasis on autonomy and spontaneity, the second aspect relevant under the heading of “present”. Seasoned participants told us that there is a lot of flexibility, and one doesn’t need to get up for meals, go to class, or attend the second-class day; one can spend their days reading in solitude if they wish. As one participant, who described herself as an introvert, told us in an interview: “I’m not someone who sits around the campfire for very long. I’ll rather take the dog for a walk and go early to bed”. Another self-described introvert appreciated “no pressure to be with others. You can read or go for a walk alone. Calm down”. The phrase, “I’m going for a walk”, even functions as a code, signalling that the participant doesn’t want to be disturbed, a code suggested during the first discussion about the camp at the social network site Underskog in 2014 and later incorporated into the camp practices.

Hesselberth (2021: 258) noted a similar point from one of the retreats she visited, stating that “everything at the retreat was explicitly presented as optional with ‘no pressure’”. In contrast to more commercial retreats, however, there is at Underleir also a strong current of spontaneous co-creation, where participants themselves initiate activities and surprises happen. New initiatives are announced at mealtimes, welcoming people to join at no cost: croquet, yoga, walks, beading, exercise, and a role-playing game are among the activities that popped up during our stay. A woman who on her fifth camp stay emphasised the positive encouragement from the organisers who, as a response to most initiatives from the participants, say, “yes, of course, just do it”. However, we also experienced spontaneity as a bit unsettling in our case. We had been promised that organisers should inform participants about us beforehand, but they had forgotten: “We have not informed about you because we mess around – we mess around a lot”, one answered when we asked. Another “red-shirt” [a nickname for the organisers] characterised their style as “anarchic” but emphasised that they cooperate well and always land on their feet.

The third aspect concerns freedom from media and topical events. Although participants stated that the absence of smartphones is not the most important feature, it is considered necessary for facilitating camp experiences. Many participants commented that conversations are better when uninterrupted, as they can move faster to a deeper level. One woman said she loves that people do not use their phones at Underleir, as they become more sociable: “There is always someone to talk to”, she said. One of the more eager supporters of the smartphone restriction told us that Underleir represents his ideal concerning how smartphones should be used, or rather, not used.

Overall, we observed that conversations lasted longer at the camp than in everyday life. Obviously, this is a holiday setting, but people also seemed to continue talking to each other for a long duration despite apparent differences in mentalities and sentiments. Although some people told us that they were carrying a phone because of an aging parent or other responsibilities, we did not observe circumstances where social or professional obligations from the home environment interrupted participants. This contrasts with tourism experiences where social and professional interruptions diminish the possibility of a digital pause (McKenna et al., 2020).

Participants described how the media pause provided a break from aspects they dislike about their lives. Underleir provides a week of escape from “endless choices”, one woman said. She described how she continuously ponders whether she should change her job, her lifestyle, or what film to watch, and wishes there were only two films on television so she could have some time off. A few wrong choices in the past made her vigilant, but the constant evaluation and rethinking was experienced as “the paradox of freedom”. Other participants used similar examples, talking about how they want to get away from a lifestyle of constant scrolling and choosing, lamenting that everything is getting more superficial, lacking focus and depth.

Participants talked about unrealistic expectations in partnerships, how friends disappear when new families are established, how people are defined by status games and social categories, such as, if you are a woman around forty, people assume that you are desperate to have a baby. Participants said they relish the opportunity at the camp to meet people without having to relate to these categories, which they consider reinforced by social media and dating apps. A man said apps and social media destroy dating and social life. Asked whether there is nothing positive about it, he said, “yes, no shame, you can just play around”, but on the other hand, he noted that “everything is transient”. It is interesting to observe how Underleir, which is also transient and passing quickly, provides a pause from transiency elsewhere.

Another observation is that the conversation culture at the camp contained very few references to topical events, entertainment, news, sports, or politics. Even though we were there on 22 July – a notorious day in Norwegian history where a terrorist killed 69 people at a political youth camp and a further 8



people by bombing the government headquarters in 2011 – the significance of the terror attacks was mentioned by no one. The absence of television and radio, in addition to smartphones and laptops, created an effective boundary to events outside the camp. Hesselberth (2021) observed one digital detox resort where participants endlessly chattered about ongoing television series, but we noticed no such talk. When participants were asked about this, they confirmed our impression: “Yes, we usually talk about other things, a bit more important things regarding you as a human being”.

The fourth aspect concerns mindfulness and relaxation: Participants go to the camp to slow down. Yoga is free and on offer in the evening, and we practised it on the lawn in beautiful surroundings, retreat-style. Underleir generally represents a sedentary lifestyle, and we moved around very little during the days we spent there. Some went for walks, but seemingly short ones. Participants wore basic summer clothes, and few had professional hiking equipment, training clothes, or tracking watches. The emphasis was not on high-performance but relaxation. As one participant said: “you get this whole other kind of presence, just to sit on the terrace on the lodge and look across the valley. You could really just sit there for a week and enjoy the view”.

One participant described meditation retreats in other parts of the world where she experienced more hard-core mindfulness, including one with several hours of silence every day. However, participants also talked about the classes and activities as “meditative”, such as the three-day wood-carving class. One of the attendees stated in an interview: “It is incredibly relaxing. I almost fell into a trance, very relaxing to focus just on one simple, physical activity. I never experienced that anywhere else”, underlining the argument with reference to his three jobs and “something happening all the time”.

Several people running classes and workshops shared similar descriptions; participants often expressed relief from getting away from their phones and doing something contemplative and focused. In several conversations, participants described familiar aspects from studies of disconnection: how they constantly check their phones in everyday life, how they have lost the ability to read longer texts and concentrate, and how they must do something tangible, with their hands, to get away from constant interruptions and self-interruptions.

In sum, the physical and temporal organisation of the camp are important for participants to be in the “present” – to become immersed in activities and to experience relaxation and focus. This, combined with the absence of media, implies a drastic reduction in situations where they need to choose between different activities and things, which, again, facilitates a carefree and playful experience.

## **Future: Self-reliance, “dugnad” versus holiday, and utopianism**

A crucial notion in camp school and friluftsliv is that the skills of the past are also helpful for the future. Under the “future” heading, we discuss three

aspects: Underleir as a place of gaining self-reliance skills, the tension between Underleir as a place of “dugnad” [voluntary work] versus a paid holiday retreat, and third, Underleir as a site of community-building and utopianism.

In discussions on the social network site Underskog and during the camp, associations with prepping and survivalism cropped up, and the first aspect concerns how the camp trains participants to become more self-reliant. The organiser Eir told us, “My life goal is to become the ultimate digital nomad”, referring to how she might start the day driving a tractor at her parents’ farm [close to the Underleir camp], and in just a few hours, by plane, be sitting in a coffee shop in the middle of Oslo. “It’s like prepping for academics”, she said and laughed. On Underskog, similar sentiments were expressed. One person stated that he wants classes in “all kinds of life skills” referring to what his parents had knowledge of, including “how dairy products are made, butchering, how to make or repairs furniture, to understand electricity and how to troubleshoot before you call the electrician”.

Studies of preppers show how they value “self-sufficiency, self-reliance, personal responsibility, and independence” (Sims & Grigsby, 2019: 93). Although preppers can be found worldwide, the US is the only country “where it exists as a visibly widespread subculture” (Mills, 2021: 338). Mills (2021: 336) defined prepping as,

a coordinated set of activities undertaken by those preparing to independently survive periods of social collapse: medium- to long-term scenarios in which food is not available to buy, electricity and water supply chains are interrupted, and many people may be dead or dying.

Norway scores high on interpersonal trust and trust in political institutions (Newton, 2001); thus, prepping is not widespread. The scenarios underlying the discussions at Underskog are, accordingly, less alarmist and more about self-reliance and sustainability, indicated by classes teaching traditional skills for gathering, preserving, and preparing food. Participants at the camp were fascinated by what one can get from plants growing in the wild, and they discussed the processes of yeasting and fermenting. Other activities involved learning tools and machinery to make clothes and furniture, build shelters and fireplaces, and restoring and recycling skills. Several commentors on Underskog indicated a wish to become less alienated from everyday objects and machinery and to learn how they work and how to repair them.

Learning new skills, preparing food from scratch, repairing, and constructing requires a certain dedication, and the second aspect concerns a potential tension between contributing to the future and having a holiday here and now. The activities at Underleir connote “dugnad”, a Norwegian expression describing working together for a common good. Some of the work requires sustained efforts over several days, such as constructing a new campfire site or building a sauna down at the riverside. However, as noted, there is also a

relaxed ideology at Underleir: “no pressure”. We noted in several instances a tension between the future-oriented “dugnad”-type expectations and the fact that people had paid to join and felt entitled to a good time.

Several participants commented on classes and activities being too demanding. One participant who had signed up for both the drywall class and sewing was concerned about the long workdays, noting that the local builders who were summoned to help were thorough and build for future solidity, “but this is my holiday”. Taking an active part in the drywall class meant that most of one’s stay consists of hard physical labour and little time to enjoy the sun or talk to others. Some cooking classes are long, and the emphasis on recycling and using available resources means a lot of sorting and other boring tasks. This tension can, to some extent, be ascribed to the disparate ideas and motives for participating in the camp. A relevant reference is Hesselberth (2021), who has described a continuum from the commercial and heavily branded digital detox retreat to a simpler monastery-type retreat, also distinguishing between participants who seem to consume retreats as a product, an entertaining holiday experience, and those who use their stay as an opportunity to nurture inner growth. Maybe as a result of this tension, participants also told us that the sentiment has gotten more pragmatic over time: Making jam used to start with picking berries, but now they are brought in. In a sense, the survivalist aspect is toned down, although some said they miss the old style – doing it from scratch.

The third issue concerning the future is utopianism: To what degree is Underleir a place where participants can realise utopian ambitions? McKenzie (2021) distinguished between two types of utopianism: a left-wing version of millennial utopianism and a right-wing version of doomsday prepping. They “both offer a demonstration of what ‘taking the future seriously’ might look like in the contemporary West” (McKenzie, 2021: 1) and can be understood as “a response to the deep ambivalence involved in contemporary future thinking. In both cases, active engagement with the future is empowering in an age where modernity feels ambivalent, aimless and out of control” (McKenzie, 2021: 6). In contrast to the doomsday preppers described here, the Underleir prepping seem entirely playful and un-secretive: There is no evidence of distrust or disbelief in institutions, and the potential of “doomsday” is treated like a science-fiction scenario. The emphasis on weaponry was equally playful. A participant talked enthusiastically about an earlier class where two-metre-high trebuchets (a type of catapult) that could sling melons and cabbages 100 metres were built. Eir said that the shooting class did not work: “But bow and arrow is a great success”. Arguably, you cannot really defend yourself with a trebuchet or a bow and arrow. In that sense, Underleir is in line with the Millennial utopian spirit, but combined with the traditional ideals of mastering self-reliance skills that are part of the friluftsliv and camp school traditions.

The sauna built on the riverside used an old hot water tank as an oven, whereas old duvets from a recycling site were used for isolation. References to saving the environment and recycling were common, although people were also self-reflective about their practices and stressed that they are not fanatics. People talked about belonging to a “counterculture”, one saying she believes in Underleir and Underskog because she is “a good socialist”. She mentioned the element of “dugnad” and examples of people helping each other, stating that “things like Underleir can save the world”. Another participant told us in an interview that “this is a type of holiday we need more of, the community-building aspect”. She also emphasised the importance of group connections taking place in “real life” instead of online. This mentality is future-oriented and has an element of idealism: Through learning, praxis, and sharing, a better future can be built.

Elements of science fiction cropped up in the conversations, resembling Californian and Silicon Valley utopianism (Sutton, 2020). Rather than just consuming, there was an interest in experimenting and construction. People of the future look beyond today’s technologies, beyond the frenzy and craziness, and seek to develop better practices. When it comes to obsessive smartphone scrolling, one of the participants volunteered that she believes we have reached a turning point: User patterns are in a kind of puberty, “but now they are maturing” she said. In many ways, the participants described themselves as ahead of the curve, critical of today’s technology, and believing that better versions can be developed.

## **Concluding discussion: Tying together past, present, and future**

In this chapter, we have explored how participants at Underleir implement digital detox practices and how their experiences can be framed under the headings of past, present, and future. The negotiations of frames we observed during the camp incorporate a long range of perspectives concerning media use and its impact on society. The camp participants had a “shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need for change” (Benford & Snow, 2000: 615). The solutions they articulated, however, is a mesh of topics that do not only revolve around media technology.

Refraining from talking about work is one important element, as well as the opportunity to engage in creative, sociable, useful, and playful activities. These represent alternatives to everyday life and invoke pleasant memories of activities once enjoyed, treasured experiences of being in the present, and preparations for a future they yearn for or want to influence. In a more practical sense, these activities occupy their attention and fill the void that the absence of media might create – a need mirrored in other disconnection research (Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019).

The chapter contributes to the disconnection literature in two important ways. First, by doing research in a concrete geographical setting, it is possible to deepen the understanding of what digital detox represents. As noted by others, disconnecting from digital gadgets is almost always temporary and partial, with blurred boundaries between online and offline practices (Light, 2015). Yet, researchers rarely study what those concrete online/offline interrelations entail within the same group of people over several days. At Underleir, the digital-free element contributes to a physical and temporal sphere different from everyday life and ordinary media habits. The absence of topical media consumption adds to this effect, conjointly creating a boundary to the outside world and current events. Yet, knowledge of and interest in retro technologies and media forms strengthen the bonds between participants.

The second contribution is linked with the concepts of past, present, and future used in the chapter to explore participants' experiences. While it is common in disconnection research to stress how digital detoxing is about being "in the moment" (Syvertsen, 2020), this chapter shows that the experiences are framed within a longer lifespan perspective. All three concepts are multi-dimensional, for example, invoking the past is about reliving childhood experiences but also about nostalgic fantasies about a better "before" (see also Gandini, Chapter 11 in this volume). Furthermore, experiences related to past, present, and future are both interlinked and a potential source of tension. For participants, learning about ways to cook food from scratch may invoke childhood memories, teach skills for the future, and be experienced as a meditative in-the-moment activity. On the other hand, being in the moment and relaxing may come into conflict with the more strenuous tasks of mastering actual skills or doing things "the traditional way".

Finally, the study confirms that taking a digital pause does not imply that participants identify as media resisters or protesters (Brennen, 2019). Of course, participants were aware of the stigma of being considered Luddites or anti-Internet activists; as shown elsewhere, this is not perceived as a tenable position in the twenty-first century (Syvertsen, 2017, 2023). Yet, by putting away digital gadgets and conducting a social experiment, the participants at Underleir produced valuable nuances as to how one can understand online/offline demarcation lines, and what is both gained and lost in a society of 24/7 connectivity.

## Acknowledgements

We are thankful to the informants at the camp, and especially Eir Husby for her time and patience in dealing with our questions. We also wish to thank Ragnhild-Marie Nerheim for research assistance.

We acknowledge funding from the Norwegian Research Council (grant no. 287563) for the project “Intrusive media, ambivalent users and digital detox (DIGITOX)” (2019–2024) and the Norwegian Media Authority (Reference 17/909-2/JEA) for the project “When digital media invades life” (2018–2019).

## References

- Ayeh, J. K. (2018). Distracted gaze: Problematic use of mobile technologies in vacation contexts. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 26, 31–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2018.01.002>
- Beattie, A. (2020). *The manufacture of disconnection* [Doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10063/9362>
- Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 611–639. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611>
- Brennen, B. (2019). *Opting out of digital media*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429469947>
- Cai, W., McKenna, B., & Waizenegger, L. (2019). Turning it off: Emotions in digital-free travel. *Journal of Travel Research*, 59(5), 909–927. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287519868314>
- Dickinson, J. E., Hibbert, J. F., & Filimonau, V. (2016). Mobile technology and the tourist experience: (Dis)connection at the campsite. *Tourism Management*, 57, 193–201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.06.005>
- Doorly, V. (2020). *Megatrends defining the future of tourism: A journey within the journey in 12 universal truths*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48626-6>
- Egger, I., Lei, S. I., & Wassler, P. (2020). Digital free tourism – An exploratory study of tourist motivations. *Tourism Management*, 79, 104098. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104098>
- Floros, C., Cai, W., McKenna, B., & Ajeeb, D. (2021). Imagine being off-the-grid: Millennials' perceptions of digital-free travel. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(5), 751–766. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1675676>
- Gelter, H. (2000). Friluftsliv: The Scandinavian philosophy of outdoor life. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 5(1), 77–92.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay of the organization of experience*. Harper and Row.
- Hesselberth, P. (2018). Discourses on disconnection and the right to disconnect. *New Media & Society*, 20(5), 1994–2010. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817711449>
- Hesselberth, P. (2021). Retreat culture and therapeutic disconnection. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 253–272). Oxford University Press.
- Hjalager, A.-M., Kwiatkowski, G., & Larsen, M. Ø. (2018). Innovation gaps in Scandinavian rural tourism. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 18(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2017.1287002>
- Jiang, Y., & Balaji, M. S. (2021). Getting unwired: What drives travelers to take a digital detox holiday? *Tourism Recreation Research*, 47(5-6), 453–469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2021.1889801>
- Johannessen, L. E. F., Rafoss, T. W., & Rasmussen, E. B. (2018). *Hvordan bruke teori?* [How to use theory?]. Universitetsforlaget.
- Karlsen, F. (2023). The digital detox camp: Practices and motivations for reverse domestication. In M. Hartman (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of media and technology domestication* (pp. 361–373). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003265931>
- Karlsen, F., & Syvertsen, T. (2016). You can't smell roses online: Intruding media and reverse domestication. *Nordicom Review*, 37(S1), 25–39. <https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2016-0021>
- Kitzinger, J. (2007). Framing and frame analysis. In E. Devereux (Ed.), *Media studies: Key issues and debates* (pp. 134–161). Sage.
- Large, J., & Schilar, H. (2018). Understanding the meanings and interpretations of adventure experiences: The perspectives of multiday hikers. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 18(4), 330–342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2018.1522724>
- Li, J., Pearce, P. L., & Low, D. (2018). Media representation of digital-free tourism: A critical discourse analysis. *Tourism Management*, 69, 317–329. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.06.027>
- Light, B. (2015). *Disconnecting with social networking sites*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137022479>
- Lomborg, S., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Advancing digital disconnection research: Introduction to the special issue. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1529–1535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211057518>

- Markham, A., & Buchanan, E. (2017). Research ethics in context: Decision-making in digital research. In M. T. Schäfer, & K. van Es (Eds.), *The datafied society: Studying culture through data* (pp. 201–209). Amsterdam University Press.  
<http://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/31843>
- McKenna, B., Waizenegger, L., & Cai, W. (2020). The influence of personal and professional commitments on digitally disconnected experiences. In I. D. Kreps, T. Komukai, T. V. Gopal, & K. Ishii (Eds.), *IFIP international conference on human choice and computers* (pp. 305–314). Springer.
- McKenzie, J. (2021). Millennial utopians and prepper subcultures: Contemporary utopianism on the left and right. *Futures*, 126, 102678. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2020.102678>
- MedieNorge. (2022). *Andel med tilgang til smarttelefon* [Share with access to smartphones]. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20220525120652/>  
<https://medienorge.uib.no/statistikk/medium/IKT/388>
- Mills, M. F. (2021). Obamageddon: Fear, the far right, and the rise of “doomsday” prepping in Obama’s America. *Journal of American Studies*, 55(2), 336–365.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875819000501>
- Moe, H., & Madsen, O. J. (2021). Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1584–1598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211048969>
- Neuhofer, B., & Ladkin, A. (2017). (Dis)connectivity in the travel context: Setting an agenda for research [Conference presentation]. ENTER2017 eTourism Conference, Rome.
- Newton, K. (2001). Trust, social capital, civil society, and democracy. *International Political Science Review*, 22(2), 201–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512101222004>
- NLF. (2021). Leirskole – en opplevelse for livet! [Camp school – an experience for life!]. Norsk Leirskoleforening [The Association for Norwegian Camp Schools]. <https://leirskole.no/>
- Putra, F. K. K., & Bandung, S. T. P. (2019). Emerging travel trends: Joy of missing out (JOMO) vs iconic landmarks. *Jurnal Pariwisata Terapan*, 3(1), 17–33.  
<https://doi.org/10.22146/jpt.49273>
- Repp, G. (1977). *Leirskole og friluftsliv* [Camp school and outdoor life]. Universitetsforlaget.
- Rosenberg, H. (2019). The “flashpacker” and the “unplugger”: Cell phone (dis)connection and the backpacking experience. *Mobile Media and Communication*, 7(1), 111–130.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157918777778>
- Sax, D. (2016). *The revenge of analog – Real things and why they matter*. Public affairs.
- Schwarzenegger, C., & Lohmeier, C. (2021). Creating opportunities for temporary disconnection: How tourism professionals provide alternatives to being permanently online. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1631–1647. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033385>
- Setlo, T. (2020, June 12). Opplæringsutvalget vil undergrave leirskoletilbudet [The educational commission will undermine camp schools]. *Leirskole.no*.  
<https://leirskole.no/opplaeringslovutvalget-vil-undergrave-leirskoletilbudet>
- Sims, A., & Grigsby, M. (2019). Prepper-worthy identity work: A cultural repertoire for constructing a secure self in an insecure world. *Sociological Spectrum*, 39(2), 93–115.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2019.1608338>
- Sutton, T. (2020). *Digital re-enchantment: Tribal belonging, new age science, and the search for happiness in a digital detoxing community*. University of Oxford.
- Syvvertsen, T. (2017). *Media resistance: Protest, dislike, abstention*. Palgrave Macmillan.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46499-2>
- Syvvertsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The politics of disconnecting*. Emerald.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787693395>
- Syvvertsen, T. (2022). Offline tourism: digital and screen ambivalence in Norwegian mountain huts with no internet access. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 22(3), 195–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2022.2070540>
- Syvvertsen, T. (2023). Framing digital disconnection: Problem definitions, values, and actions among digital detox organisers. *Convergence*, 29(3), 658–674.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221122910>
- Syvvertsen, T., & Enli, G. (2019). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>



- Syvertsen, T., Karlsen, F., & Bolling, J. (2019). Digital detox på norsk [Digital detox in Norway]. *Norsk medietidsskrift*, 26(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN.0805-9535-2019-02-02>
- Underleir. (n.d.). Hva er Underleir? [What is Underleir?]. <https://underleir.no/om-leiren/>
- Varley, P., & Semple, T. (2015). Nordic slow adventure: Explorations in time and nature. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 15(1-2), 73–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2015.1028142>
- Vliegenthart, R., & Van Zoonen, L. (2011). Power to the frame: Bringing sociology back to frame analysis. *European Journal of Communication*, 26(2), 101–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323111404838>
- Vogels, E. (2019). *Millennials stand out for their technology use, but older generations also embrace digital life*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/09/09/us-generations-technology-use/>

# (Dis)connected atmospheres

## *Tourist locations in dead zones in post-pandemic Portugal*

ANA JORGE

CICANT, LUSÓFONA UNIVERSITY, PORTUGAL

### ABSTRACT

How are Portuguese dead zones positioned as tourist locations to disconnect from digital media? In this chapter, I use the concept of atmosphere to explore how tourist dead zones contain different dimensions that work to restrain as well as foster connection: on the one hand, mindfulness, romanticism, and nostalgic elements to deter connectivity as ways of suspending the mediated and accelerated everyday life, and on the other, social media promotion and expansion of digital connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The chapter is based on a study conducted in Portugal in 2021–2022 under the DIS/CONNECT project, combining in loco and social media observation with interviews with promoters and visitors to five tourist locations in dead zones. The analysis highlights how, in the aftermath of the backlash and still under the transformation brought about by a global pandemic, dead-zone tourism stands at the intersection of offline, nature, and rural tourism, seeking an idealised individuality and selective sociability – and that the promise of disconnection tourism is only exceptionally embraced by a few tourists.

**KEYWORDS:** tourism, market, atmosphere, sensations, social media

---

Jorge, A. (2024). (Dis)connected atmospheres: Tourist locations in dead zones in post-pandemic Portugal. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 325–344). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-16>

## Introduction

Cities are flooded with connectivity. Aside from signal blockage in, for instance, prisons, banks, and some show venues, or signal problems caused by thick walls or part of underground places, dead zones in cities are rare. Not all forms of connectivity are available to everyone who circulates in those cities, and at times rules and norms dictate when and where it is inappropriate to use connected devices, such as in churches or cinemas. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, when face-to-face communication was unadvised in favour of digital contact, digital availability became an even more accepted norm.

The normalisation of smartphones in particular has made “always-on” accessibility possible and enforced the social expectation of perpetual and ubiquitous contact (Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016). However, during holidays, this norm is negotiated with the desire to enjoy the surroundings (Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021) while ensuring safety (Dickinson et al., 2016; Rosenberg, 2019). Holidays thus hold, at least for some, the expectation of escape from the overload of mediated distractions that characterise contemporary lives (Farkic et al., 2022) and are epitomised by the portable and multifunctional smartphone (Lomborg, 2015). However, in this media-saturated society, tourism is also heavily mediated (Jansson, Chapter 17 in this volume), as a source of information, a form of orientation, and in the representation produced by tourists on digital media in geotagging or social media posts – so, imagining a tourist experience devoid of media and digitalisation is untenable.

A considerable number of studies have focused on digital detox programmes as part of a growing retreat culture and wellness industry (Hesselberth, 2021; Sutton, 2020), as well as on other digital-free tourism (Cai et al., 2020; Syvertsen & Karlsen, Chapter 15 in this volume). And some research on rural and nature tourism has also highlighted the expectation of disconnection (Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021). In this chapter, I explore tourism in dead zones: locations with non-existent or limited connectivity, primarily referring to mobile reception. Usually inserted in rural or mountain areas, or in remote or desert territories, the locations might be too far from the next cell tower emitter just because it is a scarcely populated area. Rocky hills or mountains can also block the signal. Different from other forms of digital-free tourism (Cai et al., 2020), dead-zone tourism does not result from intentional blockage of the connection. Crucially, and distinct from disconnection or digital-free tourism, tourism in dead zones does not offer a structured programme of activities to follow: While several leisure options are available, it is up to the visitor to decide what they want to do and how long to spend on each activity (Farkic et al., 2022).

## Context and method

This chapter is based on a study of tourist dead zones in mainland Portugal, under the DIS/CONNECT project, conducted in Portugal in 2021–2022 in parallel with the DIGITOX project, led by the University of Oslo. In 2022, Portugal ranked fifteenth of the 27 EU member states in the *Digital Economy and Society Index* (European Commission, 2023), led by its Nordic counterparts. Compared with the latter, Portugal is a poorer (29,127 euro annual average wage in 2022; OECD, 2023) and more unequal (Gini index of 34.7% in 2020; World Bank, 2023) society. As digitalisation has been slower and more unevenly distributed in the country, I wish to explore how the pandemic affected (dis)connectivity.

I – at times together with a research assistant and my partner – conducted in loco observation in four locations, interviews with five promoters (via video call, average of one hour each) and 23 participants (mostly on location and some via video call, around half an hour each), and social media observation between March and September 2021. As agreed with participants, only their gender, age, and when relevant profession, are used to identify them. Interview guides were adapted from the DIGITOX project (see Syvertsen & Karlsen, Chapter 15 in this volume) and structured around the key themes of motivations and experience at the locations; perceptions of intrusive media; and strategies and values about digital media (see also Syvertsen, 2022). We chose the locations through online searches for “digital detox”: Moinho do Maneio, Moinhos de Ovil, Quinta da Franqueira, and Cerdeira were listed in a 2019 piece in the tourism section of *Expresso*,<sup>1</sup> the reference weekly newspaper in Portugal, and Entre Sebes was the focus of a piece in the online news portal *Sapo* (Ribeiro, 2019). In Moinho do Maneio, there is no mobile service provided by any of the three telecoms in the country; in Cerdeira and Entre Sebes, one can only get signal from one (Vodafone); and in Moinhos de Ovil, there is a weak and unstable signal by either of the operators. While the five locations are surrounded by nature, two profiles can be discerned here: Entre Sebes and Quinta da Franqueira are farms, and Cerdeira,<sup>2</sup> Moinho do Maneio, and Moinhos de Ovil are old watermills located in the forest, and they are rebuilt villages that had been abandoned, corresponding to an economic model of pre-industrialisation. Cerdeira is an open location, as a small village, whereas the others are now private property.

Visits were conducted after the second hard lockdown (in the first trimester of 2021; the first occurred in March–May 2020), when the hospitality sector was closed in Portugal and working from home became a requirement. I spent three days in Cerdeira and Moinho do Maneio, one day in Entre Sebes, and half a day in Moinhos de Ovil (because of the place’s exclusivity, I could not stay at the same time as any guests). A research assistant accompanied me to Cerdeira and Moinho do Maneio and conducted interviews with guests; my partner was with us in Cerdeira; and I was alone in visits to Moinhos de

Ovil and Entre Sebes. These different modalities allowed me to experience the places from different positions, and to witness different interactions from hosts and guests towards a young person (the research assistant, in her early 20s), a couple, or a solo traveller. I drove to all these locations, as public transport does not cover them.

## **Analytical framework and questions**

As we discovered, during the pandemic an Internet connection was made possible in some of these locations, although advertised differently. To make sense of this experience in the post-pandemic context, in this chapter I use the concept of atmosphere (Stewart, 2011) to explore how dead zones construct a disconnected place and how it is encountered by tourists. Sumartojo and Pink (2018) defined atmospheres as ephemeral elements of our everyday experiences and environments, comprising the mutually co-constitutive interaction between human and non-human elements. Atmospheres might contain multiple and contradictory elements (Germann Molz & Buda, 2022). The notion of atmosphere draws attention to the material, sensorial, and symbolic dimensions of a context (Lupton, 2017), the meanings contained in it (including memories and imagination that are evoked and created experientially), and the affective ways those are experienced and made sense of. Drawing on media, cultural, and audience studies, I perform a cultural and critical analysis where I seek to, on the one hand, expose the narratives, symbols and metaphors, tropes, and lexicon that sustain the imaginaries and imageries of disconnection as they are linked with tourist locations, and on the other, describe the role of different agents (promoters, influencers, journalists) in propagating and facilitating those imaginaries and explore how disconnection is socially distributed and negotiated.

Mainly, I ask how, if at all, dead zones are positioned as tourist locations to disconnect from digital media. I explore how the atmospheres of these tourist dead zones contain different dimensions that work in contradictory directions, both to restrain and foster connection. The elements of mindfulness, romanticism, and nostalgia created around dead zones have the potential to deter connectivity, as they invite individuals to suspend the mediated and accelerated everyday life, while elements of social media promotion and an expansion of digital connectivity that took place during the pandemic accentuate connectivity. While this indicates the well-known paradox of disconnection being embedded in connected culture (Hesselberth, 2018), it further demonstrates how this was accentuated and complicated during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Remoteness and mindfulness

Disconnection in these locations is created, first and foremost, by their geographic conditions. The tourist points are located in remote locations, some in the mountains or behind hills, which are barriers to signal diffusion. Access was sometimes difficult, especially in the case of Cerdeira – through a tight road in the Lousã mountain in the centre of mainland Portugal – which, I must say, challenged my driving skills. Moinhos de Ovil is just outside a small village, but the private road is very steep as it approaches the stream; luckily, the owner advised me to park on the road and walk the remaining meters. Remoteness is, of course, relative to the context of the country, which is a small territory with most people concentrated in cities, especially near the coastline, resulting from decades of land exodus of which these same (now tourist) locations are evidence. This remoteness explains the fact that there is no mobile signal, or that it is weak. For a long time (and until the hard pandemic lockdowns of 2020), telecommunication operators would not guarantee service via landline or satellite to these areas.

In addition to location, other material conditions are unfavourable to connectivity. The manager of Quinta da Franqueira, Piers Gallie, told us that, in the main room of the main house, “there is a normal [Wi-Fi] signal, clients can make video calls from there, no problem. But in the guest houses, that’s another problem. Old houses have more than a meter thick walls. The signal won’t get through!” I also felt this in Moinho do Maneio, where I could get a Wi-Fi signal at the front door of the guest houses made of schist, but not inside. These material impediments indicate that disconnection is not intentionally created as in other forms of digital-free tourism, but something that can be marketed as a limitation *or* as a perk.

These remote and “secluded places” (Hesselberth, 2021) afford sensations that sustain a disconnection disposition beyond a material level (Chia & Beattie, 2021), as they are symbolically invested with the possibility to disconnect from civilisation. As a journalist wrote about her stay in Entre Sebes, in the (green) north of the country: “Internet access is not available and there is not always a mobile phone network, which makes the farm the perfect place to disappear from the world, disconnect from social networks and create a connection with the surrounding nature” (Ribeiro, 2019). As the locations are in the forest or close to trails, they offer the possibility of hiking as a mindful (and romantic) activity in the style of Thoreau, inviting introspection. While spending time outdoors and enjoying nature is an important part of Nordic cultures (Syvertsen, 2022), such approximation to nature is far more recent in a southern European country. In Cerdeira, a 44-year-old woman indicated that her inclination to disconnect is facilitated by her attitude towards immersing herself in the location’s spirit, “by looking with other relationship with the surroundings, we are less interested in being online”.

Not just the landscape but also the soundscape composes the atmosphere for a disconnected break. On Facebook, Moinho do Maneio (n.d.) includes as part of their page description: “Disconnect from the World. Come to listen to the silence”. Silence is deemed restorative for stressful lives and stands in opposition to the constant noise of the ubiquitous media. It contrasts busy urban lives, where people struggle to find time to think and reflect, as connectivity avoids the “in-between-times” (Görland, as cited in Schwarzenegger & Menke, 2020). Dead-zone tourism intersects with an emergent industry of idleness and do-nothing tourism (Farkic et al., 2022), crossing the mindfulness industry (Rauch, 2018). This bodily attuning and mindfulness promise the opportunity to “reconnect with nature and detach from mediated anxieties” (Rauch, 2018: 97) and to listen to oneself. Visitors are invited to slow down and live in the present through contemplation, introspection, and relaxation. This “presence here-and-now is essential for an authentic life”, as self-help authors also preach (Enli & Syvertsen, 2021: 228). Through the Instagram location tag, we found that retreats with specific programmes are organised in Cerdeira: Feed Your Soul, a yoga retreat with a plant-based chef and including chanting; and Conecta-te Terra Maya, a spiritual and holistic retreat.

This soundscape is not just made of silence, but also of the streams nearby. Guests in Cerdeira can find a water bottle in their houses to fetch water from the fountain for their consumption, and there are natural pools. The water element continues with (artificial) pools in Moinho do Maneio, Entre Sebes, and Quinta da Franqueira. Soaking up the sun and observing the natural elements are, to mindfulness gurus, grounding practices. Following the rhythm and flow of nature is said to calm the nervous system and decrease heart rate, and it stands in contrast with allowing one’s time and energy to be dictated by others or machines. In Moinho do Maneio, we joined a Pilates class at sunset by the pool with the guests.

Non-human elements are also constitutive parts of the atmosphere and invitation to disconnect: The relationship with animals, whether in the farms or the forest resorts, also contributes to an ambience of resting and tenderness, but also to adventure. Mindfulness proclaims that animals – be they domestic, farm, or wild – can sooth the urban spirit. In Cerdeira, one of the attractions is the proximity to wildlife in the Lousã mountain, and guests are incentivised to take hikes through the tracks in the mountain and see the deer. But the advertising posters do not mention other more frightening animals, such as wolves, snakes, or boars, revealing a romanticisation of nature. Entre Sebes runs a pedagogic farm with farming animals in small numbers (two horses, one donkey, goats, sheep, Vietnamese Pot-bellied pigs, guinea pigs, and rabbits), which works well for their consumer target of families, as we found with the guests when we visited this place in the North of Portugal. Here, you can “enjoy the birds singing” (Ribeiro, 2019) and I woke – fortunately, not too early – to the sound of the hens. There, they have some cats and dogs,

as does Moinho do Maneio. In the latter, the romantic profile meets that of the farm: The dogs and cats are very much part of the experience of the location, as are the donkeys – lovely, if I may say. In Ovil, pets are allowed, and they even have a dedicated corner inside the house. Eduarda Santos told me that her guests know they can run into small animals, such as a lizard.

These locations offer an atmosphere predicated on “slowness” (Sharma, 2015) and solipsism based on the “me” and the present. To Sharma, this would serve as a tool to recalibrate the neoliberal worker subjectivity. Instead, Coleman (2022: 147) described mindfulness as “an affective response to [people’s] encounters with the world”, whereby the “‘cadences’, ‘rhythms’, ‘gestures’, ‘noticings’ [...] remodulate how people feel, experience and live”. In these dead zones, the absence of a structured programme of activities to follow means they propose temporal autonomy (Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021; Schwarzenegger & Menke, 2020). In addition to the natural elements, some objects are introduced to invite self-indulgence and idleness – or, as Eduarda Santos, the owner of Ovil, said, “tranquillity and relaxation”. There were also hammocks in Moinho do Maneio, as well as in Moinhos de Ovil, as encouragements to relax, take a nap, or read a book; and Entre Sebes and Moinho do Maneio offer massages as an extra service. Moinhos de Ovil and Moinho do Maneio invite people to eat outside at their tables and to use the canoes in the small rivers that cross their properties. In the latter, one can also find a table football board. A couple, 39 and 40, said: “We are keen to enjoy the rails and we saw a canoe and we are doing that! And the bikes! [...] maybe even the trampoline”. Another couple who stayed at the bubble tent, where one can see the sky and stars at night, told us they spent the evening “talking and playing the board games they have up there”. These suggested activities are efforts to avoid the feelings of anxiety and boredom that can be created when tourists are liberated from mindless connectivity (Cai et al., 2020). In a hyper-productive society where mindless scrolling is an accepted way to “kill time”, “dead time” during holidays may be daunting (Farkic et al., 2022).

The two mill properties (Maneio and Ovil) use folkloric elements in their decoration, including traditional games in Ovil, which attempt to counter the homogenising global society. They also infuse the atmosphere with a “positive vibe” through the use of messages and posters. In Maneio, they have rocks on the small street that crosses the property with wishes inscribed on them with chalk: “love”, “health”, “tolerance” (in Portuguese), or “be happy :)” (in Portuguese and English, with the emoticon). In Ovil, at the entrance of the farm one can find a poster: “Always look on the bright side of life”. And closer down: “It always seems impossible until it’s done” (in English). In both places, there are carefully curated book collections. In my room in Moinho do Maneio, I could find *Siddharta*, by Herman Hesse, a famous novel



about a spiritual journey of self-discovery. In Moinhos de Ovil, books relate to the Douro region, feelings, and photography. And in Cerdeira, there is a small library, but it was restricted during our visit because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Reading books is an activity that is notoriously constricted by the time and energy drained by intrusive media, as it requires more attention and a single focus. In the cases where I had access to books, they offered the possibility to disengage from digital technologies, and further accentuated either the work on the self or the local connection.

In the guest house where I stayed in Moinho do Maneio, a decorative clock whose hands do not move, made from a pan, brings attention to a feeling of time standing still on this farm in the almost deserted Portuguese countryside. Tourist venues in dead zones seek to create an atmosphere that will put on hold “the alleged accelerated affordances of life in modern late capitalist societies” (Schwarzenegger & Menke, 2020: 89) and promise a respite from the intensified media use that “contributes to our feeling distracted, anxious, alienated, forgetful, overworked, stressed out” (Rauch, 2018: xiii). As one of the visitors we interviewed told us, “if you are in a holiday mood, for me it is great not to have Internet or phone” (female, 39). The “holiday mood” precedes the encounter with the tourist locations, which then works to modulate it into a disconnected mood or state of mind (Karppi et al., 2021).

## **A romantic and exclusive perk**

The atmosphere of disconnection of these tourist dead zones is also a product of the social isolation that derives from the remoteness. The settings are romantically located in nature, away from the burdens of the developed world – that is, as much from over-connection as from the busyness of the city. In Ovil, one of the visitors found herself in “a rewarding isolation” (female, 41), and another said she was looking for “an exclusive place, that would not have other people, right? [...] We were able to be in our very own world” (female, 45). A tourist (female, 50) in Moinho do Maneio said: “I hope it stays like this and does not get an influx”.

The romanticism associated with natural landscapes includes contemplating the landscape but also feeling alone in nature and, ultimately, enjoying individual freedom and privacy (Jacobsen, 2004). Moreover, the growth of rural tourism is also a reaction to the massification of tourism (Cohen, 1987), which was accentuated in the resolution of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Hence, dead-zone tourism sits at the confluence of the feelings of anti-tourism and anti-sociality. The exclusivity of the locations is more evident when it is menaced, as in the case of the open village of Cerdeira. When we stayed there (as Joana Salgado had mentioned in the interview she gave us prior to our visit), visitors were passing through the village during the day, visiting several of these schist villages across the region. We saw many of

those daytime visitors taking a tour around the village and taking and posing for pictures with their phones. When looking for geolocation on Instagram, one can find many public posts from those visitors, and if one searches on Google Maps, there are many contributions of different corners and views of the village.

Dead zones offer romanticism for love or an affective relationship. Portuguese sociologist José Machado Pais (2010) wrote that in contemporary, accelerated societies, romantic relationships fall prey to the lack of time and energy – and that is accentuated by intrusive media. Among our cases, Moinhos de Ovil is the one that has the most robust romantic positioning. Eduarda Santos told us she could make more money by booking a family but advises people to try to have the experience as a couple. She added that “some female clients book to come here to surprise their husbands because they want them to take a break from work”. While Eduarda said her clients report their stays were effective in having men disconnect from “phone and work”, she also told us that this works only for a short stay and would not work for a week. (In support of this, a 48-year-old businessman in Cerdeira told us he would be “without breath” if he could not get hold of his e-mail.) The romantic atmosphere is also heightened, ironically, by the influencers who have stayed at the property, such as famous Instagrammer Catarina Miranda, who stayed at the property for her honeymoon, or Isabel Saldanha, a photographer who writes emotional captions with a bon vivant vibe. The two former guests we interviewed, 41 and 45 years old, said they initially knew about the place through influencers on Instagram. It is neither a coincidence nor a surprise that Ovil is the highest-priced location in the study, affordable to upper-middle- to upper-class national tourists; it is part of the (growing) high-end segment of the disconnection market.

This romantic atmosphere is not only highly individualistic (Jacobsen, 2004), but it also constructs a preferred sociality for tourists. In Cerdeira, a schist board in the café reads, in handwriting: “Wi-Fi: only after 30 minutes conversation” (see Figure 16.1). Such sayings have become tropes that emphasise the value of face-to-face, present, and fully attentive interaction over (digitally) mediated interaction (Docherty, 2020), which is deemed as “effortless, non-committal and somewhat superficial sociality” (Lomborg, 2015: 48). Moreover, the use of these posters, often with irony or puns, applies a parodic sensibility that attracts hipsters, for example (Zhao, 2013), and captivates sophisticated tourists. In addition to confirming cultural capital of those who recognise the paradoxes and original references (as I signal for the nostalgic messages), these references elicit a lightly humorous reaction or a positive affective response (Karppi et al., 2021) that engages the tourist more with the place. Ironically, they invite tourists to share such tropes on social media (Jorge, 2019).

**FIGURE 16.1** “Wi-Fi: only after 30 minutes conversation”



*Comments:* The photograph was taken in a café in Cerdeira.

*Source:* photo by Ana Jorge

Such a model of sociality is echoed in the interviews with tourists. A 50-year-old female visitor to Moinho do Maneio said: “Maybe it is just more important that I try to talk with the person standing next to me”. And in Entre Sebes, we found a group of three couples on their annual getaway who told me that the weak service on their mobile devices meant that they had more uninterrupted conversations. In the post-pandemic environment, visitors were seeking exclusivity as much as human presence. However, being with a partner, in a group, or as a family without interruptions from digital technologies was the preferred model of sociality. This marking of face-to-face conviviality as better than digitally mediated interaction is confirmed in the many statements we listened to from the tourists, that they take satisfaction in the fact that nothing (relevant) had happened online when they went back.

Such a model is enforced on children and young people. The managers of the tourist locations echo the idea that these locations work “to take children away from digital technologies” (Eduarda Santos), inviting them to play more. A 41-year-old mother of three recalled her stay in Ovil, saying the children were playing incessantly on the property and that she felt it was safe because it was a closed property. However, we hardly found teenagers in our visits, and accounts show resistance to spending time in dead zones. The only teenage boy (15) we interviewed in Cerdeira had gone there, after

initially resisting the idea, with his parents. He told us they have stayed in other places in the country with limited connectivity, as his mother is a creative worker who prefers these locations to rest and work. In Entre Sebes, we found families with young children, who were said to have been busy and playing, distracted from tablets, but host Susana Pereira told us she had cancellations from families with teenagers as well as seen youngsters brought by their parents to the farm who were in a bad humour *because* of the limited connectivity. We found similar affective responses through the accounts of parents we interviewed in Moinho do Maneio: A 49-year-old father told us, “I keep *forcing* them [teenagers] to disconnect. This last August, we checked in here and left after ten days! They bring their books, I try to *drag* them to experiences, so they can see things live”.

In fact, disconnecting through stays at dead zones seemed a conscious choice only of a few. While individuals embarking on tourism for their holidays usually negotiate their availability with significant others who stay home (Rosenberg, 2019), many of our interviewees were unaware of the limitations to mobile connectivity of the places they were visiting. One father (39) said, “our kids are staying with my sister, and we were supposed to text [upon arriving]”, and his wife (40) added: “It’s the first time our son is without his parents, he is 7. Had we and them known [there was no service], there would have been no problem, no anxiety at all”. A 49-year-old female teacher who was at Moinho do Maneio with her husband, sister, and brother-in-law told us, “the only thing that *disturbed* us a bit was more the mobile service than the Internet itself”, as they have SIM cards from all three national operators.

When talking about the anxieties of being out of contact, and even if we conducted some of the interviews with couples, it was women who expressed their concerns for the children at home, and parents – “they are of a certain age already, you know?” (female, 50, Moinho do Maneio). As we will see, the possibility to connect via the Internet did not necessarily solve these anxieties, especially of contacting the elderly, as the latter do not use digital services. In contrast, people who resist constant availability at home accept more easily the unexpected disconnection: Although she did not know she would be deprived of the Internet or have a feeble mobile service, the 41-year-old female visitor to Ovil told us she did not feel it as a problem, as she does not usually talk with her parents every day; when staying there, she just sent them a picture when she found service.

For others, staying in a dead zone was a matter of economy. If Ovil is marketed to the upper-class (one of the interviewees acknowledged that “not every family can afford these getaways”), and in Moinho do Maneio and Cerdeira, we found primarily urban, middle-class tourists (high school teacher, designer, engineer, architect, businessman),<sup>3</sup> in Entre Sebes, we found a group of working-class friends who chose the place for their annual reunion because it was cheaper than every other farm property after the inflation exacerbated

by the pandemic, with many people looking for isolated venues. The latter was the cheapest location among our cases, partly because they do not consider themselves in the “disconnection” segment. They market the location as a “pedagogic farm” and warn guests about it being a dead zone; the host told us the *Sapo* journalist (Ribeiro, 2019) chose to frame it as disconnected.

## Marketing through nostalgia

Cerdeira, Moinho do Maneio, and Moinhos de Ovil invest more heavily in social media promotion than the farms of Entre Sebes and Quinta da Franqueira, which work to mark out sociocultural differences through mechanisms of distinction. The former have pages on Facebook and profiles on Instagram and invest in influencer marketing. The irony of social media promotion about locations that offer the possibility to disconnect is not lost on the promoters, who frame this as a necessary tool to attract and engage audiences. Anabela Martins, who runs Moinho do Maneio with her husband, told us the place has received good media and social media attention; Facebook has worked well because people engage “organically”; that is, she does not have to invest in sponsored ads, and only since the start of the pandemic has she dedicated more attention to Instagram. The promotion by influencers on social media has immediate results in reservations, she told us, which confirms influencers’ strategic role in promoting disconnection as a form of recalibration for productive workers (Jorge & Pedroni, 2021). As a 57-year-old returning visitor to the Lousã mountains said: “I thought that people coming here were older people wanting to get some rest. It’s not like that now. I clearly saw many more young people”.

Through digital observation, we found that these social media contents cultivate a longing for the past. In an Instagram post with “Do you remember?” in a handwritten font, Cerdeira shared a picture of a phone counter (see Figure 16.2) from a time when mobile phones were non-existent and phone communications were limited, paid according to the time of day, and in this case with a public device, in places like cafés or stores. Another post shows a 1980s television advertisement, framing the post with references to times when there were only two (public and national) television stations. The caption reads, “Who knows what this piece is?”, directly calling audiences to respond. These nostalgic social media posts evoke the memories of the target consumers, rather than showing relics of the actual locations, abandoned even before the twentieth century (Figlia, 2016).

**FIGURE 16.2** Phone counter in a social media post



Comments: Instagram post by @cerdeira\_homeforcreativity. In English, “Recorda-se?” means “Do you remember?”.

Nostalgia “entails affective management” of the relationship with the objects, spaces, and people associated with such a past (Paasonen, 2021: 144). It works affectively, moving or touching the audiences (Schwarzenegger & Menke, 2020), which means that nostalgia is also an efficient mechanism to increase social media engagement (commenting, liking, or sharing) through identification and relatability to everyday, even banal experiences that are associated with memories.

In fact, these contents allude to analogue forms of media that resonate with social media users of specific generations, now in their 30s through to their 50s. These analogue media have an imperfect quality of communication (Wieghorst, 2021), but are also bound to limited connectivity – as one would have to, for instance, pay according to use and move to the few places where the devices were available. Limited connectivity is, in turn, associated with an idea of greater intentionality, that is, using media for contact just as needed. In other words, as the discourses of mindfulness proclaim, the imagery of analogue media pertains to the same constellation of tropes where digital media are said to control people rather than act as tools they operate (Wieghorst, 2021). Some of the examples recuperated by the tourist companies are also specific to the country, as there was more variation, for instance, in how telecommunication corporations set infrastructures and devices before the era of economic and technological convergence, where global references reign. This local significance also creates a sense of belonging and cultural connection, which is accentuated on-site through folkloric and regionally bound objects used in decoration.

Analogue nostalgia used in social media marketing consolidates the intent of ironic posters to attract the sophisticated tourist. Only those with the memories and references can understand the nostalgic messages and fully appreciate the irony of critiquing the digital *on* social media platforms. Furthermore, it intersects with a generational difference. In this line of reasoning, older generations lived in more pristine conditions, and the younger ones live in a world dominated by digital technologies. It is to approximate such an authentic environment – with more time on their hands and a far less stressful life (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020) and in a time older than themselves – that tourists are invited to book their stay in a dead zone. For example, a simple life is celebrated in one of Moinhos de Ovil’s social media posts. Through the multimodal affordances of Instagram Stories, a close-up photo of a cup of black coffee and some crackers and honey is accompanied by the music lyrics, “Don’t need any TV, don’t need any phone” (English in original).

As Paasonen (2021) sharply remarked, these notions of the past are also romanticised: Think of people living without electricity and spending long evenings with only themselves as entertainment. Peasants were not necessarily happy in an arduous everyday life, mostly connected with farming. Now, guests have every convenience at their disposal – even if, in Moinho do Maneio, appliances are hidden within nice wooden cabinets. The rustic elements of the five venues are preserved, though stylised in the case of Ovil (with low saturated, pastel colours), Cerdeira, and Maneio (with red solid and intense blue, respectively, contrasting with the schist).

## Colonised by connectivity

Other factors pertaining to the influence of digital and social media on tourism complicate disconnection in dead zones. Social media not only work as an important source of information about the tourist locations (including influencer visibility), alongside traditional media, but also a collaborative pool where tourists recount their experiences to others. “At the time [I was at Ovil] I shared about this on Instagram and my friends asked me where this was”, a female guest, 45, recalled. Smartphones can also be used for photography, although the 50-year-old female tourist in Maneio said this should be done in moderation during a hike and, if posted online, this should be done later; she is critical about people who keep taking pictures all the time during the hikes she takes in groups. The digital services are also used for geolocation, as a 60-year-old male tourist in Cerdeira told us: “I just used the Internet to find the trails”.

I drove to a (jumbo) swing we had heard about, at the top of Serra da Lousã, but could not find it until I used Google Maps, as there were no signs on the road. Over the last few years, Portugal has installed more swings, walkways, and suspension bridges in inaccessible mountains to incentivise tourism in a country that does not have a strong relationship with nature as the Nordics do

(Syvertsen, 2022). Especially swings and suspension bridges bring a romantic flavour with a modern touch to the natural places. When I got to the Lousã swing, some people were posing for photos, patiently waiting to take them with no one in the frame, alluding to the romantic ideal (Jacobsen, 2004). The poster bore the hashtag #IstoéLousã [this is Lousã] – when accent marks from the Portuguese language do not even work for hashtag traffic; hence, the association is more expressive than functional (Jorge, 2019).

Additional material evidence of the influence of social media on tourism is a frame in the shape of a heart, built in wood in Candal, the village next to Cerdeira (see Figure 16.3). One must climb the mountain a bit to get a photograph of the village from above. The irony is that this village has a very scarce mobile signal, and the frame conducts tourists to get the postcard in a specific way, maybe to make this village distinct from others in the region, when they share it on social media.

**FIGURE 16.3** Frame for a social media postcard



*Comments:* The photograph was taken in Candal.

*Source:* photo by Ana Jorge



Dead zones stand in tension with the crossbreeding that social media inflicts on nature and rural tourism. When connectivity spreads symbolically, if not materially, into natural places and fosters tourists to continue their visits on social media, the divide between connectivity and place is eroded and nature is further romanticised – and “Instagrammised”. As Simmel (2002) posed, metropolitan life is so grand that its web affects even those standing outside through the means of money relations. Digital media expands and colonises nature tourism and dead zones even where connectivity is unavailable.

## **Expanding connectivity during the pandemic**

The relationship between dead zones and disconnection was further complicated during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the venues we initially listed from 2019 media pieces had changed their conditions when we started collecting data in March 2021. During the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, three of the five businesses had their connectivity increase. The promoters of Entre Sebes and Moinho do Maneio mentioned they “finally” had one operator agreeing to install better Internet services. This expansion was felt as all the more needed because the mobile connectivity was feeble:

During the early period of the pandemic, we were mostly at home and we heard about a solution. We eventually installed the Internet via satellite. We never say that we have it so that they [the clients] won’t expect Internet everywhere. But because there is no mobile signal, people need it more. By the public area of breakfasts, we have a TP-link [router] which anyone, if they want to, can use to go online. (Anabela Martins, Moinho do Maneio)

These changes in Moinho do Maneio were not marketed through social media and were inconsistently communicated to actual clients. As previously demonstrated, some of the clients we interviewed were surprised to find themselves without any mobile service. They keep the Wi-Fi key on a handwritten paper at the corner of the breakfast lounge, which one can only find if they ask the staff. As for Entre Sebes, Susana Pereira said she still calls guests to directly inform them in advance what the mobile connectivity is like at the farm: “Most of them still come, but I have had a few cancellations”.

In Cerdeira, the pandemic led to spreading Wi-Fi availability throughout the resort as a sanitary precaution to avoid concentrating people in the café, the single Internet access point they used to have. The schist guesthouses now have fibre Internet access, which was announced in our reservation confirmation e-mail. Joana Salgado said that “now, everyone can access the Internet from the houses. They can choose, right? Now it’s up to each of them if they want to use it or not”. To further accentuate the irony, Cerdeira has also been promoting options for remote workers, or even digital nomads, as Portugal has been doing in the aftermath of the pandemic. In fact, promising creativity through immersion in a mountain environment is still part of the

focus on sensations (Farkic et al., 2022) – precisely what was sought by the mother of the 15-year-old boy we interviewed in Cerdeira.

## Concluding discussion

Through the notion of atmosphere, I have explored in this chapter how dead zones contain different and contradictory layers (Germann Molz & Buda, 2022) between material and symbolic elements related to (dis)connection: Some deter, while others expand, connectivity. Moreover, possibilities to connect and disconnect from digital media are affectively experienced differently by visitors in these complex atmospheres.

Disconnection through tourism in dead zones appears as symbolically and sensorially constructed through repertoires of mindfulness, romanticism, and nostalgia, which create an atmosphere of detachment from what is habitual or dictated by the outer world to replace it with a self-indulgent set of bodily sensations focusing on here, now, me, and the selective us. In the post-pandemic world, the tropes of mindfulness, romanticism, and nostalgia pose dead zones as spaces for an idealised individuality and selective sociability. As digital detox retreats and camps, dead zones would produce a “therapeutic disconnection” (Hesselberth, 2021), or a form of physical and mental restoration or recalibration (Sharma, 2015). In that sense, in addition to being a business in themselves, tourist dead zones are an instrument that returns an ameliorated individual to the neoliberal society.

The pandemic accentuated what was already a profound implication of connectivity in these tourist locations. The smartphone was already the habitual device at the service of the tourist experience for its affordances relating to photography, navigation, information, and contact. Digital media logics have also colonised tourism in dead zones as tourism offices, municipalities, and hosts invest in seeking tourists’ engagement with places through digital devices and further sharing of experiences through social media, affectively elicited by posters, puns, frames, or hashtags. During the pandemic, however, while mobile signals remained feeble or non-existent due to remoteness and material conditions, Internet connectivity and access were expanded in these locations – out of sanitary precaution, attending to visitors’ anxieties in a hyperconnected post-pandemic society, or capitalising new opportunities by targeting remote workers.

Analysing the media and social media visibility of the different locations allowed us to go past detecting the irony or cynicism of promoting disconnection through digital media. In fact, social media promotion – including influencers – works to affectively engage consumers and augment and socialise their tourist experience of disconnection. Crucially, the venues that specifically market themselves as disconnected (Moinhos de Ovil, Moinho do Maneio, and Cerdeira) increase their market value and attract customers who are able to pay more. On the contrary, Entre Sebes and Quinta da Franqueira do not

capitalise on disconnectivity, and instead take it as an accidental limitation of remote and unfavourable locations. While all tourists we interviewed were from urban contexts, we only found working-class clients in Entre Sebes, and Quinta da Franqueira does not distinguish a class profile in their foreign customers.

In addition to being classed, disconnection is gendered, as interviews revealed different types of anxieties generated by the unreachability (Cai et al., 2020; Farkic et al., 2022). In the cracks of connectivity expectations, we could see the social distribution and negotiation of connectivity, as women are the main carers for children and the elderly. Disconnection in dead zones is expected, negotiated, and embraced differently by tourists, as they bring their social but also cultural and personal viewpoints to atmospheres that accumulate these distinct possibilities to disconnect. Experiences of disconnection in dead zones are variable as an affective relation that occurs through temporality as well as embodiment (Coleman, 2022). Most of the tourists we interviewed did not expect complete disconnection, but rather a contained disconnection that would allow them to be away from whatever is heteronomously imposed and remain deliberately and self-consciously connected. In fact, only a few visitors embraced the promise of disconnection in dead zones and considered it a way to open up for other sensorial experiences and modes of attention (Karppi et al., 2021).

Exploring tourist locations in dead zones in Portugal as atmospheres allowed for an understanding of the social construction of disconnection – by hosts, tourists, journalists, audiences of social media, tourism offices, and beyond – in conflation with material conditions, and how these are experienced socially as well as affectively. In the post-pandemic period, the complexity of these atmospheres emerges both as a response to and a capitalisation of reconfigured modes of sociality, engagement with outdoor life, and mobility.

## Acknowledgements

The “DIS/CONNECT: individuals’ digital disconnection” project received funding from EEA Grants Bilateral Relations Fund (ref.: FBR\_OC1\_COFAC).

## References

- Cai, W., McKenna, B., & Waizenegger, L. (2020). Turning it off: Emotions in digital-free travel. *Journal of Travel Research*, 59(5), 909–927. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287519868314>
- Chia, A., & Beattie, A. (2021). Ethics and experimentation in the light phone and Google digital wellbeing. In A. Chia, A. Jorge, & T. Karppi (Eds.), *Reckoning with social media* (pp. 127–146). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cohen, E. (1987). “Alternative tourism” – A critique. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 12(2), 13–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.1987.11014508>
- Coleman, R. (2022). The presents of the present: Mindfulness, time and structures of feeling. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 23(1), 131–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2020.1810730>

- Dickinson, J. E., Hibbert, J. F., & Filimonau, V. (2016). Mobile technology and the tourist experience: (Dis)connection at the campsite. *Tourism Management*, 57, 193–201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.06.005>
- Docherty, N. (2020). Facebook's ideal user: Healthy habits, social capital, and the politics of well-being online. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120915606>
- Enli, G., & Syvertsen, T. (2021). Disconnect to reconnect! Self-help to regain an authentic sense of space through digital detoxing. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 227–252). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.001.0001>
- European Commission. (2023). *Digital economy and society index (DESI) 2022 – Portugal*. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi-portugal>
- Farkic, J., Isailović, G., & Lesjak, M. (2022). Conceptualising tourist idleness and creating places of otium in nature-based tourism. *Academica Turistica*, 15(1), 11–23. <https://doi.org/10.26493/2335-4194.15.11-23>
- Figlia, L. di (2016). Turnaround: Abandoned villages, from discarded elements of modern Italian society to possible resources. *International Planning Studies*, 21(3), 278–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563475.2016.1186530>
- Germann Molz, J., & Buda, D.-M. (2022). Attuning to affect and emotion in tourism studies. *Tourism Geographies*, 24(2-3), 187–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2021.2012714>
- Hesselberth, P. (2018). Discourses on disconnection and the right to disconnect. *New Media & Society*, 20(5), 1994–2010. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817711449>
- Hesselberth, P. (2021). Retreat culture and therapeutic disconnection. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 253–270). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.001.0001>
- Jacobsen, J. K. S. (2004). Roaming romantics: Solitude-seeking and self-centredness in scenic sightseeing. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 4(1), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250410003475>
- Jorge, A. (2019). Social media, interrupted: Users recounting temporary disconnection on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4), 2056305119881691. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119881691>
- Jorge, A., & Pedroni, M. (2021). 'Hey! I'm back after a 24h #DigitalDetox!': Influencers posing disconnection. In A. Chia, A. Jorge, & T. Karppi (Eds.), *Reckoning with social media* (pp. 63–83). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Karppi, T., Chia, A., & Jorge, A. (2021). In the mood for disconnection. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1599–1614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135485652111034621>
- Lomborg, S. (2015). The Internet in my pocket. In A. Bechmann, & S. Lomborg (Eds.), *The ubiquitous internet: User and industry perspectives* (pp. 35–53). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315856667>
- Lupton, D. (2017). How does health feel? Towards research on the affective atmospheres of digital health. *Digital Health*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2055207617701276>
- Mascheroni, G., & Vincent, J. (2016). Perpetual contact as a communicative affordance: Opportunities, constraints, and emotions. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 4(3), 310–326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157916639347>
- Moinho do Maneio. (n.d.). *Home* [Facebook page]. Facebook. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://www.facebook.com/moinhomaneio/about>
- OECD. (2023). *Average wages – 2022* (Indicator). <https://data.oecd.org/earnwage/average-wages.htm>
- Paasonen, S. (2021). *Dependent, distracted, bored: Affective formations in networked media*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11903.001.0001>
- Pais, J. M. (2010). *Lufa-Lufa Quotidiana: Ensaios sobre Cidade, Cultura e Vida Urbana* [Everyday hustle: Essays on city, culture and urban life]. Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- Rauch, J. (2018). *Slow media: Why slow is satisfying, sustainable, and smart*. Oxford University Press.
- Ribeiro, S. S. (2019, June 30). *Quinta de Entre Sebes: O local perfeito para um detox digital no meio da natureza* [Entre Sebes farm: The perfect location for a digital detox in the middle of nature]. SAPO Viagens. <https://viagens.sapo.pt/ficar/ficar-portugal/artigos/quinta-de-entre-sebes-o-local-perfeito-para-um-detox-digital-no-meio-da-natureza>

- Rosenberg, H. (2019). The “flashpacker” and the “unplugger”: Cell phone (dis)connection and the backpacking experience. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 7(1), 111–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157918777778>
- Schwarzenegger, C., & Lohmeier, C. (2021). Creating opportunities for temporary disconnection: How tourism professionals provide alternatives to being permanently online. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1631–1647. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033385>
- Schwarzenegger, C., & Menke, M. (2020). Who are the new men in grey? Making sense of time, time-theft and temporal autonomy in the (non)use of digital media. In A. Kaun, C. Pentzold, & C. Lohmeier (Eds.), *Making time for digital lives: Beyond chronotopia* (pp. 63–81). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sharma, S. (2015). *In the meantime: Temporality and cultural politics*. Duke University Press.
- Simmel, G. (2002). The metropolis and mental life. In G. Bridge, & S. Watson (Eds.), *The Blackwell city reader* (pp. 11–19). Blackwell.
- Stewart, K. (2011). Atmospheric attunements. *Environment and planning D: Society and Space*, 29(3), 445–453. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d9109>
- Sumartojo, S., & Pink, S. (2018). *Atmospheres and the experiential world: Theory and methods*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315281254>
- Sutton, T. (2020). *Digital re-enchantment: Tribal belonging, new age science and the search for happiness in a digital detoxing community* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, UK]. <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:dd83e6d0-aa32-4c4e-b925-5cdb505a60c9>
- Syvetsen, T. (2022). Offline tourism: Digital and screen ambivalence in Norwegian mountain huts with no internet access. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 22(3), 195–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2022.2070540>
- Syvetsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Wiegthorst, C. (2021). Analogue Nostalgia: Examining critiques of social media. In A. Chia, A. Jorge, & T. Karppi (Eds.), *Reckoning with social media* (pp. 207–225). Rowman & Littlefield.
- World Bank. (2023). *Gini index – Portugal*. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=PT>
- Zhao, S. (2013). Selling the ‘Indie taste’: A social semiotic analysis of frankie magazine. In E. Djonov, & S. Zhao (Eds.), *Critical multimodal studies of popular discourse* (pp. 143–159). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203104286>

## Endnotes

- 1 The *Expresso* newspaper suffered a major cyberattack in January 2022, and the original publication, “Disconnecting: digital detox in 8 wi-fi free venues”, could not be retrieved.
- 2 Cerdeira was rebuilt through a venture initiated by Kerstin Thomas, a German student in Coimbra in the late 1970s who found the village, as Joana Salgado told us in an interview. It is an entire village that has been being rebuilt since the late 1980s with the investment of the family of the couple that owns it as an arts residency – and since the 2000s also with a touristic component with the investment of other parties.
- 3 The host of Quinta da Franqueira told us the visitors were mostly foreigners and that no class patterns could be captured.

# The cultured traveller

## *Three theses on cultural capital and the taste for disconnection in tourism*

ANDRÉ JANSSON

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, KARLSTAD UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

### ABSTRACT

This chapter starts out from previous research showing that people in possession of greater amounts of cultural capital are more sceptical of new media technology and more inclined than others to withdraw from media in time-spaces of leisure and vacationing. To get at the underlying sociocultural mechanisms behind such findings, the chapter provides an overview of historical and contemporary patterns pertaining to how cultural capital plays out in relation to tourism and (new) media. Three main theses are presented, linked to representational, connective, and logistical media affordances, respectively. First, I argue that cultural capital generally fosters a predisposition for the “authentic” and thus rejects mass-circulated tourism imageries. Second, cultural capital sustains the safeguarding of personal boundaries and thus works against open-ended connectivity and mediated intrusions into the “tourism-world”. Third, cultural capital feeds from a sense of independent navigation in foreign places and thus shuns certain forms of (mediated) guidance. Altogether, the three theses highlight the significance of cultural capital as a counterforce to digitalisation, and as a vector of the disconnection turn.

**KEYWORDS:** tourism, digital disconnection, cultural capital, mobility, media affordances

---

Jansson, A. (2024). The cultured traveller: Three theses on cultural capital and the taste for disconnection in tourism. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 345–362). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-17>

## Introduction: The distaste for connection

In 1979, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu published one of the century's most influential books on human behaviour. Its full title, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (English translation; Bourdieu, 1979/1984), captures the essence of Bourdieu's argument. Based on extensive empirical work, surveys as well as ethnographic accounts, he showed that people's preferences – their tastes and distastes for different things (including practices, places, other people, and various social phenomena) – largely stem from their social background and play a key role in marking out the boundaries between privileged and not-so-privileged groups in society. What an individual prefers, as well as *how* different practices are carried out, reveals something about that person – whether intended or not. Whether one is interested in rugby or golf, or prefers bacon or oysters, plays into the symbolic games that continuously define “high” versus “low” status. In addition, Bourdieu argued, people's preferences vary in a “horizontal” dimension, depending on whether they are in possession of economic or cultural capital. The latter refers mainly to educational achievements and the power to manage the circulation of meaning, as opposed to money and material properties (economic capital), in society. By means of advanced correspondence analyses, Bourdieu and his colleagues could map out an entire social space, depicting what kinds of preferred practices were associated with which social positions. In higher positions, the tastes among business-people and managers were found to differ from the tastes of artists and university professors. Further down in the hierarchy, the preferences differed among industrial, social, and cultural workers.

In principle, it is possible to analyse any kind of human practice according to the Bourdieusian framework. In *Distinction*, examples can be found ranging from eating habits and dress codes to variations in the taste for different composers and newspapers. Over the years, other researchers have implemented Bourdieu's ideas in relation to a variety of social fields, as well as in different countries (see, e.g., McKinnon, 2017; Prieur & Savage, 2013; Prior, 2013). Regardless of which practices and properties are in focus and how they are related to one another, the important thing is that tastes – and distastes – are not guaranteed by nature. They are socially shaped, as well as classified, especially in relation to the tastes of more privileged groups. If certain activities become “too popular”, or if certain goods lose their exclusivity, it means that those in higher positions have already moved on to other means of distinction. Typically, these processes occur without much reflection. People in general do not think very much about why they like the things they like, or why they sometimes adjust their preferences. It is a sociocultural dynamic that somehow seems “natural”.

In a previous study, conducted as part of the longitudinal research project “Measuring Mediatization”, I and my colleagues wanted to explore whether

Bourdieu's theory could also be used to explain people's preferences regarding digital disconnection. In the 2019 survey, distributed to a representative sample of the Swedish population, my colleagues and I included questions about how people felt about their own smartphone use, as well as whether or not they preferred to be disconnected in certain places and at certain times. We then applied the type of multiple correspondence analysis developed by Bourdieu and his colleagues to construct a social space and plot our respondents' generalised statements into this space. Some of the most interesting findings, which are presented and discussed in a recent book chapter (Fast et al., 2021), concern the role of cultural capital. We found that cultural capital corresponded with a sense of digital unease. People who possessed cultural rather than economic capital tended to agree that they were stressed by their smartphone, that it disrupted their work, and that they used it too much. Expressed differently, we could identify a certain distaste for digital connection among those with cultural capital, at least inasmuch as it was experienced as a source of disturbance. We also found that people with cultural capital were more inclined to keep their mobiles muted and to disconnect from digital media while on vacation and when in nature. They expressed a taste for establishing zones of disconnection in certain time-spaces of leisure. These orientations should not be taken as elite tastes, however. Rather, they are associated foremost with the "cultural middle classes". Higher up in the Bourdieusian social space, our study revealed other distinctive practices, such as having routines for regulating one's smartphone (non-)use and disconnecting from digital media while visiting friends. In lower social positions, our respondents' answers concerning digital disconnection were more neutral, indicating that the issue was not considered particularly important.

There are many things one could look deeper into here. In this chapter, I want to concentrate on the observed correspondence between cultural capital and the taste for disconnecting while on vacation and in nature. The reason for such a focus is that the findings fit into a pattern that I have also observed in previous research on digital media practices in the context of tourism and travelling. In general, people who we might think of as "cultured travellers" seem more sceptical of using digital media extensively while travelling for leisure, that is, in tourism, and more prone to seek out ways of resisting such technology. For example, in a study of "alternative" tourism – urban exploration and ruin tourism – we found a division between individuals who shared and exposed their experiences and whereabouts extensively online and those who were concerned about keeping their activities, as well as the places they had visited, more private, even secret (see Jansson, 2018; Jansson & Klausen, 2018). The latter group regarded connective media as a threat to authenticity and more genuine place experiences. Even though the study of alternative tourists was qualitative in nature, and thus could not operationalise cultural and economic capital in any statistical sense, it was possible to interpret the different attitudes to connective media in such terms.



In light of such studies – and several others that I discuss in this chapter – my aim here is to explore what the taste for disconnection (or, distaste for connection), especially in the context of tourism and vacationing, is fundamentally about. How can we make sense of the cultural middle classes’ stronger inclination to disconnect in leisurely contexts? This problem can be broken down into two specific questions that will guide the discussion. First, based on what is known about the predispositions (tastes) associated with cultural capital, what could be expected that these groups desire from leisure travel? Second, given their travel-related preferences, which affordances of digitally connected media do these “cultured travellers” feel a need to counter or withdraw from?

My chapter takes the form of an essay – an attempt. In what follows, I conduct a systematic exploration of historical and contemporary patterns pertaining to how cultural capital plays out in relation to tourism *and* (new) media. I consider Bourdieu’s original analyses of these matters, as well as more recent studies that shed light on the nature of cultural capital in relevant contexts. Three main theses are presented, each one linked to a particular type of media affordance and its particular shape in our digitalised world. Before presenting the three theses, I consider what an affordance is, and how the idea of media affordances can help in understanding the ambivalent experiences of modern tourists in general, and the “cultured traveller” in particular.

## **Media affordances as environmental conditions of leisure travel**

Ever since its early days, modern tourism has been accompanied by an ensemble of media that travellers have customarily used before, during, and after their journeys. Travel brochures, catalogues, and magazines have contributed to plans and visions. Maps and guidebooks have helped tourists find their way. Postcards and telegrams have been sent and photos have been taken. More recently, such functions, and many others, have been digitalised, “platformed”, and integrated into mobile devices. Communicative resources that used to be spread out in space (travel agencies, post offices, phone boxes, etc.), and sometimes available only at particular times, are now continuously available via a smartphone or computer. People are turned into “digital wayfarers”, as suggested by Hjorth and Pink (2014), planning their routes and interacting with others near and far and generally “on the go”. This also means that “touristic” media practices seem less distinct or exceptional than they used to do. Navigating, texting, and sending pictures are things that people do on a daily basis, as a matter of routine. The “digital mundane” (Maltby & Thornham, 2016) is carried over into the (most often) more extraordinary spaces and activities of tourism (Jansson, 2020), and this, as will be shown, has consequences for how people experience their journeys.

I suggest that we think of this development not just as a technological matter but as an environmental transformation, where communicative

possibilities are reorganised and extended (Jansson, 2022a; Madianou & Miller, 2013). In his theory of affordances, Gibson (1979/2014) considered the human life environment as a structure of resources that individually and together offer people opportunities to act in particular ways (or prevent them from doing so). We may here think about natural resources like water that can be used for drinking or cleaning as well as human-made artefacts and tools that are designed for particular purposes. A drinking glass is designed to hold liquids and to be held in a human hand, while a fence is designed to prevent human bodies from accessing a certain place. The interaction between artefact and human body and perception is crucial here. Even subtle material differences may shape affordances. For example, as Gaver (1991: 80) noted, while “thin vertical doorhandles afford pulling”, flat horizontal ones afford pushing. In this way, all material elements – including media (e.g., Gaver, 1991; Hutchby, 2001; Nagy & Neff, 2015) – hold affordances that are sometimes more discernible and available to some people than to others, due to uneven material access or because of cultural differences or variations in skill and experience. Likewise, affordances are not set in stone: A newspaper is produced for conveying information, but one can also use it to sit on or as a (not very efficient) shelter from rain. The affordances of a smartphone seem increasingly difficult to overview and depend on which apps are downloaded to the device and whether it is properly configured, charged, and connected to the digital infrastructure. Even if disconnected, a smartphone can still be used as a torchlight.

What kinds of affordances did the media environment, and particular technologies, offer to tourists before the digital age? In what ways did different media enable people to communicate? I answer this question with reference to a triadic categorisation of affordance types, or registers, that I have elaborated and introduced in my previous work on “geomedia” (see especially Jansson, 2022a). I can then discuss these types in more detail to distinguish the consequences of digitalisation and platformisation in the context of tourism.

The first type is representational media affordances. This is the capacity of media to provide engaging and adequate representations of people, places, events, and ideas through which human beings can make sense of the world and other people. Tourism has often been closely associated with such affordances, characteristic of visually oriented media like travel brochures, advertisements, postcards, and tourism photography. This is not to say that a postcard holds *only* representational affordances, given that it (re)presents a view from a particular place; a postcard also connects people. But it is part of an ensemble of cultural techniques that have historically shaped the so-called tourist gaze (Urry, 1990/2002) and thus played (and still play) into people’s desires to *see* things on their journeys (see also MacCannell, 1973). Other such techniques for visual consumption include sightseeing busses, tour guides, cameras, staged vantage points, museums, and various exhibition spaces.

Second, there are connective media affordances, which refer to the ability of media to link people together across space and time, responding to the human desire to get in touch and stay in touch with others. We may here think of telephony, telegraphy, and letters, as well as other postal services, as media that are particularly biased towards such affordances. In tourism, these media enable travellers to contact friends and family back home to share information about where they are and what is happening during the journey, as well as to communicate with fellow travellers, travel bureaus, and so forth. We may also think of the phrasebook as a medium that is predominantly connective in nature as it sustains people's efforts to share information with others across language barriers.

This leads to the final affordance type: logistical media affordances. They refer to the ability of media to "arrange people and property into time and space" (Peters, 2008: 40). More concretely, logistical affordances enable navigation in space, as well as coordination and orchestration of various activities and flows of people and things in time and space. Accordingly, logistical affordances do not directly concern the communicative exchange between people, but rather provide the conditions for such exchange to occur. In the context of travel and tourism, one may immediately think of maps, guidebooks, and timetables. But there are also clocks, signposts, tickets, and passports, as well as other types of travel documents, which help people get around and reach their destinations or appointments in a punctual and efficient way. While many such media also entail representational affordances, such as the map that is also a representation of space, we should think of logistical media as predominantly infrastructural in nature, as Peters (2008, 2015) has argued.

As mentioned, affordances are sometimes ambiguous: They provide certain action opportunities, on the one hand, but may also impose limitations or even obstacles to action, on the other. For example, while signposts in a city help tourists find their way to a particular site or sight, they may also close off other options and hinder people from having alternative experiences. Likewise, analogue media like telephony or telegraphy were never free of charge, but could be expensive to use and thus exclude certain travellers from access. They could also be associated with social and moral obligations to stay connected and thus have an impeding effect on the tourist's sense of freedom. Hence, even before digitalisation and platformisation, one could think about the media environment – in tourism as well as otherwise – as a relatively complex constellation of affordances that not only invited people to communicate but also set limits and sometimes caused ambiguous feelings due to economic restraints, moral pressures, technology scepticism, and so forth. As I now turn to the analysis of contemporary travel conditions, we will see how such ambiguities escalate and sometimes lead to counter-measures, such as deliberate disconnection or media withdrawal.

## Reasons why cultural capital may foster disconnection in leisure travel

There is no doubt that the number of options as to when, where, how, and for what purpose a person may use media technology while travelling has multiplied. Madianou and Miller (2013) refer to this as “polymedia”: a condition where there is not just a number of technological options to choose from but also a relatively limited and stable economic cost, typically associated with a digital subscription allowing a certain amount of data traffic. Whereas this condition implies that one particular device, notably the smartphone, enables different affordances to interweave as “digital wayfarers” (Hjort & Pink, 2014) navigate, take photos, chat with friends, and so forth, during a trip, it is analytically helpful to distinguish how alterations in *each* of the affordance types affect the travel experience. In this way, it can be assessed which significant desires and values linked to cultural capital might be threatened – or at least experienced as threatened among certain travellers – and thus why cultural capital may foster disconnection practices in tourism. I now introduce three theses, based on previous research, that capture these dynamics.

### **Thesis 1: Cultural capital fosters a predisposition for the “authentic” non-staged, and thus rejects mass-circulated tourism imageries**

Cultural capital is a resource that it takes time to accumulate and which is therefore more available to those with a privileged social background, or habitus. In his work on cultural capital, Bourdieu (1979/1984) put emphasis on the desire for “pure” aesthetic experiences. He described the “pure gaze” as an orientation grounded in the autonomous artistic field, where form in itself is a source of desire and concern – as opposed to popular, or “ordinary”, tastes that “expect every image to explicitly perform a function” (Bourdieu 1979/1984: 4). A sign of cultural capital, then, is a person’s ability to enjoy legitimate culture (i.e., culture that is *classified* as having a deeper aesthetic quality and meaning) in a “natural” manner. The symbolic power of “good taste” has a greater social impact if the person is able to seek out the “right” type of culture and converse around it without any obvious restraint or sign of effort. Likewise, there is a corresponding distaste for the non-authentic, the mass produced, and the popular, let alone that those rich in cultural capital can sometimes “afford” to diverge from the legitimate taste (which can also make them seem more interesting and open-minded).

Bourdieu’s thinking about the “pure gaze” can be related to more distinctive forms of travel. Historically, it is easy to find examples of how the “pure gaze” has contributed to the shaping and classification of different types of leisure travel. In his 1961 book, *The Image*, American historian Daniel J.

Boorstin (1961: 77) lamented “the lost art of travel” and argued that mass culture had replaced any real, first-hand experiences of foreign places with a search for experiences shaped by media representations. The *traveller*, understood as someone that was “working at something”, had been replaced by the pleasure-seeking *tourist*, who bought a ticket “to make pleasant and interesting things happen” to them (Boorstin, 1961: 85). According to Boorstin, the entire world of tourism was staged in order to fit common understandings of “the picturesque”, or “the beautiful”. As such, he defended the type of distinctive, conservative taste that was subsequently unpacked by Bourdieu and exposed as a source of social dominance. Boorstin’s perspective reverberates with the worldview of those “cultured”, upper-class travellers who, in the second half of the nineteenth century, dominated organised leisure travel and for whom it was vital *not* to get caught in the pre-ordered (i.e., inauthentic) visual schemes of the “picturesque” (Austin, 2007).

It must be problematised whether it is empirically correct to describe mass tourists as people that only, or predominantly, travel to consume extraordinary – but “pre-packaged” – sights. As MacCannell (2001: 31) argued, alongside the conventional “tourist gaze” there is also a “second gaze”:

I could summarize the central finding of all the research I have done on tourists as follows: the act of sightseeing is itself organized around a kernel of resistance to the limitations of the tourist gaze. The strongest indication of this resistance is the desire to get beyond touristic representation.

Still, while MacCannell articulated an important point, if we follow Bourdieu’s theory of taste and sociocultural classification, the mere fact that there is in society a deep-seated *view* of tourism as linked to artificial mass culture (as we saw) forms a backdrop to distinctive practices among those with more cultural (and oftentimes also economic) capital. Among privileged groups it thus feels natural to seek out places, activities, and forms of leisure travel that are different from those represented in popular media and heavily marketed vacation packages. Ultimately, as Munt (1994) argued, this boils down to a refusal to consider oneself a tourist.

What are the digital threats to such a “cultured” approach to travel? It is fair to say that mobile platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TripAdvisor in some sense provide a counterweight to the imagery and promotional culture of the tourism sector *per se*. Individual travellers hold the power to circulate alternative images and even challenge dominant representations. As research shows, tourism-related sharing practices are often diverse in terms of style and content, entailing staged representations of typical tourism sights and events alongside backstage oriented glimpses of, for instance, the frictions, toil, and trouble of getting around in foreign places (e.g., Cassinger & Thelander, 2021; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Schwarz, 2021). The new platform economy is also characterised by digital entrepreneurs in the business of distributing “alternative” tourism experiences, especially via platforms that

enable people to rent private accommodation, consult local guides, or even have dinner in private homes (e.g., Jansson, 2019; Molz, 2013; van Doorn, 2020). Nevertheless, while such imageries feed into the counter-tourist desires among certain travellers, especially in the cultural middle classes, there is now also an even greater risk of “hyper-mediation”. More and more places and activities are deemed symbolically contaminated and “inauthentic” among those with cultural capital (which does not mean that they become less authentic in any objective sense of the term; see, e.g., Wang, 1999).

From this perspective, the current revolution in representational affordances widens the scope of cultural standardisation and, accordingly, underpins a growing distaste for connective platforms among “cultured” travellers. The development does not only invoke more fine-grained distinctions among tourists in terms of which channels and platforms to use before and during their journeys; it also makes disconnection seem like the ultimate solution for steering clear of the clichés and imageries of mass tourism and thus reclaiming a “pure gaze”.

## **Thesis 2: Cultural capital sustains the safeguarding of meaningful personal boundaries and thus works against open-ended connectivity and mediated intrusions into the “tourism-world”**

Let us now consider the consequences of escalating connective affordances. The fact that anyone with a smartphone or access to other digital devices can keep numerous connections open at the same time, more or less without interruption, does not only mean that travelling becomes more fun and secure, but that the tourist can instantaneously share a picture or ask for advice or guidance from friends and acquaintances regardless of location. There are also moments of “context collapse” (Marwick & boyd, 2011), digital “decapsulation” (Jansson, 2007), and “anxieties of control” (Leszczynski, 2015). What these phenomena have in common is that they actualise the risk of connectivity turning into intrusion. This risk has grown exponentially with the spread of digital platforms that not just enable but spur, even force, people to engage online for the purpose of circulating profitable data (e.g., Karppi, 2018; van Dijck, 2013).

Context collapse means that different communicative realms comeingle on digital platforms, especially on social media. Thus, it is difficult for the tourist to use Instagram or Facebook solely to reinforce travel related experiences; there is also much else going on that may be impossible to avoid. Potentially, when accessing such platforms, or just having a glance at one’s smartphone, the world of work and everyday matters collapses into the “tourism-world” (Zhang & Zhang, 2022; see also Cohen, 1979). This is also what “decapsulation” refers to: the sense of failure or frustrations when a particular sought-after spatial, sensory, and emotional experience, such as undisturbed vacation in a foreign setting, gets interrupted by external events that one cannot control (see

also Jansson, 2020). Here, we may think about the advertisements and push-notifications regularly targeting media users, telling them what kind of advice, service, or entertainment they “might be interested in” at the moment based on previous online (trans)actions and the possibility to trace where devices are located. Such automated messages may not only disturb; they also add to the anxiety of being watched or followed, that is, a fractured sense of privacy (e.g., Leszczynski, 2015; Swanlund & Shuurman, 2019; Zuboff, 2015).

Here, temporary or partial disconnection from digital platforms may be an attractive solution for keeping up boundaries around the experience of “being away”. In line with this reasoning, Fan and colleagues (2019) found in a study of Chinese tourists abroad that those who were most keen on getting “immersed” in the foreign environment – that is, to learn about it and engage with local people and their customs – were also less likely to spend time on social media platforms. Rather, they tended to restrict their use of digital media and tried to minimise their contact with people back home. Similarly, Doerr (2021) found in a study among young people engaged in hiking and nature tourism that their use of smartphones was informally banned and considered a threat to the secluded experience of wilderness. No surprise, then, that the commercial discourse surrounding digital detox retreats, as a form of media-free tourism, largely revolves around the (presumed) need among modern, busy individuals to “disconnect to reconnect” – with place, other people, as well as one’s inner self (Enli & Syvertsen, 2021; see also Syvertsen & Karlsen, Chapter 15 in this volume).

While there are studies that have recently examined how knowledge workers (e.g., academics and artists) handle digital intrusions in work – showing that such measures as going offline or turning to analogue technology are closely linked to creative ideals and a desire for work–life balance (see, e.g., Bagger & Lomborg, 2021; Fast & Jansson, 2019; Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2021) – there is no study that explicitly investigates how cultural capital plays into people’s coping with such intrusions in the realm of tourism. Likewise, the question of cultural capital has not been explicitly addressed in studies of disconnected tourism or “digital detox tourism” (e.g., Stäheli & Stoltenberg, 2024; Zhang & Zhang, 2022). If we consult other sources and research that has previously tried to depict what characterises the values and lifestyles of people with cultural capital, however, strong indications can be found that the strive for distinction is also a strive to control boundaries and steer clear of intrusive technologies. In the 1990s, for example, research in the media ethnographic tradition showed that cultural capital was often associated with the rejection of certain types of popular media, notably commercial television. This resistance was due not only to the quality of the programmes (or, the outspoken lack thereof), but also to the intrusive nature of commercial flows and the type of distractive and fragmented mode of consumption that they fostered (see Hirsch, 1992; Jansson, 2003; Moores, 1993). As such, the

satellite dish became an ambiguous signifier in the media landscape, something that people with “good taste” would rather not put on display (Brunsdon, 1996). Likewise, new connective innovations like the mobile phone caused frustration among people with cultural capital – not least the annoying ways in which these devices were used by *others* engaged in private conversations in public spaces (Jansson, 2001).

Additional clues can be found when turning to the tourism literature. In their characterisation of the aforementioned “disconnected immersive traveller” (which is one of six ideal types identified in their study), Fan and colleagues (2019: 7) associated this type with a desire for self-improvement *and* a desire for “understanding otherness and experiencing local cultures”. In other words (and in contrast to what they call “digital detox travellers”, who more actively interact with fellow tourists), this is a typically cosmopolitan value orientation that is found among social groups with higher education levels and cultural capital (e.g., Igarashi & Saito, 2014; Jansson, 2016; Prieur & Savage, 2013, 2015). The authors also referred to Cohen’s (1979) classical analysis of different modes of tourism experiences, arguing that the desire for local immersion and media withdrawal resonates with an experimental mode of experience actively *opposed* to the scripted journeys of mass tourism. In this way, the attempt to resist over-extended connective affordances – through partial disconnection, various forms of spatial and temporal restrictions, or a romantic (re)turn to analogue media (see Adams & Jansson, 2023) – turns into a new, post-digital way of establishing distinction vis-à-vis the “golden hordes” and their less cultured, less differentiated journeys (Munt, 1994).

### **Thesis 3: Cultural capital feeds from a sense of independent navigation in foreign places and thus shuns certain forms of (digitally mediated) guidance**

In their classical study of museum and art gallery visitors, Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) demonstrated how cultural capital fosters, and is expressed through, a seemingly natural “love of art” (which is also the title of their book). In their surveys, the aforementioned “pure gaze” was found to be accompanied by a desire among culturally privileged groups to navigate freely in exhibition spaces, that is, without any additional instructions or recommended paths. The opposite was true among less experienced visitors, who requested signage, concrete guidance, and information about the art pieces and their meanings (thereby revealing their lack of cultural capital). This underscores that cultural capital is associated with autonomy as a core value; the “cultured” person is somebody who does not only search for authenticity (Thesis 1) and keep up clear boundaries around the self (Thesis 2) but also prefers to navigate independently in the cultural and material geography.



Again, much resonance can be found with Bourdieu's findings when considering the history of modern tourism. Similar attitudes can be found among those privileged travellers that once regarded organised mass tourism as a threat to the distinctiveness of travelling. As Austin (2007) showed in a study of late nineteenth-century travelogues, the "cultured" traveller did not want to be confused with the "ordinary" tourist (who was at this time also a relatively new figure), and one way of marking this difference was to avoid more obvious signs of being guided, or (even worse) disoriented. Getting lost in foreign terrain, or, more generally, being identified as someone lacking spatial and navigational ease, was experienced as a "touristic embarrassment". Around the same time, as Koshar (1998) showed in an analysis of late nineteenth-century guidebooks, the Baedeker guide was explicitly designed to help the traveller *resist* various commercial temptations, that is, to avoid being lured into various "tourist traps" and steer clear from places actually "not worth seeing" (according to these cultivated standards). Similar things have been observed in studies of more recent tourism phenomena, such as backpacking and other types of "alternative" travels. Iaquineto (2012), for example, found in a study among backpackers that they often felt that the Lonely Planet guidebook made destinations "too popular" and less exciting to visit – thus indirectly steering these tourists to *other* places.

The digital threats to independent navigation and wayfaring stem from the accentuated logistical affordances that come with locative media. While guidebooks and tourist maps were designed to steer travellers to certain places – whether historical sights, restaurants, or department stores, and especially if published or commissioned by commercial stakeholders – they did not adapt to the individual. Today, locative media and artificial intelligence enable automated prescription (Jansson, 2022b). Getting around with an app like Google Maps, for example, does not only make navigation easier and more efficient due to the fact that the map is place-contingent (meaning that one's position is always "in the middle") (e.g., Abend & Harvey, 2017; Calvignac & Smolinski, 2020); it is also an activity that is shaped by the user's previous activities and engagements inasmuch as they are digitally captured (including browsing history, online transactions, geo-tagging, etc.). Based on such data, which are automatically gathered and computed by the platform and inherently interlocked with the overall Google universe, the user receives tailor-made prescriptions – which are at the same time calculated *predictions* of consumer behaviour (Zuboff, 2015) – regarding *where* to go in the first place. As Abend (2018: 104, citing Theilman et al., 2012) argued, "the egocentricity that prescribes the experience for the end user is used for commercial interests here and geomedial becomes part of much broader efforts to control and steer the 'dwelling in the web'". As such, the propensity of platformed logistical media to *steer* people goes beyond material geographies and influences the autonomy of people to decide about their whereabouts – whether at home or away, as everyday dwellers or tourists.

There are two things here that could explain (at least to some extent) why people with cultural capital feel a certain distaste for being connected while travelling. First, the whole sense of independent navigation – and exploration – is threatened by datafied logistical systems that provide various recommendations. People may feel steered, even *followed*, as much as they feel guided, as they are nudged to visit particular places, accept commercial offers, and participate in automated ratings of tourism related services (Jansson, 2022b). Second, as these systems work in the same way across different realms of social life – which is also to say that they are commercially imperfect – they tend to generate a sense of *sameness*. When tourists come to a foreign place, especially a larger city, they are largely exposed to the same kinds of recommendations as always; think, for example, of major international brands and franchises related to, among other things, retail and restaurants. In addition, tourists are automatically entangled with the “flexible spatial arrangements” of the platform economy (Richardson, 2020a). In addition to navigational platforms like Google Maps, this includes not least services provided by global platform companies like Airbnb, Uber, and Deliveroo, whose operations depend on the combined circulation of people *and* data (e.g., Pollio, 2021; Richardson, 2020b; Stabrowski, 2017). Altogether, the possibility to encapsulate genuine experiences and textures related to a foreign place and culture is undermined by commercial guidance that generally revolve around the same services that are available across different societies and contexts.

Again, this means that the boundaries of the “tourism-world” (regardless of what it contains) dissolve. The logistical horizons of mass tourists, business travellers, local inhabitants, and others, converge – and as such meaningful distinctions blur, “selective unplugging” (Zhang & Zhang, 2022) may come as a solution to those concerned with protecting their cultural capital.

## **Concluding discussion: The disconnection turn as a neo-romantic movement?**

I have in this chapter advanced three theses in an attempt to capture why cultural capital, as shown in previous research, fosters a disposition to disconnect from media in leisure-oriented travel. It should be stressed, again, that this exploration is somewhat speculative in nature. Even though my theses are grounded in previous research, there is still a need to further validate their claims. This is in line with the essayistic ambition of the text; what I have sketched is a framework that can be operationalised in future research. Furthermore, the three theses together provide new insights that contribute to the wider debate in disconnection studies as to how different forms of deliberate media withdrawal are linked to social and symbolic power and contribute to the overall pushback against digitalisation.

Here, I want to stress especially the importance of authenticity and independence as moral values that mediate between cultural capital and

digital disconnection practices. The striving for “authenticity” – regardless of what people and organisations exactly put into this slippery term – has been recognised in previous work on digital detox (see Enli & Syvetsen, 2021; Syvetsen & Enli, 2020). It is also one of the most debated concepts in tourism studies (e.g., Olsen, 2002; Wang, 1999). As a rule – while this can be theoretically problematised – mediations of all kinds stand in the way of people’s authentic experiences. The more mediated something gets, the more its (perceived) authenticity is undermined. Likewise, the more mediations there are, the more difficult it is to feel that one is free to follow one’s inner desires and impulses and discover things that are “true” to one’s identity and preferences. Of course, this is all a matter of social construction, as Bourdieu has shown. Social life as such can be understood as a structure of mediations where symbolic meanings and values are exchanged and classified. Nevertheless – and precisely therefore – the emphasis on authenticity and independence that distinguishes the values of “cultured” travellers reveals how tourism-related disconnection practices are part of a larger symbolic battlefield. The desire to counter certain digital media affordances (as outlined above) is at the same time a matter of following one’s inner compass (that is, *habitus*) and invoking cultural distinctions pertaining to travel and tourism (as well as to media technologies and practices). Inasmuch as disconnection practices in this context are recognised as distinctive markers (including anything from rejecting social media during one’s vacation to travelling without a smartphone), there is also solid ground for new trends to emerge – such as the “digital detox retreat” – which at the same time contribute to the social normalisation of connected lives. We are largely dealing with dialectical processes.

In a historical perspective, the theses I have presented suggest that the sociocultural roots of digital disconnection can be traced to deep-seated value structures of modern society. As shown, the “taste for disconnection” is not entirely new, even though media affordances have been transformed. The articulations of cultural capital that we have discussed here in relation to tourism resonate with historical patterns of “cultured” travel. Such forms of travel stand in opposition to mainstream consumer culture and popular tastes, while at the same time playing a key role in defining a sort of “avant-garde” precisely in relation to the mainstream. As Colin Campbell (1987) argued in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, consumer culture emerged not just through the industrial revolution and accelerating efficiency in the means of production (related to the extension of a Protestant ethic), but also through the prevalence of a romantic ethic celebrating novelty and liminal desires. Such desires – which consumption reproduces rather than satisfies – spur modern individuals (some more than others) to continuously look for the new, the unexplored, and the different. Along these lines, digital disconnection in tourism (and probably also in other social realms) articulates

the enduring cultural prevalence of romanticism. The habitus of the “cultured traveller” seems to foster a distinctive, neo-romantic search for the genuine, or pure “other”, one’s inner self, or “authentic” experiences of place. Then, perhaps, “unplugging” should be considered something more than just a contemporary impulse among digitally exhausted knowledge workers and other members of the connected elite. Perhaps it is part of a larger transition, a “disconnection turn” (Fast, 2021) or a “digital backlash” (as discussed in this volume), whose dynamics can only be understood if studied in relation to the historical dialectics of capitalism and compared with similar phenomena of our modern past.

## Acknowledgements

This chapter is part of the ongoing research project “Measuring Mediatization, Stage 2”, funded by the Anne-Marie and Gustaf Ander Foundation for Media Research.

## References

- Abend, P. (2018). From map reading to geobrowsing: Methodological reconsiderations for geomedial. In T. Felgenhauer, & K. Gäbler (Eds.), *Geographies of digital culture* (pp. 97–111). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315302959>
- Abend, P., & Harvey, F. (2017). Maps as geomedial action spaces: Considering the shift from logocentric to egocentric engagements. *GeoJournal*, 82(1), 171–183. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-015-9673-z>
- Adams, P. C., & Jansson, A. (2023). Postdigital territoriality: Disentangling from digital media as a return to place. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 113(3), 658–674. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2022.2124147>
- Austin, L. M. (2007). Aesthetic embarrassment: The reversion to the picturesque in nineteenth-century English tourism. *ELH*, 74(3), 629–653. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30029575>
- Bagger, C., & Lomborg, S. (2021). Overcoming forced disconnection: Disentangling the professional and the personal in pandemic times. In A. Chia, A. Jorge, & T. Karppi (Eds.), *Reckoning with social media: Disconnection in the age of the Techlash* (pp. 167–188). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Boorstin, D. J. (1961). *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America*. Vintage Books.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Routledge. (Original work published 1979)
- Bourdieu, P., & Darbel, A. (1991). *The love of art: European art museums and their public*. Polity Press.
- Brunsdon, C. (1996). Satellite dishes and the landscapes of taste. In J. Hay (Ed.), *The audience and its landscape* (pp. 343–358). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429496813>
- Calvignac, C., & Smolinski, J. (2020). How can the use of a mobile application change the course of a sightseeing tour? A question of pace, gaze and information processing. *Tourist Studies*, 20(1), 49–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797619885955>
- Campbell, C. (1987). *The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism*. Blackwell.
- Cassinger, C., & Thelander, Å. (2021). Co-creation constrained: Exploring gazes of the destination on Instagram. In M. Månsson, A. Buchmann, C. Cassinger, & L. Eskilsson (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to media and tourism* (pp. 165–175). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429430398>

- Cohen, E. (1979). A phenomenology of tourism experiences. *Sociology*, 13(2), 179–201. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003803857901300203>
- Doerr, N. M. (2021). Digital disconnection as othering. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 91–111). Oxford University Press.
- Enli, G., & Syvertsen, T. (2021). Disconnect to reconnect! Self-help to regain an authentic sense of space through digital detoxing. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection* (pp. 227–252). Oxford University Press.
- Fan, D. X., Buhalis, D., & Lin, B. (2019). A tourist typology of online and face-to-face social contact: Destination immersion and tourism encapsulation/decapsulation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 78, 102757. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2019.102757>
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnection work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Fast, K., & Jansson, A. (2019). *Transmedia work: Privilege and precariousness in digital modernity*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203732748>
- Fast, K., Lindell, J., & Jansson, A. (2021). Disconnection as distinction: A Bourdieusian study of where people withdraw from digital media. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Eds.), *Disentangling: The geographies of digital disconnection*. (pp. 61–90). Oxford University Press.
- Gaver, W. W. (1991). Technology affordances. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems*, 79–84.
- Gibson, J. J. (1979/2014). The theory of affordances. In J. J. Gieseking, W. Mangold, C. Katz, S. Low, & S. Saegert (Eds.), *The people, space and place reader* (pp. 56–60). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315816852>
- Hirsch, E. (1992). The long term and the short term of domestic consumption: An ethnographic case study. In R. Silverstone, & E. Hirsch (Eds.), *Consuming technologies: Media and information in domestic spaces* (pp. 208–226). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203401491>
- Hjorth, L., & Pink, S. (2014). New visualities and the digital wayfarer: Reconceptualizing camera phone photography and locative media. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 2(1), 40–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157913505257>
- Hutchby, I. (2001). Technologies, texts and affordances. *Sociology*, 35(2), 441–456. <https://doi.org/10.1177/S0038038501000219>
- Iaquinto, B. L. (2012). Backpacking in the internet age: Contextualizing the use of lonely planet guidebooks. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 37(2), 145–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2012.11081699>
- Igarashi, H., & Saito, H. (2014). Cosmopolitanism as cultural capital: Exploring the intersection of globalization, education and stratification. *Cultural Sociology*, 8(3), 222–239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975514523935>
- Jansson, A. (2001). *Image culture: Media, consumption and everyday life in reflexive modernity* [Doctoral dissertation, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Gothenburg University, Sweden].
- Jansson, A. (2003). Lifeworlds under siege? A study of mediatization as intrusion and restraint. *Nordicom Review*, 24(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2017-0292>
- Jansson, A. (2007). A sense of tourism: New media and the dialectic of encapsulation/decapsulation. *Tourist Studies*, 7(1), 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797607079799>
- Jansson, A. (2016). How to become an ‘elite cosmopolitan’: The mediatized trajectories of United Nations expatriates. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19(5), 465–480. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549416631549>
- Jansson, A. (2018). Rethinking post-tourism in the age of social media. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 69, 101–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2018.01.005>
- Jansson, A. (2019). The mutual shaping of geomediality and gentrification: The case of alternative tourism apps. *Communication and the Public*, 4(2), 166–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047319850197>
- Jansson, A. (2020). The transmedia tourist: A theory of how digitalization reinforces the de-differentiation of tourism and social life. *Tourist Studies*, 20(4), 391–408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797620937905>

- Jansson, A. (2022a). *Rethinking communication geographies: Geomedia, digital logistics and the human condition*. Edward Elgar.
- Jansson, A. (2022b). Guided by data: A logistical approach to tourism in the platform economy. *Digital Geography and Society*, 3, 100040. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.diggeo.2022.100040>
- Jansson, A., & Klausen, M. (2018). The spreadable city: Urban exploration and connective media. In K. Bezdecny, & K. Archer (Eds.), *Handbook of emerging 21st century cities* (pp. 411–431). Edward Elgar.
- Karlsen, F., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Intrusive media and knowledge work: How knowledge workers negotiate digital media norms in the pursuit of focused work. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(15), 2174–2189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1933561>
- Karppi, T. (2018). *Disconnect: Facebook's affective bonds*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Koshar, R. (1998). “What ought to be seen”: Tourists’ guidebooks and national identities in modern Germany and Europe. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33(3), 323–340. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/261119>
- Leszczynski, A. (2015). Spatial big data and anxieties of control. *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space*, 33(6), 965–984. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775815595814>
- MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(3), 589–603. <https://doi.org/10.1086/225585>
- MacCannell, D. (2001). Tourist agency. *Tourist Studies*, 1(1), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879760100100102>
- Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2013). Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(2), 169–187. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877912452486>
- Maltby, S., & Thornham, H. (2016). The digital mundane: Social media and the military. *Media, Culture & Society*, 38(8), 1153–1168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716646173>
- Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media and Society*, 13(1), 114–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313>
- McKinnon, A. (2017). Religion and social class: Theory and method after Bourdieu. *Sociological Research Online*, 22(1), 161–173. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.4247>
- Molz, J. G. (2013). Social networking technologies and the moral economy of alternative tourism: The case of couchsurfing.org. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 43, 210–230. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2013.08.001>
- Moore, S. (1993). *Interpreting audiences: The ethnography of media consumption*. Sage.
- Munar, A. M., & Jacobsen, J. K. S. (2014). Motivations for sharing tourism experiences through social media. *Tourism Management*, 43, 46–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.01.012>
- Munt, I. (1994). The ‘other’ postmodern tourism: Culture, travel and the new middle classes. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11(3), 101–123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632769401100300>
- Nagy, P., & Neff, G. (2015). Imagined affordance: Reconstructing a keyword for communication theory. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563305115603385>
- Olsen, K. (2002). Authenticity as a concept in tourism research: The social organization of the experience of authenticity. *Tourist Studies*, 2(2), 159–182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879702761936644>
- Peters, J. D. (2008). Strange sympathies: Horizons of German and American media theory. In F. Kelleter, & D. Stein (Eds.), *American studies as media studies* (pp. 3–23). Universitätsverlag.
- Peters, J. D. (2015). *The marvelous clouds: Toward a philosophy of elemental media*. University of Chicago Press.
- Pollio, A. (2021). Uber, airports, and labour at the infrastructural interfaces of platform urbanism. *Geoforum*, 118, 47–55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.11.010>
- Prieur, A., & Savage, M. (2013). Emerging forms of cultural capital. *European Societies*, 15(2), 246–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2012.748930>
- Prieur, A., & Savage, M. (2015). *On “knowingness”, cosmopolitanism and busyness as emerging forms of cultural capital* (pp. 307–318). Routledge.

- Prior, N. (2013). Bourdieu and the sociology of music consumption: A critical assessment of recent developments. *Sociology Compass*, 7(3), 181–193. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12020>
- Richardson, L. (2020a). Coordinating the city: Platforms as flexible spatial arrangements. *Urban Geography*, 41(3), 458–461. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1717027>
- Richardson, L. (2020b). Platforms, markets, and contingent calculation: The flexible arrangement of the delivered meal. *Antipode*, 52(3), 619–636. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12546>
- Schwarz, K. C. (2021). “Gazing” and “performing”: Travel photography and online self-presentation. *Tourist Studies*, 21(2), 260–277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797620985789>
- Stabrowski, F. (2017). ‘People as businesses’: Airbnb and urban micro-entrepreneurialism in New York City. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 10(2), 327–347. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsx004>
- Stäheli, U., & Stoltenberg, L. (2024). Digital detox tourism: Practices of analogization. *New Media & Society*, 26(2), 1056–1073. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211072808>
- Swanlund, D., & Schuurman, N. (2019). Resisting geosurveillance: A survey of tactics and strategies for spatial privacy. *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(4), 596–610. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132518772661>
- Syvetsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Urry, J. (2002). *The tourist gaze*. Routledge. (Original work published 1990)
- van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.
- van Doorn, N. (2020). A new institution on the block: On platform urbanism and Airbnb citizenship. *New Media & Society*, 22(10), 1808–1826. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819884377>
- Wang, N. (1999). Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(2), 349–370. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(98\)00103-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0)
- Zhang, M., & Zhang, X. (2022). Between escape and return: Rethinking daily life and travel in selective unplugging. *Tourism Management*, 91, 104521. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2022.104521>
- Zuboff, S. (2015). Big other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization. *Journal of Information Technology*, 30(1), 75–89. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5>

# Power, pride, and patience in literary reading

*A paradox of precarious attention and disconnection*

KARI SPJELDNÆS

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, KRISTIANIA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, NORWAY

## ABSTRACT

Ubiquitous digital connectivity is a challenge to literary reading for leisure and recreation, and there is a tension between online life and reading concentration. On the empirical basis of a qualitative study on adult readers of literature, in this chapter I explore the tension between the act of reading and the readers' priorities in today's era of deep mediatisation. The chapter presents a typology of three attributes to describe the interrelation between disconnection and concentrated attention as demonstrated by literary readers. First, being a literary reader adheres to personal values that lay the groundwork for pride in self-understanding as a reader. Second, the identity as a reader triggers the power to self-regulate digital connectivity. Third, being an experienced reader enforces enduring patience to read, though not without struggle and firm decisions. The identified attributes represent both positively motivating and negatively stressing experiences. Hence, combining modern media life and long-form reading triggers ambivalence and evokes a paradox of attention. This chapter demonstrates how even personally preferred and well-experienced cognitive demanding acts, such as long-form reading, requires attention on disconnection to keep up attention.

**KEYWORDS:** reading, attention, concentration, digital disconnection, balancing connectivity

---

Spjeldnæs, K. (2024). Power, pride, and patience in literary reading: A paradox of precarious attention and disconnection. In K. Albris, K. Fast, F. Karlsen, A. Kaun, S. Lomborg, & T. Syvertsen (Eds.), *The digital backlash and the paradoxes of disconnection* (pp. 363–382). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855961-18>



## Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how literary reading is perceived and practised in digitalised daily life (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Morley, 2005). Leisure reading unfolds physically in a paper book or digitally in an e-book or an audiobook (Spjeldnæs & Karlsen, 2022). I focus on the tension between the concentration needed to read literature and possible digital distractions, regardless of reading format or mode; whether literature is consumed in text or through sound, offline or online, is not considered here.

These days, the consumption of literature must be practised in a more complex media situation than only a generation ago (Baron, 2021), and spans of unbroken time are scarce in the modern world (Wajcman, 2015). However, what is constant is that the reader of a longer text must keep concentrating for some time (Baron, 2015; Wolf, 2018). Therefore, literary reading for leisure and recreation requires periods of focused attention (Terranova, 2012). The ubiquitous digital reminders and options coming from 24/7 connectivity have become increasingly intrusive and are perceived as threats to concentration (Firth et al., 2019).

Disturbances, real-life obligations, and personal treats of one kind or another are not new to the art of reading, but they have changed under the influence of digital media. Practical duties like cleaning one's house or clothes have not ceased. Further, interruptions from family and private and professional relations are no longer limited in time and place: Anyone can reach you anytime, anywhere. Also, the amount of content for entertainment and education has turned into an endless flow of easily accessible and time-consuming offers competing for attention. On the one hand, the continuous digital connection allows digital media to influence social relations and to profoundly interfere with human life in general (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2021). On the other hand, digital disconnection arguably contributes to better real-life experiences (Syvertsen, 2022) and well-being (Karppi et al., 2021). This chapter concentrates on disconnecting *to* rather than disconnecting *from* (Jorge et al., 2022), and I argue that there is a need to create more knowledge on the interrelation between digital disconnection and demanding cognitive acts. Literary reading is an example of such acts. In this chapter, I explore disconnection and literary reading according to the following research question: How do readers of literature experience the balancing of long-form reading with digital connection in the age of deep mediatisation?

The empirical basis for this chapter consists of a qualitative study of twelve adult readers of fiction and nonfiction undertaken in Norway during the Covid-19 pandemic. In exploring how they perform their literary reading under the ever-present possibility of digital updating or more easily consumed digital entertainment, this study investigates the perceived relationship between attentional pulls (Throop & Duranti, 2015) from digital distractions and a

desire to concentrate, focusing on the dilemma of balancing literary reading with digital connectivity. I aim to highlight some major tensions perceived by media users who want to concentrate but are challenged by digital media.

The following presentation of this chapter's background sets the frame of modern and multi-format literary reading within a digitalised daily life. Proceeding to the theoretical frame, the concepts of temporal ambivalence, authenticity, and self-regulation are introduced before being applied in the analysis. Then follows a discussion before the final presentation of the typology and the concluding remarks.

## **Why literary reading and digital disconnection?**

This chapter emerges from the background of a deeply mediatised society where digital connections ubiquitously influence personal experiences in daily life (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). In their comprehensive analysis of media development and its consequences, Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2017) introduced the three waves of mediatisation in order to place the accelerated process of digitalisation in a historical tradition. Mechanisation due to the printing press characterised the first wave. The electrification of communication media defined the second wave, which began with the telegraph and developed until the third wave, namely the penetrating digitalisation that has taken place in the last couple of decades. These waves highlight distinctive changes in a long history characterised by continuous development. Mechanised print media, such as the book, has predominated over the last 600 years.

The term mediatisation points to the thorough transformation of practices of communication and social processes (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) and emphasises the influence of digitalisation on the social world. The profound transformation caused by the third wave has required the addition of “deep” when describing the last decades of digitalisation. The deep mediatisation and its transformative force must be understood through its relation to time, according to Couldry and Hepp, because time is the central organising principle in human perception.

A reaction to digital overload is to opt-out and actively search for digital disconnection, and this can take place over shorter or longer times (Syvertsen, 2020; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Research on digital disconnection highlights how disconnection is seldom a goal in itself. Instead, disconnection is a means to achieve something else (Moe & Madsen, 2021; Sutton, 2017), like real-life sociality (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019), relaxation and well-being (Beattie & Daubs, 2020; Karppi et al., 2021), or concentration on demanding cognitive tasks, either in professional life (Fast, 2021; Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2021) or private life (Karppi et al., 2021). In the words of Anne Kaun (2021: 1573), I am “countering the assumption that non-use is passive”. Another notion worth stressing is that literary reading is an individual act of concentration.

When readers make their grounds for a literary experience, a non-social mode is usually preferable to a social one. In this realm, disconnection is performed to obtain temporary solitude and not social experiences in real life.

A text constitutes meaning when the information given in the text inter-relates with experiences already registered in the mind (Iser, 1978; Wolf & Barzillai, 2009). In this, the content of what is read is understood by the reader's active participation. Personal engagement and subjective contribution are prerequisites to developing meaning when reading.

Further, being immersed in the text and understanding and remembering what is read is what characterises the quality of deep reading (Birkerts, 1994; Wolf & Barzillai, 2009). Deep reading implies a flow comparable to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) description of engaging in physical activity. Distractions following digital disturbances threaten the concentrated mode that readers need to be in to immerse themselves in literature (Baron, 2021; Baron & Mangen, 2021).

Scholars of reading research have expressed increased concern about the development of long-form reading (Baron, 2021; Baron & Mangen, 2021; Kovač & Van der Weel, 2018).<sup>1</sup> The challenges growing out of digital connectivity on human attention span have become an ever more relevant topic as the reduced capacity to concentrate for a more extended period has become a widespread concern in both scholarly and vernacular environments (Carr, 2010; Hari, 2022; Twenge, 2017).

Trained readers gain advantages in their ability to adapt their reading following the complexity of the text and in their capacity to manage long-form reading in general. In addition, readers of literature develop the ability for complex thinking (Baron, 2015, 2021; Baron & Mangen, 2021), develop empathy (Kuzmičová et al., 2017; Mar, 2011), increase their vocabulary, and train their reading competencies (Baron, 2021; Wolf, 2008, 2018).

The current era of deep mediatisation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) challenges the ability to perform deep reading and to maintain deep reading over time (Firth et al., 2019; Hayles, 2007; Twenge et al., 2019). While reading complete works of fiction or nonfiction cultivates a mix of cognitive strengths (Baron & Mangen, 2021), the distracting effect of the smartphone has been demonstrated to be present even when kept on silent mode (Ward et al., 2017). On the other hand, the ability to collect meaning from a long narrative text is dependent on keeping track of the plotline and characters and continuously relating what is read to relevant former experiences, whether they are themselves read experiences or real-life experiences (Mangen et al., 2019), while documentary and argumentative texts demand that the reader keep track of sustained arguments and multi-sided evidence before proceeding to complex conclusions (Baron & Mangen, 2021).

Readers participate in media consumption and are known to demonstrate active deliberation in their choices and ways of operating their reading

(Jenkins, 2013; Radway, 1984), thus making their handling of a widely digitalised media repertoire interesting to explore. Against the background of a deeply mediated society causing responses of digital disconnection and concern about the future of reading, I now present the three concepts that constitute the theoretical lens for the analysis in this study on literary readers: temporal ambivalence, authenticity, and self-regulation.

## Analytical framework

The first concept in the theoretical approach to the analysis is temporal ambivalence, which is related to experiences of time. The perspective of time as a fundamental principle in handling personal experiences (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) is a guide to approaching the handling of literary reading in a deeply mediated daily life. The interrelation between the deep mediation of our era and the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001) underlines the vulnerability of available time when dealing with digital connection and cognitive attention (Firth et al., 2019; Terranova, 2012). The readers' perceived notions of their handling of digital (dis)connection in the context of literary reading are expressed through their perception of time. The concept of temporal ambivalence (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020) highlights how subjective deliberations mark the experiences of time related to digital development.

It is worth noting how temporal ambivalence brings forward a notion of “lost time”, as demonstrated in a study on smartphone use (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). The ever-present smartphone leads to increased experiences of time lost in indefinite cycles of checking the phone and in long stretches of mobile scrolling (Kormelink & Meijer, 2018; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). The sentiment of “temporal overload” relates to the experience of temporal ambivalence (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). The experience of time as an essential structuring tool leading to ambivalent reactions as revealed in disconnection studies serves as a theoretical perspective into the empirical material in this chapter.

The second concept applied in analysing the empirical basis for this chapter is authenticity. The perspective of authenticity serves to highlight the importance of personal values when handling digital connection and disconnection (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). In the concept of authenticity, there is a related longing for the pre-digital era, the time before deep mediation, and a notion of presence. Being present is regarded as a significant motivation to limit digital connection (Syvertsen, 2020), referring both to physical presence in social relations and to being cognitively present and connected to one's inner self (see also Jorge, Chapter 16, and Jansson, Chapter 17 in this volume).

Notions of authenticity are put down in media use, and inner values and perceived hierarchical structures are demonstrated. Couldry (2004: 115) emphasised the role of media as a structuring element in people's lives, and how people “order” or “practise” their media use indicates how

their perceived hierarchical structures are dependent on inner values. Thus, personal values connected to authenticity guide the practical handling of (dis)connection in daily life.

Being true to one's inner self is perceived as distinctly different from scrolling online (Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Experiences in nature (Syvertsen, 2022; Syvertsen et al., 2019) and holidays away from connected daily lives (Beattie & Daubs, 2020; Syvertsen & Karlsen, Chapter 15 in this volume) are examples of practices of "disconnecting to reconnect" (Sutton, 2017). Notions of a more balanced and fulfilling lifestyle, characterised by an active search away from new technology that is considered invading and alienating, are recognised as subjective reasons to disconnect (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020).

Related to authenticity is the notion of digital well-being, a state where technology is in balance with the non-connected parts of life (Baym et al., 2020; Jorge, 2019; Vanden Abeele, 2020; Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021). Furthermore, digital-wellbeing implies a level of self-control, in contrast to the addictive use of social media with negative implications such as exhaustion and concentration problems (Beattie & Daubs, 2020) resulting from "over connection" (Baym et al., 2020).

While increased discomfort is known to grow out of too much digital connectivity, particularly from Facebook use (Baym et al., 2020), active disconnection practices can enforce a sense of personal empowerment (Allcott et al., 2020). According to the defining power of reading for personal identity (Jenkins, 2013; Radway, 1984), identifying as a reader lays the groundwork for the unfolding of passions, for making personal choices (like what to read), and for fully immersing oneself in an activity according to one's inner values.

Self-regulation is the third concept applied to the analysis in this chapter. The psychologist Ole Jacob Madsen (2015: 124) underlined the interrelation between "exercising control over actions, thoughts, and emotions" and long-held personal values. In this, self-regulation differs from the inherently short-term concept of self-*control*, which is more about managing impulses. Self-regulation implies an overarching perspective of one's actions, and a self-monitoring mode is kept alive based on personal values and desires. According to Madsen, self-regulation includes both conscious and unconscious operations.

Scholarly exploration of self-regulation leads back to the famous marshmallow study, where Walter Mischel and his colleagues found that small children who endured waiting for a second marshmallow before eating the first one given to them were more successful later in life than those who ate their first marshmallow at once (Mischel et al., 1988; Shoda et al., 1990). Later studies have forcefully nuanced the findings in the early marshmallow studies, the first of which was Mischel's initial study in the early 1970s (Mischel, 1974), demonstrating the importance of the children's family background and the reliability of the environment when their ability to decide on waiting for

gratification is considered (Kidd et al., 2013; Watts et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the ability to self-regulate and demonstrate willpower is not to be bypassed when implementing personal acts that require endurance over time (Madsen, 2015). To manage self-regulation, though, Madsen suggested that the ability for metacognition is a prerequisite in searching for a higher goal.

To maintain the balance between online and offline activities, the need for self-regulation requires a forced position (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). The impact of deep mediatisation makes being a digital media consumer a 24/7 identity. The transformative processes involved in profound digitalisation have led to the individualisation of responsibility for balancing a digitally connected life with “real life” experiences (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). This emerging position of self-regulation increases the individual’s responsibility in handling digital connections, as exemplified when users of social media actively interrupt their digital connection to control their lives, time, social life, and well-being in general (Jorge, 2019). The result is that the operating of a digital daily life may lead to an increase in conflicts experienced on a personal level (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020).

In these times of deep mediatisation, demands on ensuring that time is “put to good use” have been transferred from working life into leisure life (Madsen, 2015: 90). The assumption about an empowering force growing out of leading oneself is even more manifest. In a few generations’ time, the concept of work has changed from being a liberating force in itself to becoming empowering, and a relation between self-leadership and self-regulation has emerged (Madsen, 2015). Hence, individual human capital becomes essential in managing modern life, whether it is professional life (Fast, 2021; Guyard & Kaun, 2018) or in the context of leisure reading (Kosch et al., 2022).

In the following, after a presentation of the method, the perspectives of temporal ambivalences, authenticity, and self-regulation are used as key concepts in exploring the literary reader’s balancing of long-form reading with digital connectivity.

## Method

This chapter is based on a study of semi-structured qualitative interviews with adult readers of literature conducted by Faltin Karlsen and I in Norway in January–March 2021. Informants were recruited through snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), starting with a post on Facebook asking for leisure readers (and explicitly not professionals within the literary industry) willing to share their experiences of reading habits and digital influence on reading, including analogue reading (paper) and digital reading (e-book or audiobook). All informants ended up describing how they had been recommended to register for the study from a friend or family member, demonstrating that the Facebook post had reached far beyond the first level

of “friends”. New informants were interviewed until saturation was reached in terms of variation in experiences with digitalisation and literary reading.

Twelve informants responded to a request about being a leisure reader and having experience in analogue reading (paper) and digital reading (e-book or audiobook). They consented to share their experiences of reading habits and digital influence on reading, and in a small survey sent to the informants after their first consent to participate, they submitted information about age, educational background, present occupation, and preferred genres and experiences with different reading media. Five male and seven female readers aged 28–67 were included in the study. The minimum of personal information, such as the informants’ reading media and an indication of their amount of reading, is shown in Table 18.1 to outline the empirical basis for this chapter. Because the study concentrated on the readers’ relation to their reading medium and their experiences of how digitalised daily life influences their consumption of literature, the interview sessions did not dive deeply into variations in the informants’ demographic and social background.

The interviews lasted 40–60 minutes, and most of them were conducted online (Zoom or FaceTime), while two were conducted via telephone. The Covid-19 pandemic situation was the reason for conducting the interviews digitally; however, all the interview sessions turned into deep conversations on the themes addressed by the interview guide. Hence, it is likely safe to assume that the secluded set up of a digital interview might have been rewarding for the informants, considering that literary reading is mostly a private act. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and coded in NVivo. I have translated the quotations in this chapter from Norwegian to English.

**TABLE 18.1** Overview of informants

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Occupation             | Reading formats        | Level of reading |
|-----------|-----|--------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| John      | 28  | M      | Carpenter              | paper + audio          | medium           |
| Richard   | 29  | M      | Digital designer       | audio + paper          | medium           |
| Simon     | 32  | M      | Postdoc                | paper + audio          | medium           |
| Susan     | 34  | F      | PhD candidate          | paper + tablet + audio | heavy            |
| Theresa   | 40  | F      | Librarian              | tablet + audio         | heavy            |
| Alice     | 53  | F      | Unemployed             | tablet + paper         | heavy            |
| Hannah    | 55  | F      | Actress                | audio + tablet + paper | heavy            |
| Kate      | 59  | F      | Newly retired teacher  | audio + tablet + paper | heavy            |
| Henry     | 60  | M      | Researcher             | tablet                 | heavy            |
| Caroline  | 62  | F      | Home-maker             | paper + audio          | light            |
| Rita      | 63  | F      | Bioengineer            | paper                  | light            |
| Gustav    | 67  | M      | Caseworker/ bureaucrat | tablet + paper         | medium           |

*Comments:* Heavy reader: Reads whenever possible, presenting herself as someone who is always reading. Medium reader: Reads regularly, at best every day; also identifies as a heavy reader (partly) because of earlier reading. Light reader: Identifies with books and reads more occasionally, like on holidays and because of social encouragement, like a book club.

Analysis

When analysing the interviews, an inductive approach according to thematic analyses guided the creation of categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which was further developed into coding in NVivo. Out of the initial 23 categories in NVivo, the following 6 were used in the analyses: frequency, concentration, identity as a reader, time, availability, and importance. A level of axial coding was added when the first level of coded material was analysed through the perspectives of temporal ambivalences, authenticity, and self-regulation to understand what the reports of these devoted readers bring forward at a generalised level. In the following, I proceed with the analysis in the following order: the meaning of time-related issues, the sense of authenticity, and the importance of self-regulation.



## **Enduring patience in balancing temporal ambivalences**

Directly addressing reading time versus time spent on smartphones was a recurring theme among the informants. Even though the interview guide had no detailed questions about experiences of time concerning digital connectivity, all informants referred to sensations of time as being essential to their reading practice. The notion of time spent on online activities on smartphones was an explanation for less reading, as clearly expressed by both a younger and an older male informant. Simon (32) said: “I think it [the smartphone] has made me less capable of reading longer texts”. The smartphone, with its immediate connectivity to social media, swallows time and interferes with the ability to indulge in a book. This time-consuming capacity of smartphones was stated by several informants: “I spend much more time on the smartphone than I spend reading books. Absolutely. I do not know how much more, ten times more, I guess” (Gustav, 67).

It is worth noticing that smartphones and social media seem to be automatically interrelated. The relationship was consistently stated as a matter of objective truth, regardless of the interview questions, and it did not trigger any need for an explanation from the informants. The smartphone was the cause of interruptions and broken reading sessions: “I turn it off, I choose no disturbances if I want uninterrupted time to read. It is important to me that my reading is uninterrupted, that I get into the flow of reading” (Alice, 53). The informants clearly expressed tensions between having time to read and concentration in order to delve into a text, on the one hand, and the challenges of disruptions brought on by the smartphone, on the other. Notions of time defined the readers’ experiences at several levels, and the ability to read was directly connected to available time, especially the availability of uninterrupted time. Time was thus the structuring element in their management of literary reading (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). The readers expressed a “loss of time” (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020) when digital connection limited their possibility for reading, and they said how the smartphone leads to a lack of concentration needed to read, and this is sensed and expressed as if time disappears: “It [the smartphone] is negative, it affects me negatively. In every part of my life, my smartphone can be awful” (John, 28). To engage in reading implies being patient and enduring in resisting ubiquitous digital temptations.

## **Pride based on authenticity**

In analysing the reports from these literary readers, there appears the notion of intense devotion. Finding a balance between reading and digital connection and disruptions is a challenge for almost all of them, but they expressed only minor concerns about their ability to master this challenge. Digital ties do not prevent them from reading, even though they have to take some precautions,

and they might even struggle with their self-discipline from time to time. Deep down, they do not doubt their own ability to self-regulate. Even though they participated in this study in their capacity as readers, the overall impact of their identification as literary readers was striking:

[I got these books for Christmas,] and now I am longing to read them, but then, there is a new semester, and I must work on the reading list and everything. So, I try to do it as fast as possible to squeeze in some reading time. That is my goal. (Susan, 34)

If I go on Facebook, that is my choice. And I usually do it once a day, and I admit that this is to check that I do not miss out on something, for instance, birthday greetings and all of that. I think that's nice to do. But if I am in the middle of a book, I'll read that book. [...] Then, no one can stop me. (Hannah, 55)

Reading literature is a prioritised activity for these individuals. Their identity as readers seems to make them keep up their favourite activity even though it requires cognitive presence and they must struggle to maintain their reading capacity over time. To them, literary reading is coherent with their identity as an act of great authenticity (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020).

This study shows a clear tendency in readers to keep track of their priorities for their attention. They seem to have an innately understood hierarchy of what is worthy of their interest, and this conscious prioritising enforces their ability to self-regulate. Several informants clearly expressed how their love of reading strengthens their ability to resist distractions and disturbances in the face of digital connectivity: “When I read, it [social media/smartphone] does not compete” (Susan, 34). Reading is a matter of value, and it fits in with the participants’ overarching personal values (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

The meaning of literature to many of these readers is further emphasised in the deliberation of literature with regard to other media. They also nuance their media consumption within works of literature, and personal assumptions of quality come into question: “It depends on the book; how good I find the book. Take Jon Kalman Stefansson [Icelandic author], for instance. I was completely taken [...] then I do not check on Facebook or what has happened” (Alice, 53).

Attached to the notion of authenticity in being a reader is a nostalgic sentiment that some informants clearly expressed. Interestingly, the longing for paper books and unbroken reading time was highlighted by informants at both ends of the age range. The traditional analogue book is exclusive (Syvertsen, 2020), and both the oldest and the youngest readers referred to experiences of still reading paper books in terms of superiority. To be a reader is experienced as something to be proud of and is connected to one’s inner values and personal identity (Jansson, Chapter 17 in this volume).

## Power to self-regulate

The readers expressed great consciousness of the interrelation between them mastering their time and the possibility to read. The informants' awareness of how their time to read relates to their ability to regulate connected smartphone use is confirmed in the perceived relation between concentration and experiences of time.

Even though the readers are bothered by digital distractions from online connections, they expressed a uniform understanding of how it is up to themselves to make time for reading in their daily life (Madsen, 2015). This is not to say that managing (dis)connection in order to read is without struggle, and several informants clearly expressed how easy it is to be distracted by connected devices and how they firmly put pressure on themselves to resist them:

Sometimes I am extreme in moving my attention toward my smartphone. It depends on me, on how good I am at... Right now, I am in a period of being extremely oriented towards Twitter, so I am checking far too often. (Theresa, 40)

Theresa's underlining of how "it depends" on her reflects the general notion of the readers' need to regulate their media consumption and their connectivity themselves. None of the informants presented any other option than self-regulation to ensure their opportunity for reading (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020).

Being dependent on self-regulation implies personal freedom, including the freedom to take advantage of digital connections. A few of the informants emphasised how digital connection can be an advantage to reading: "I want to read a book, and then, suddenly, I am thinking about the story that engages me, and then I want to check something online (Gustav, 67). It is also worth noticing how the readers of literature are accustomed to navigating in a world of disruptions, regardless of connectivity: "Modern life is full of distractions, and I have at least tried to take precautions to minimise them" (Alice, 53). Physical and digital limitations determine the possibilities to read, and many of these are not at all new to the art of reading, including family needs, practical obligations, other media, or combinations of these.

The understanding of self-regulation as a prerequisite was a general theme among the informants, regardless of whether they face personal challenges in handling a connected daily life or not. "I do not need any special practice [to protect my reading time]", as Kate (63) said, and in this statement, the notion of her being free from invading digitalisation is shared among some of the older informants in our selection. They adhered to the understanding of the need to self-regulate, while at the same time they expressed relief that these are not their problems. However, there was a remarkable prevalence of worries about how continuous digital connection negatively influences people other than themselves. They reported how young people are caught up by their small smartphone screens, and they wondered what this will lead to in

the long run. Not only did they express concern for the younger ones, but there were also explicit references to people their age, friends in their sixties, who “lose” whole evenings because of Facebook. What comes to view is their deliberation of the implicit difference between themselves, who know how to self-regulate, and others who are more likely to fall prey to Facebook and other digitally connected time-stealers.

Regardless of the widespread notion of there being no alternative to self-regulation (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020), many informants expressed a kind of resignation and a sense of being overrun when it comes to the deeper reasons behind the challenges caused by digital connection. It is as if algorithms unavoidably capture them: “It is something about the design of these apps. You are meant to stay there as much as possible. It is an unpleasant design” (Hans, 60); “I do not have Twitter or Snapchat. I do not have many of those dependency apps” (Richard, 29).

Even though they are highly self-aware and take precautions to counter unwanted digital distractions, they see no other option than to accept the structural basis of modern digitalised life (Bucher, 2020) and the profound influence of algorithms. Generally expressed and as a matter-of-fact realisation, this is it. Therefore, there is no real option but to keep on self-regulating.

## The attention paradox

The analysis in this study shows how readers of literature perceive their ability to indulge in long-form reading as determined by time in the current era of deep mediatisation. They expressed a strong interrelation between having time to read and not being caught up by digital distractions. They connected the ability to concentrate on reading with mastering their time and their use of their smartphones. Even though it might be challenging and troublesome, there was an overall tendency that self-confidence is expressed when it comes to the ability to disconnect in order to secure time to read. Digitally induced disturbances can be more invading, more tempting, and more addictive than the ever-present physical disturbances, which are still there; however, different from many “real-life” disturbances, they are in charge of the means of controlling the digital disturbances themselves.

The possibility of being the master of one’s time when digital connection is under control seems evident to these readers. They do not question whether they are going to secure reading time. They are aware that they have to deal with this, and they express self-confidence. They prove to themselves their ability to disconnect even though it is complicated and occasionally beyond their immediate desires. In this, they accept the paradox of having to concentrate on how to concentrate in order to engage in their long-time passion for reading. Thus, to counter penetrating digitalisation by controlling connectivity when immersing in a beloved activity includes not questioning the attention paradox.

Regardless of digitalisation, digital connection, and digital disconnection, adult literary readers must train themselves to hold their attention over time. Being familiar with long-form reading and performing deep-reading means that one has some practice concentrating on a text. This notion of knowing “how to do it” leaves the readers with the motivation to maintain their attention and go on reading.

The notion of having to balance intrusive digital media without rejecting them is a poignant finding in this study. This is clear in expressions about time and in how the readers mobilise the personal strength to occasionally liberate themselves from digital connectivity in order to read. The readers thus demonstrate a temporal ambivalence (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020) in handling reading alongside digital daily life updates, and their power to maintain self-regulation is connected to their identity as a reader (Madsen, 2015). They consider reading literature to be an authentic attribute that is inherent in their conception of themselves (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020), and they expect themselves to be able to handle the tensions following in the wake of constant connectivity (Syvertsen, 2022).

This chapter has explicitly focused on adult and experienced readers. Not only do they identify as readers, but they have also developed their reading habits in pre deep-mediatised times. There is a need for more knowledge on those introduced to reading *in* times of deep mediatisation to broaden our understanding of how continuous digital connection influences the concentration needed to read as well as reading patterns in deeply mediatised societies. Studies on practices among those who have to handle digital distractions without experiences of keeping attention over time, such as when reading to achieve something valuable to them, are needed to broaden the understanding of the influence of digitalisation on literary reading. Further studies on the interrelation between the reading of literature and digital disconnection will enrich the knowledge of literary reading practices and will contribute to the general understanding of how people balance digital connectivity with demanding cognitive acts.

## Concluding discussion

To answer the research question of how literature readers experience the balancing of long-form reading with digital connection in the age of deep mediatisation, I propose a typology based on three distinct attributes to describe the interrelation between disconnection and concentrated attention, as shown in Table 18.2.

**TABLE 18.2** Typology of attributes activated when dealing with disconnection

|                 | In handling disconnection        | In not handling disconnection     |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Patience</b> | - Mastering one's own time       | - Time disappears                 |
| Enduring        | - Succeeding in disconnecting    | - Sense of loss                   |
| cognitive       | - Cherishing uninterrupted time  | - Impatience induced by pre-      |
| presence        |                                  | destined algorithms               |
| <b>Pride</b>    | - High in self-esteem            | - Generally feeling low           |
| Inbound         | - Self-confidence following the  | - Failure to disconnect nags on   |
| motivation to   | perceived identity               | self-confidence                   |
| prioritise      | - Internal values based on being | - Nostalgia toward previous       |
|                 | authentic                        | analogue practices                |
| <b>Power</b>    | - Recognise a responsibility to  | - Inward accusations when failing |
| Ability to      | self-regulate                    | to disconnect                     |
| self-regulate   | - Draw advantage of also being   | - Captured by algorithms          |
|                 | connected                        | - Worries about others            |
|                 | - Experienced in maintaining     |                                   |
|                 | attention over time              |                                   |

*Comments:* Enduring patience, pride in self-understanding, and power to self-regulate are attributes typically triggered when readers are handling, or not handling, continuous digital connectivity to pursue leisure reading.

First, being a reader adheres to personal values and deeply grounded identity attributes. Literary readers have an innate guide to priorities, corresponding with how the age of deep mediatisation enforces mediated figuration of the self (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). They convey pride in self-understanding as a reader. Second, this study shows how readers possess a strength that enables them the power to self-regulate: They can create “strong counter-measures” (Syvertsen, 2020). Even when it is costly and implies self-enforcement, it is possible to store the smartphone somewhere else or delete an app if that is necessary to find time to read. Third, the temporal dimension cannot be forgotten, neither in the dimension of literary reading nor in keeping the digital connection under control to maintain the concentration needed to read. In general, literary readers manage to control their connectivity patiently with their power to self-regulate and their pride in self-understanding. Literary readers demonstrate enduring patience in balancing reading and digital connection. When combining modern media life and long-form reading, each of these attributes can capture both positive and challenging experiences. Each positively named typology attribute brings forward the possibility of its negatively experienced counterpart. The power to self-regulate comes with the option of self-accusation, and failure to disconnect nags on one’s self-confidence. Patience in maintaining cognitive

presence has a flip-side in the ambivalent sense of smartphones taking up too much time and eventually losing time.

This typology of attributes in dealing with disconnection and continuous attention provides new knowledge on the processes needed for readers aiming to engage in literary reading. The typology brings forward an awareness of nuances in balancing the premises of private life where digital connection is the new normal (Ytre-Arne, 2023). The findings in this chapter correlate with those of disconnection scholars highlighting the general ambivalence characterising digital media consumption (Syvertsen, 2020; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). Further, the informants in this study expressed how digital disconnection is a time-limited operation: They capture pockets of reading time through practices of disconnection. In the current era of deep mediatisation, the devoted readers of literature manage to find reading time.

To keep up the authentic self who loves reading as it is developing in time (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) requires effort and motivation. The precarious attention needed to patiently maintain disconnection and continue reading for a while (Beattie, 2020) relies on the pride and power inherent to an identity as a reader. The tension inherent in the attributes required for dealing with disconnection underscores how deep mediatisation triggers contradictions. Moreover, when digital connection is the new normal, the attention paradox emerges: Even personally preferred and well-experienced cognitive demanding acts, such as long-form reading, requires attention on attention to ensure focus and concentration.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Faltin Karlsen for collaboration on the interviews. Thanks also to colleagues and reviewers who have commented on drafts. The research was funded by Kristiania University College and the Research Council of Norway (grant no. 287563).

## References

- Allcott, H., Braghieri, L., Eichmeyer, S., & Gentzkow, M. (2020). The welfare effects of social media. *American Economic Review*, 110(3), 629–676. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20190658>
- Baron, N. S. (2015). *Words onscreen: The fate of reading in a digital world* (p. XV, 304). Oxford University Press.
- Baron, N. S. (2021). *How we read now: Strategic choices for print, screen, and audio*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190084097.001.0001>
- Baron, N. S., & Mangen, A. (2021). Doing the reading: The decline of long long-form reading in higher education. *Poetics Today*, 42(2), 253–279. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-8883248>
- Baym, N. K., Wagman, K. B., & Persaud, C. J. (2020). Mindfully scrolling: Rethinking Facebook after time deactivated. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 2056305120919105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120919105>
- Beattie, A. (2020). *The manufacture of disconnection* [Doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand]. <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.17151578.v1>
- Beattie, A., & Daubs, M. S. (2020). Framing ‘digital well-being’ as a social good. *First Monday*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i12.10430>
- Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10(2), 141–163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004912418101000205>
- Birkerts, S. (1994). *The Gutenberg elegies: The fate of reading in an electronic age*. Faber & Faber.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bucher, T. (2020). Nothing to disconnect from? Being singular plural in an age of machine learning. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(4), 610–617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720914028>
- Carr, N. (2010). *The shallows: What the internet is doing to our brains*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Couldry, N. (2004). Theorising media as practice. *Social Semiotics*, 14(2), 115–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1035033042000238295>
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety: Experiencing flow in work and play*. Jessey-Bass.
- Davenport, T. H., & Beck, J. C. (2001). *The attention economy: Understanding the new currency of business*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnection work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Firth, J., Torous, J., Stubbs, B., Firth, J. A., Steiner, G. Z., Smith, L., Alvarez-Jimenez, M., Gleeson, J., Vancampfort, D., Armitage, C. J., & Sarris, J. (2019). The ‘online brain’: How the internet may be changing our cognition. *World Psychiatry*, 18(2), 119–129. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20617>
- Guyard, C., & Kaun, A. (2018). Workfulness: Governing the disobedient brain. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 11(6), 535–548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2018.1481877>
- Hari, J. (2022). *Stolen focus: Why you can’t pay attention--and how to think deeply again*. Bloomsbury.
- Hayles, N. K. (2007). Hyper and deep attention: The generational divide in cognitive modes. *Profession*, 187–199. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25595866>
- Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2013). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203114339>
- Jorge, A. (2019). Social media, interrupted: Users recounting temporary disconnection on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119881691>
- Jorge, A., Amaral, I., & de Matos Alves, A. (2022). ‘Time well spent’: The ideology of temporal disconnection as a means for digital well-being. *International Journal of Communication*, 16(0), 1551–1572. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18148>



- Karlsen, F., & Syvertsen, T. (2016). You can't smell roses online: Intruding media and reverse domestication. *Nordicom Review*, 37(S1)25–39. <https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2016-0021>
- Karlsen, F., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Intrusive media and knowledge work: How knowledge workers negotiate digital media norms in the pursuit of focused work. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(15), 2174–2189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1933561>
- Karppi, T., Chia, A., & Jorge, A. (2021). In the mood for disconnection. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1599–1614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211034621>
- Kaun, A. (2021). Ways of seeing digital disconnection: A negative sociology of digital culture. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1571–1583. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211045535>
- Kidd, C., Palmeri, H., & Aslin, R. N. (2013). Rational snacking: Young children's decision-making on the marshmallow task is moderated by beliefs about environmental reliability. *Cognition*, 126(1), 109–114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2012.08.004>
- Kormelink, T. G., & Meijer, I. C. (2018). What clicks actually mean: Exploring digital news user practices. *Journalism*, 19(5), 668–683. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916688290>
- Kosch, L., Stocker, G., Schwabe, A., & Boomgaarden, H. G. (2022). *Reading fiction with an e-book or in print: Purposes, pragmatics and practices. A focus group study.* <https://doi.org/10.1075/ssol.21012.kos>
- Kovač, M., & Van der Weel, A. (2018). Reading in a post-textual era. *First Monday*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v23i10.9416>
- Kuntsman, A., & Miyake, E. (2019). The paradox and continuum of digital disengagement: Denaturalising digital sociality and technological connectivity. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41(6), 901–913. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719853732>
- Kuzmičová, A., Mangen, A., Støle, H., & Begnum, A. C. (2017). Literature and readers' empathy: A qualitative text manipulation study. *Language and Literature*, 26(2), 137–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947017704729>
- Madsen, O. J. (2015). *Optimizing the self: Social representations of self-help.* Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315693866>
- Mangen, A., Olivier, G., & Velay, J.-L. (2019). Comparing comprehension of a long text read in print book and on Kindle: Where in the text and when in the story? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00038>
- Mar, R. (2011). The neural bases of social cognition and story comprehension. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62, 103–134. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-120709-145406>
- Mischel, W. (1974). Processes in delay of gratification. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 7) (pp. 249–292). Academic Press. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60039-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60039-8)
- Mischel, W., Shoda, Y., & Peake, P. K. (1988). The nature of adolescent competencies predicted by preschool delay of gratification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(4), 687–696. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.54.4.687>
- Moe, H., & Madsen, O. J. (2021). Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1584–1598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211048969>
- Morley, D. (2005). *Television, audiences and cultural studies.* Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203398357>
- Pyysiäinen, J., Halpin, D., & Guilfoyle, A. (2017). Neoliberal governance and 'responsibilization' of agents: Reassessing the mechanisms of responsibility-shift in neoliberal discursive environments. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 18(2), 215–235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2017.1331858>
- Radway, J. A. (1984). *Reading the romance.* University of North Carolina Press.
- Shoda, Y., Mischel, W., & Peake, P. K. (1990). Predicting adolescent cognitive and self-regulatory competencies from preschool delay of gratification: Identifying diagnostic conditions. *Developmental Psychology*, 26(6), 978–986. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.26.6.978>
- Spjeldnæs, K., & Karlsen, F. (2022). How digital devices transform literary reading: The impact of e-books, audiobooks and online life on reading habits. *New Media & Society*, Online-First. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221126168>
- Sutton, T. (2017). Disconnect to reconnect: The food/technology metaphor in digital detoxing. *First Monday*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i6.7561>

- Syvvertsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The politics of disconnecting*. Emerald.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787693395>
- Syvvertsen, T. (2022). Offline tourism: Digital and screen ambivalence in Norwegian mountain huts with no internet access. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 22(3), 195–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2022.2070540>
- Syvvertsen, T., & Enli, G. (2020). Digital detox: Media resistance and the promise of authenticity. *Convergence*, 26(5-6), 1269–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519847325>
- Syvvertsen, T., Karlsen, F., & Bolling, J. (2019). Digital detox på norsk [Digital detox in Norway]. *Norsk medietidsskrift*, 26(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN.0805-9535-2019-02-02>
- Terranova, T. (2012). Attention, economy and the brain. *Culture Machine*, 13.  
<https://culturemachine.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/465-973-1-PB.pdf>
- Throop, C. J., & Duranti, A. (2015). Attention, ritual glitches, and attentional pull: The president and the queen. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 14(4), 1055–1082.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-014-9397-4>
- Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy – and completely unprepared for adulthood – and what that means for the rest of us*. Simon & Schuster.
- Twenge, J. M., Martin, G. N., & Spitzberg, B. H. (2019). Trends in U.S. adolescents' media use, 1976–2016: The rise of digital media, the decline of TV, and the (near) demise of print. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 8(4), 329–345. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000203>
- Vanden Abeele, M. M. P. (2020). Digital wellbeing as a dynamic construct. *Communication Theory*, 31(4), 932–955. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa024>
- Vanden Abeele, M. M. P., & Mohr, V. (2021). Media addictions as Apparatchik: What discourse on TV and smartphone addiction reveals about society. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1536–1557.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211038539>
- Wajcman, J. (2015). *Pressed for time: The acceleration of life in digital capitalism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ward, A. F., Duke, K., Gneezy, A., & Bos, M. W. (2017). Brain drain: The mere presence of one's own smartphone reduces available cognitive capacity. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 2(2), 140–154. <https://doi.org/10.1086/691462>
- Watts, T. W., Duncan, G. J., & Quan, H. (2018). Revisiting the marshmallow test: A conceptual replication investigating links between early delay of gratification and later outcomes. *Psychological Science*, 29(7), 1159–1177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797618761661>
- Wolf, M. (2008). *Proust and the squid: The story and science of the reading brain*. Harper Collins.
- Wolf, M. (2018). *Reader, come home: The reading brain in a digital world*. Harper Collins.
- Wolf, M., & Barzillai, M. (2009). The importance of deep reading. *Educational Leadership*, 66(6), 32–37.
- Ytre-Arne, B. (2023). *Media use in digital everyday life*. Emerald.
- Ytre-Arne, B., & Moe, H. (2021). Doomscrolling, monitoring and avoiding: News use in Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. *Journalism Studies*, 22(13), 1739–1755.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1952475>
- Ytre-Arne, B., Syvvertsen, T., Moe, H., & Karlsen, F. (2020). Temporal ambivalences in smartphone use: Conflicting flows, conflicting responsibilities. *New Media & Society*, 22(9), 1715–1732. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820913561>

## Endnotes

1. According to Baron and Mangen (2021), novels and nonfiction books are “long long-form” texts. Short long-form refers to newspaper articles up to 2,000 words, and medium long-form refers to journal articles up to 10,000 words. In this chapter, “long-form reading” covers all leisure reading.

# Afterword

## *Final push*

TERO KARPPI

INSTITUTE OF COMMUNICATION, CULTURE, INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY,  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, CANADA; VISITING RESEARCHER, SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING  
SCIENCES, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, LUT UNIVERSITY, FINLAND

“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](http://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.

## References

- Chun, W. H. K. (2011). Crisis, crisis, crisis, or sovereignty and networks. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 28(6), 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411418490>
- Espada M., & Popli, N. (2023, March 16). Why the U.S. and Other countries want to ban or restrict TikTok. *TIME*. <https://time.com/6263851/why-us-wants-to-ban-tiktok/>
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnective work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Hesselberth, P. (2018). Discourses on disconnectivity and the right to disconnect. *New Media & Society*, 20(5), 1994–2010. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817711449>
- Hsu, T. (2018, March 21). For many Facebook users, a ‘last straw’ that led them to quit. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/technology/users-abandon-facebook.html>

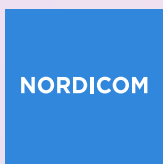


- Kingma, L. (2017, February 27). Digital detox at the end of the world. *Futurism*.  
<https://futurism.com/kakslauttanen-digital-detox-at-the-end-of-the-world>
- Lindgren, A., Doria, A., Lindblom, J., & Ek, M. (2008). Networking in the land of northern lights: Two years of experiences from DTN system deployments. *Proceedings of the 2008 ACM Workshop on Wireless Networks and Systems for Developing Regions*, 1–8.  
<https://doi.org/10.1145/1410064.1410066>
- Manneuvuo, M. (2023). Uneasy self-promotion and tactics of patience: Finnish MPs' ambivalent feelings about personalised politics on social media. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 26(1), 104–119. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779221120028>
- Melville, H. (2004). *Bartleby, the scrivener: A story of Wall Street*. The Project Gutenberg. (Original work published 1853).  
<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11231/pg11231-images.html>
- Roulette, J. (2023, February 9). SpaceX curbed Ukraine's use of Starlink internet for drones –company president. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/spacex-curbed-ukraines-use-starlink-internet-drones-company-president-2023-02-09/>
- Simonite, T. (2022, May 11). How Starlink scrambled to keep Ukraine Online. *Wired*.  
<https://www.wired.com/story/starlink-ukraine-internet/>
- Starlink. (n.d.). *Starlink*. <https://www.starlink.com/map>
- Starosielski, N. (2015). *The undersea network*. Duke University Press.
- Valtioneuvosto. (1999, April 15). Pääministeri Paavo Lipponen II hallituksen ohjelma [Programme of prime minister Paavo Lipponen II's government].  
<https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/67-paaministeri-paavo-lipponen-ii-hallituksen-ohjelma#>
- Wieghehorst, C. (2021). Analogue nostalgia: Examining critiques of social media. In A. Chia, A. Jorge, & T. Karppi (Eds.), *Reckoning with social media* (pp. 207–225). Rowman & Littlefield.

“The digital backlash” covers a range of social and cultural practices of digital disconnection, as well as critiques of the impact of digital technologies and platforms in the world today. Through calls for more restrictive, or more “mindful”, uses of digital technologies, “mobile-free” schools, work regulations along the lines of a “right to disconnect” framework, the rise of new entrepreneurs in the growing “digital detox” industry, as well as critiques of the role of Big Tech – society is deliberating on the stakes of the digital for the human condition.

The digital backlash can best be described as a kind of zeitgeist: a moment in history in which the norms about digital behaviour, consumption, and habits are being questioned, and where the early hype of the digital era beginning in the 1990s is being challenged. This edited volume offers a collection of empirical and theoretical analyses of the digital backlash as it manifests across national, institutional, and everyday contexts.

The contributions span analyses of discourses and public debates around disconnection and the so-called techlash, the ambiguities and tensions of digital connectivity for work, labour, and productivity, the reordering of family and school life along with the perceived negative consequences of digital connectivity for the well-being of children and young people, as well as the playful and sometimes subversive recreational practices that people reinvent in search of authenticity as a response to all things digital. A distinct focus is placed on social practices and dilemmas related to new ways that people adapt to, appropriate, and push back against digital technologies in everyday life.



UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG



Nordicom is funded with  
support from the  
Nordic Council of Ministers



Nordicom is a centre for Nordic media research at the University of Gothenburg.