

Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies

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Abstract

Digital disconnection or ‘digital detox’ has become a key reference point for media scholars interested in how media technology increasingly gains influence on our everyday lives. Digital disconnection from intrusive media is often intertwined with other types of human conduct, which is less highlighted. There is a potential for media scholars to engage with what seems to be a mainstreaming of digital disconnection from self-help literature via mobile applications to media activism and public debate. In this article, we therefore aim to examine digital disconnection beyond media studies by distilling five common positions: disconnection as health, concentration, existentiality, freedom and sustainability. An underlying theme in all five positions appears to be the notion of responsabilisation, although some of the positions attempt to portray disconnection as a way to ultimately resist such responsabilisation. The article thus aims to spur media scholars to treat digital disconnection as part of broader cultural trends.

Keywords

cross-disciplinary, Digital disconnection, digital detox, intrusive media, self-regulation, responsabilisation, review, cross-disciplinary, typology

Introduction

Media seep into new domains of everyday life and society. Media scholars have stuck different labels on this development. ‘Mediatisation’ has as its fundamental premise that ‘our societies are increasingly saturated by digital media and their infrastructures, which have become constitutive for the social worlds in which we live’ (Hepp, 2020: 1411). The starting point for this article is the flipside of this tendency (cf. Kaun and Schwarzenegger, 2014): Digital disconnection is also leaking into new domain of social life – in as wildly different practices as yoga retreat’s promotional

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strategies, ambivalence to smartphone use in everyday life, and movements for ‘workfulness’. With this rise in attention to opting out, avoiding, detoxing or disengaging from digital media follows an overflow into different research fields including labour sociology, environmental studies, philosophy and psychology, but also into general debates about the good life, societal problems and global challenges. This raises the question; how is digital disconnection understood beyond media studies?

This article addresses the question by focusing on what digital disconnection is presented as a solution to from different perspectives in broader public debate. Mirroring the eclectic character of discourses on digital disconnection, we draw on a selection of works that concentrate on popular non-fiction, bordering on self-help literature. Discussing underlying assumptions in these books about the role of digital media, we will argue, can bring out nuances in what digital disconnection is an answer to. The aim is to get a better understanding of the diversity not just of disconnection as an empirical phenomenon, but of approaches to understand it. In effect, we take a novel perspective on how media – in this case their perceived ubiquity and attempts at combating that – is seen to affect the social world. The added value of such a discussion is the potential to see digital disconnection as a phenomenon that is defined and used for different purposes depending on different agendas on wider societal issues, beyond media-centric activism.

Rather than aiming to exhaust contributions within our field, then, we provide an overview of how discussions elsewhere tackle digital disconnection. We discuss five prevalent positions on digital disconnection beyond media studies: (1) Disconnection as health-bringing; (2) disconnection as concentration; (3) disconnection as existentiality; (4) disconnection as freedom; and more tentatively, (5) disconnection as sustainability. Our argument is not that we need to strive for convergence towards one true meaning of digital disconnection, or that certain approaches are normatively superior. Rather, our ambition is that bringing out the different positions will yield a better understanding that is needed for further endeavours to study and contextualize digital disconnection, from within media studies, as well as across disciplines.

In what follows, we first discuss how media scholars have approached the phenomenon of digital disconnection, including previous work on sorting different discourses of digital disconnection. We argue that the attention to the intrusiveness of digital media, coupled with critical scrutiny of processes of responsabilisation, are important perspectives to bring to a discussion of digital disconnection beyond media studies. On that basis, we present the approach of the discussion of positions on digital disconnection, before we lay out the five positions and their underlying assumptions. In concluding, we point to challenges for research in trying to engage with broader cultural discussions of digital disconnection.

Media studies and digital disconnection

Focusing on the users’ experiences, audience scholars portray media as ‘intrusive’ (Mollen and Dhaenes, 2018; Ytre-Arne and Das, 2018). The concept encompasses issues of exploitation, following the economic interests of media companies; formativity, meaning the ways specific roles and types of agency are inscribed into software interfaces and algorithmic media; and exclusion, pointing to the power imbalances between providers and users. Yet, the most obviously relevant aspects for the understanding why digital disconnection has become a widespread phenomenon is the pervasiveness of intrusive media:

The increasing ubiquity, embeddedness of and reliance on digital software-based media in people’s everyday life, requiring them to display and adopt ever more complex and differentiated ways of handling and managing their engagement with media (Mollen and Dhaenes, 2018: 49; also e.g., Deuze, 2011).

Closely aligned with processes of datafication (e.g. [Mejias and Couldry 2019](#)), this is one way to present key characteristics of the state of media that forms the basis for the surge in interest in the phenomenon of disconnection. Scholars have approached the phenomenon in different manners, focusing on the critical potential of such disconnection, people who disconnect and discourses of disconnection.

Importantly, these are all often present in specific studies. An emblematic example is [Portwood-Stacer's \(2013\)](#) early investigation of the performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention. She combines analysis of texts about this abstention with interviews with the non-users. On that basis, the suggestion is put forward that media refusers may consider integrating the act of individual refusal to a larger strategy, as the discursive context appear to matter greatly as to whether such acts are merely seen as quitting or attitude problems, or a subversive deed to overthrow capitalist consumer culture ([Portwood-Stacer, 2013](#)). As such, Portwood-Stacer adds analysis of the discourse on disconnection with user studies to drive a critical argument about political potential (see also, e.g. [Jorge 2019](#)).

Other contributions focus more solely on the critical aspects, often proposing conceptual distinctions. [Natale and Treré \(2020\)](#) argue that we should stop conceiving of disconnection as disengagement, and focus on how people can engage through disconnecting. They place disconnection explicitly in the context of media activism, and discuss hacking and anonymity tools for online media as examples of how users can engage through digital disconnection. [Casemajor et al. \(2015\)](#) examine notions of non-participations from platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as types of potentially empowering political acts rather than simply mere passivity. Hence, the phenomena of non-participation might imply the re-politization of ongoing discussions on digital cultures, for instance, political theory's old distinction between negative and positive freedom ([Casemajor et al., 2015](#)). In these examples, critical media scholars charge disconnection with a more comprehensive understanding of relations between economic practices and politics, and attempt to spur action for change, for instance, by turning disconnection into a form of engagement.

A different take on this can be found in considerations of the notion that digital disengagement is no longer a possibility since people now are entangled in technological assemblages (e.g. [Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019](#), see also [Bucher, 2020](#); [Hesselberth, 2017](#) on 'the (im)possibility of "opting out"'). One clear take away from these contributions is that we at least should view opting out strategies not as a fixed dichotomy, but as a continuum of practices. That also goes for the different cultural, social, linguistic and political contexts and motivations for digital disconnection, which [Kuntsman and Miyake \(2019\)](#) emphasise are still to be explored in depth. Here, some contributions offer insights from the Global South (e.g. [Lim, 2020](#)). Yet, others focus on the context of specific platforms, as in processes of user 'migration' as protest (e.g. [Edwards and Boellstorff, 2020](#)).

Regarding the empirical strand focusing on people who disconnect, [Kuntsman and Miyake \(2019\)](#) remark that much of the research up until now appear to deal with Facebook disconnection or non-use (e.g. [Baumer et al., 2013](#)). Still, the widespread method of subjecting informants to periods of enforced non-use of internet or digital media more broadly should also be noted ([Kaun and Schwarzenegger \(2014\)](#) for an early example; [Wenjie and McKenna \(2019\)](#) for an example from tourism studies). There are good reasons for giving attention to Facebook, however, with its dominant position in many societies (e.g. [Baym et al. \(2020\)](#) for a lucid analysis of 'mindful' discourses among users, and an argument for the prevalence of Facebook). Yet, in other societies, other platforms and considerations are more central to user experiences. As, for example, [Pype, 2019](#) has shown, issues of connection and disconnection appear radically different in societies (in her case DR Congo) that are radically different from those in the Northern hemisphere when it comes to access to infrastructure as well as disciplinary structures of temporality.

Studies of people who in different ways disconnect can draw a lineage from opposition against other new media at different historical junctures. Syvertsen (2017), in a book-length discussion of the phenomenon of ‘media resistance’, analyzes the features of those who protest, dislike or attempt to abstain from media. She argues that through history, resistance towards media has been founded in questions of morality, culture, enlightenment, democracy, community and health, but that the resistance itself has moved from the political to the personal domain (Syvertsen, 2017: 119ff).

In a more recent book, Syvertsen (2020: 120) emphasises that self-regulating media users, often just referred to as digital detoxers, must be understood as a ‘pluralistic bunch’, with quite dissimilar motives. However, there is still a common aspiration uniting them:

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).

For activists, the attention given to digital disconnection can be seen as merely a logical result of the digitalisation of media and the tendencies with intrusive media: Urging disconnection has always been a core call in media resistance, whether in the form of putting away the comic book, turning off the TV set or removing a smartphone app.

There is a parallel here in work on ‘news avoidance’ within journalism studies, where one strand of studies focuses on the positive impact of self-regulating news consumption (as opposed to the potentially democratically problematic sides of habitual low intake of political information). Woodstock (2013), in a much-quoted study, stresses how for some ‘news resisters’, choosing to decrease news use facilitates participation in public life – a claim that again points to the question of the critical potential in digital disconnection.

Individual responsibility seems to be a thread that runs through these discussions. Thus, the concept of responsabilisation seems relevant. Responsibilisation is an essential feature of technology in contemporary analysis of late modern governing. For instance, sociologist Nikolas Rose (1999) in his book *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* presents responsabilisation as a decisive vector in advance liberal style of governing where the citizen is increasingly expected to pursue his or her freedom through different acts of self-regulation, including vital arenas such as health, education and work-life. In addition, with the rapid growth of new technologies and media platforms in the 21st century, responsabilisation has also arguably expanded its scope by introducing new areas of self-regulation for families and individuals. Syvertsen (2017: 89) maintains that this development also has led to a gradual shift from government regulating media companies, to users having to self-regulate their own behaviour in order to prevent media from becoming too invasive. Therefore, the well-established self-help genre also gains new territory within social and online media, and there is now an increasing number of books, applications and services available that provide digital users with self-regulating tools and techniques.

There is a need to reflect further on digital disengagement as an unfolding complex phenomenon, which becomes a helpful entry point into a wider reflection on sociality, agency, rights and everyday life.

In terms of existing studies of discourses more broadly, Syvertsen (2020: 15) argues that there are three ‘dominant motives’ for a digital detox or restriction of online media use, supported by digital detox texts of various kinds (e.g. self-help and marketing material) and interviews with media (non) users: presence, productivity and privacy. The fundamental for the first one is the argument that offline communication is more authentic than online communication, and that digital media distracts from something more genuine (Syvertsen, 2020: 15; cf. Baym et al., 2020). The motive of productivity is also related to distraction, but it focuses on the ways online media draws people away

from work (Syvertsen, 2020: 17ff). The final motive, privacy, encompass an urge to shield oneself from others often banal private information (as shared online), a scepticism towards commercial use of data, and the unease with the lack of transparency in future uses of that data (Syvertsen, 2020: 19).

Based on such work, we want to push further to get at a better understanding of the underlying assumptions or motives: If digital disconnection is distracting from something more genuine – what is the superior activity or state that people should focus on instead, and how is that conceived to improve not just people’s relation to media technologies, but their quality of life or society more generally? And when productivity is the motive for disconnecting, what exactly is the perceived role of digital media within and beyond work situations?

With the ‘mainstreaming’ of digital disconnection, the phenomenon seeps into a wide range of discussions, without necessarily being centre stage. It is these discussions’ assumptions about the role of digital media and the disconnection from them that we are interested in understanding.

Approach and material

Our methodological approach in this article is conceptual in the sense that unlike for instance a literary review, it does not provide a systematic overview and search from exciting data, but seeks novel relationships among similar concepts in order to integrate them theoretically across multiple fields of knowledge (e.g. Jaakkola, 2020). Conceptual papers can again be separated into several (somewhat overlapping) subgenres. We believe our comes closest to a ‘typology’, which aim can be summarised as ‘categorizing variants of concepts as distinct types’. (Jaakkola, 2020: 22). Ideally, the outcome of our typological conceptual analysis is a broader theoretical perspectivation on the phenomena that is digital disconnection, than the exciting research literature currently allows. While recently, the use of typologies in social sciences have been impacted by the possibility for sorting large data sets with the help of computational power (e.g. Bailey, 2005), we present a qualitative discussion. We do not claim to have come up with a classification of simultaneously mutually exclusive and exhaustive types, but employ the different positions heuristically. This follows from our aim to trace how digital disconnection leaks into different domains of social life – not to exhaust all such domains or different takes. The point is to highlight the diversity of such domains and bring out differences and similarities in the role and position ascribed to digital media in these discussions.

With this aim in mind, we have chosen popular or influential non-fiction and self-help books or manifestos at the core of our analysis. The choice of self-help books or manifestos is motivated by the fact that, as found in previous studies of users who disconnect reviewed above, digital disconnection is tightly connected to individual self-improvement as well as activism of different sorts, providing a close alignment with the self-help and do-it-yourself (DIY) genre on a general level. Following Syvertsen and Enli (2020) argument of selection of digital detox self-help books for analysis, which ideally should represent digital detox’s international distribution, we also have chosen popular self-help books representative of the United States, Europe and the Nordic region. But, rather than just focusing on one title, we have chosen to review influential self-help authorships, perhaps more reflective of the different position on values each bring. The selection of books is based on searches of online resources (including search engines and leading bookstores), coupled with a sustained engagement over time with the scholarly research on digital disconnection within and beyond media studies, as well as previous work (author) analysing self-help literature.

By drawing on popular key texts on opting out and digital disconnection, we hope to bring out underlying assumptions and motifs in the literature, that viewed collectively tells us something about which values and themes digital disconnection is intertwined with. Our approach, then, differs from previous work. Syvertsen (2020) brings in discourses found in media coverage, among media

users in everyday life settings, as well as commercial detox texts. As such, her pool is tangent to ours, but ours is focused on specific kinds of popular books (as opposed to a wider definition of texts). As opposed to other contributions (e.g. Hesselberth, 2017), we look for contributions that does not stem from research on media as such, but that include digital disconnection in their argument.

The starting point for our analysis is a set of basic categories in which we assume digital disconnection to now play a role. These categories were developed with a basis in studies of self-help literature. The genre of self-help is based on the philosophy of helping oneself (Madsen, 2015). Helping oneself to do what exactly one might ask? Interestingly, historical research on people's New Year's Resolution from the mid-20th century documents a previous cultural gap between USA and Europa in terms of the belief in improving one's character, whereas today, the American growth mindset appears to have put all doubt and destiny aside (Madsen, 2015; Farber, 1957). The most typical motif of all is not so surprisingly becoming fitter and healthier, followed by the goal to find your true purpose in life, while acquiring the skills for success, improving your personal relationships and developing a deeper level of commitment usually follows on the next places. Whereas, the goal of becoming prosperous and rich still appears to be a mostly American pursuit, perhaps not only reflecting the early pioneer spirit, but also today's dire economic reality for many Americans (Madsen, 2015).

Although the overarching theme is 'digital disconnection' here, the neighbouring concept of 'digital detox' can serve as a point of departure for our analytical categories, since the motif behind more explicitly relates to traditional human cleansing practices and purification rituals. If one looks at definitions of 'detox' for instance from the Cambridge Dictionary one will find the following: 'a period when you stop taking unhealthy or harmful foods, drinks, or substances into your body for a period of time, in order to improve your health'. So, the motivation of improved health is one obvious human conduct that always has been part of traditional detoxes from fat, sugar, alcohol and substances. However, since the phenomena of digital detox also is aimed at things that are not good for us in large amounts, but that are not consumed through your mouth and stored in the body, but is taken in with your eyes and ears and aimed at your mind, health must be expanded to users mental health in the analysis.

When detox is gradually extended to new areas of human conducts, so are the motifs behind. Many of these motifs seem to follow close to the most common pursuits of both self-help and New Year's Resolutions. For instance, human conducts that are related to our conscious being when we are awake and aware like concentration and purpose, and also, its opposite namely just being for itself in terms of existentiality and non-purpose activities that have no goal outside of the activity itself. In an even larger scheme of things, this also implies that digital disconnection touch upon human fundamental values like freedom and the right to choose a life of one's own, and even threats to this in terms of repression, inequality, surveillance and the environmental crisis. Hence, the mediatization of everyday life means that digital connection and detox basically now runs through human conduct from the smallest steps toward self-care and feeling better about yourself to the biggest steps towards saving the planet. The concept of detox has expanded from solely being about digestion and health, to present itself as a viable strategy of responsible self-government in most human and societal matters. With this as our starting point, we have five categories to explore, assumed to capture the evolvement of disconnection from the inner to the outer: (1) health, (2) concentration, (3) existentiality, (4) freedom and (5) sustainability.

From the initial analysis of popular books on each position, we proceed to a wider historical and societal discussion in order to showcase how these positions appear to fit into well-established areas and problems of human conduct, such as being healthy or being aware in the present. From the general categories listed above, then, we worked dynamically, formulating the different positions.

Five positions on digital disconnection beyond media studies

We now turn to the five positions on digital disconnection. The order of presentation is organised so that we start with positions on digital disconnection as concerning the individual, first focused on general health (position 1), and then on efficiency (position 2) and the meaning of life (position 3). Next, we survey positions that focus on systemic aspects, as a means to critique or change a political system (position 4) and, finally and more tentatively, as a means to critique or change the course of the Anthropocene (position 5). In this sense, the presentation follows digital disconnection from specific to more general individual discussions, and then from specific to more general systemic discussions.

Further, when presenting the five positions, we relate them to each other and comment on overlaps as well as similarities. The identification is not meant to be taken as a static list of unique and separate positions. Rather, as we will highlight, individual contributions adhere only partly to our attempts at fencing. Again, we do not see this as problematic since the positions we identify, and their labels, are meant as heuristic tools in the ongoing discussions in the field of digital disconnection research.

Disconnection as health-bringing

‘A digital detox is about learning to live with technology in a way that’s healthy’ argues Tanya Goodin (2017: 7) in her book *OFF: Your Digital Detox for a Better Life*. Goodin is a digital entrepreneur and the founder of digital detox specialists Time to Log Off based in London. Her position and advice to readers seeking a balance between online and offline in their daily lives illustrates how much of the current discourse on digital detox that actively position itself beyond traditional moral categories like good and evil, and allies itself with the pursuit of optimal physical and mental health: ‘It’s not that the digital world is bad, it’s almost that it’s too good. It’s why everywhere you look everyone is one their phones, *all* the time – but this is affecting our physical and mental health’ (Goodin, 2017: 8).

Health as a prominent motif for digital disconnection is to be expected. Health has traditionally been a major concern since the earliest known human cultures, and a significant aspect of all world religions. Whereas today, it is not uncommon to hear the complaint that health has become a religion in itself for Western secular soul-seeking men and women (Madsen, 2014). An important historical hallmark was the launch of World Health Organization’s (WHO) health definition in 1948 that represented a fundamental breach from its predecessors now linking health also with well-being, and defining health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity’ (WHO, 2020: par. 2). WHO’s conceptualisation received both praise for being innovative by no longer relating health purely to disease and illness, but also reproach for being unnecessarily wide-ranging, and setting the stage for an unhealthy pursuit of health as an abundant state, that few if anybody could reach (Callahan, 1973; Huber et al., 2011).

In the following time-period after World War II up until the present, several trends in health are noticeable. One of them is closely linked to the sociological notion of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), which entails that each and one of us now must make a life of one’s own, not the least make the best of one’s health. Political economist Robert Crawford (1980) coined already for 40 years ago the term ‘healthism’ which refers to the tendency to situate problems of health and disease at the level of the individual – and correspondingly that the solutions to the same problems are formulated at that same level. Learning to live with technology in a healthy way is obviously situated within this strand, as Goodin among other highlights in her title: It is *Your Digital Detox* and nobody else’s.

Also, health is repeatedly interpreted as a moral category and an obligation, even replacing the old values of good and bad (Martin, 2006). This line of thinking was apparent when one of the seminal philosophers of the modern era, Friedrich Nietzsche, 1887: 5) pondered about the human condition, and famously warned his readers that ‘the last man’ confides himself in an Earth where everything has become small: ‘One has one’s little pleasure for the day and one’s little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health. “We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink.”’ The above-mentioned Crawford (1980) refers a century later to ‘health’ as a super-value that all other values now must submit to. Goodin (2018: 8) for instance remarks: ‘It’s not that the digital world is bad [...] but this is affecting our physical and mental health’, which illuminate Crawford’s point: health is above all other evaluations.

A third apparent tendency within health since the mid-20th century is the growing recognition of, and preoccupation, with our ‘mental health’ (Wright, 2011), very much like health before it. Author has docketed this development for ‘the therapeutic turn’ in which psychology and the quest for mental health is equivalent to a global secular world religion, that serves as a narrative for selfhood in the 21st century. Jan De Vos (2020: 233) recently posed the question of what happens when the therapeutic culture and happiness industry goes digital, and lists ‘intensification’ as the most obvious answer, since the digital world now makes popular psychology even more accessible, as compared to the old world of manual self-help books. In the interdisciplinary study of therapeutic cultures, the increased preoccupation with health, well-being, happiness and self-development, was originally viewed primarily as narcissistic and doomed (Lasch, 1979; Rieff, 1987), as of today the tendency is to take a less antithetical view of the political and the psychological where acts of self-care, may also be acts of resistance (Madsen, 2020; Salmenniemi and Kempainen, 2020).

Regardless, in much digital disconnection literature like Goodin’s, ‘digital technology’ and ‘mental health’ are depicted up against each other. What Goodin and others seem to have in mind is that when people are constantly checking their smartphones, they are not being aware or mindful in the present moment. Instead, they let their mental state being constantly bombarded with updates and whims.

From this first position, then, the answer to the question ‘What is digital disconnection a solution to?’ is ‘Digital disconnection is good for physical and mental health’.

Disconnection as concentration

The most common motif among American self-help readers has previously been found to be the pursuit of ‘self-control’ (Whelan, 2004). Perhaps, as a response to the growth of technological gadgets, new digital media platforms, and in general potential distractions, self-control appears to have become the primary ‘technology of the self’, that users draw on in order to understand themselves and their digital habits.

A case in point is Cal Newport. Newport is an American computer science professor who has written several best-selling books including *Deep Work* and *Digital Minimalism*, ranging from advice on how to become a ‘straight-A student’, to time management and productivity tools, in order to satisfyingly manage both your workday and life and relationships outside of work. One important intellectual aspect of human activity that Newport depicts as acutely threatened today with us being constantly distracted by what goes on online, is concentration, and what he coins ‘deep work’. Newport (2016: 3) defines ‘deep work’ in the following: ‘Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate’. In particular, Newport (2016: 5) highlights modern knowledge workers as ‘a group that’s rapidly forgetting the value of going deep’. And the reason, according to Newport, is the familiar network tools like e-mail, SMS, social media

such as Twitter and Facebook, and even infotainment websites like BuzzFeed and Reddit, which may offer a lot of fun, but ultimately also fragments knowledge worker's attention. In sum, most knowledge workers entanglement with these tools in their work hours simply leads to more 'shallow work': 'Noncognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted'. (Newport, 2016: 6).

Newport's approach is permeated with efficiency: Every aspect of your life should be organised to afford for maximum productivity, ranging from how you plan your workday (with a method for 'time blocking', as demonstrated in Newport's own daily planner book), to what kind of household tasks you could outsource (cleaning, laundry, gardening etc) in order to make you balance a productive workday and a meaningful 'deep life' focusing on close social relations and quality leisure activities. In this scheme, social media is held forth as a key distraction machine, and Newport advices for different forms of digital 'decluttering' or disconnection.

The rationale behind Newport and similar contributors' argument for digital disconnection is not new, but follows a line of time management self-help literature that focuses on pragmatic tricks to shield your work time from distractions, often brought on by new information technologies. As Melissa Gregg shows in her book *Counterproductive* (2018), self-help advice in the 1970s included recommendations to dial your own telephone number and leave the phone off the hook, so everyone gets a busy signal, or unplugging the phone. What is new, however, is the concern with entertainment media: With intrusive media and the convergence of professional and personal communication tools, digital disconnection becomes a key focus point for efficiency and time management self-help advice.

There is a clear overlap here, with the motive Syvertsen (2020) identified as "productivity", but the agenda is at once more specific (helping knowledge workers to maximise concentration for efficiency), and more encompassing, since the advice on digital disconnection also relate to better spare time. Connected to this tendency, and also related to the discussion of well-being and mental health outlined above, to understand the interest in digital disconnection in efficiency self-help guides, the idea that success at work requires success at home is important. The argument is that cognitive hard work that drives meaningful productivity requires a comprehensive routine that demands certain measures taken also in your spare time. Like an athlete should avoid binge drinking during the weekend, the successful knowledge worker is advised to avoid binging on Netflix at night. Further, as Newport also has noted recently (Newport, 2020), we see at the workplace an individualisation of responsibility for time management and productivity achievements, where each worker is left to figure out how best to juggle the different tools and how best to manoeuvre tasks during a workday and balance between work and leisure.

To sum up, the answer offered by this position to what digital disconnection is good, is:

Digital disconnection is good for personal efficiency and success.

Digital disconnection as existentiality

The motto 'joy of missing out' (JOMO) appears to have emerged in the mid-2010s as a response to the more well-known 'fear of missing out' (FOMO), in particular the fear of not being socially online to check out what everybody else is doing. As such, JOMO can provide an inroad to a third position on disconnection.

Danish psychology professor Svend Brinkmann (2017, 2019) can illustrate this position. He has embraced the counter-slogan JOMO in an attempt to redirect people's attention, affection and lives from the mild anxiety of missing out and the constant need to just check their smartphone if anything

has happened. In his book *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze*, Brinkmann (2017) stands on the shoulders of the Stoics when he encourages readers to question the quest for self-development and accelerated self-help culture. In the successor *The Joy of Missing Out: The Art of Self-Restraint in an Age of Excess* (2019), Brinkmann turns to everything from commercials to social media that demands our attention allied with the motto YOLO – You Only Live Once. Brinkmann argues for an opposite approach, where logging off becomes a part of the art of limitation, a forgotten, but a necessary deed that we need to rediscover today, according to him. Drawing on fellow Dane, the existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, Brinkmann warns against wanting something out of instrumental reasons, where everything we do is done for the benefit of something else than the activity itself. Therefore, the popular idea that getting the most out of ones wishes is not liberating, but in the long run threatens to make us slaves to our desires, according to Brinkmann.

This position seems to find resonance in an increasing recognition that digital connectivity threatens our very way being in the world, and therefore a lot of philosophical and religious writing from the Ancient Greeks to Buddhist mindfulness enjoys a renaissance. A main finding in the study by Baym et al. (2020) referred to above was that the participants were much more likely to describe their time away from the platform as something that increased their awareness rather than their practice. Facebook-scrolling was frequently characterized as a ‘mindless’ and ‘wasted’ activity by the participants. However, moving from the awareness of a disliked behaviour to a potentially new behaviour was not at all as obvious as one perhaps could expect. Baym et al. (2020) critically discuss the American mindfulness-discourse and other forms of mind-based self-regulation, which they find be to quite influential in the informants’ ideas about what disconnection is good for, but appear not as transformative as it adherents often like to claim. This leads to the conclusion that disconnective practices devoted to consciousness and mindfulness may help people find a balance in life, but ultimately it cannot really set them free. The power to avoid is to their fore, but not the power to transform.

We note again a similarity to one of the motives identified by Syvertsen (2020), namely digital detox for ‘presence’, but we underline that digital media do not take centre stage in these discussions of ‘existentiality’. Rather, media appear as one among many kinds of catalysts for an accelerated lifestyle always geared at pursuing something new, to develop and change for the better. Still, digital media seep into domains of our lives, it appears, in ways they did not previously do. As such, the attention given to media here could be seen as a result of their intrusiveness as pervasiveness (Mollen and Dhaenes, 2018). Hence, opting and missing out here becomes a necessary life-principle for resisting the attention economy that put its tempting spells on us through the lure of the small screen and Facebook’s iconic red push notifications.

From this third position, digital disconnection is good for our presence.

Disconnection as freedom

As Baym et al. (2020) highlighted in their findings on Facebook abstention, transformation for real change seemed out of bounds for the participants. This points to the issue of freedom. Freedom, the ability to act or change without constraint, has throughout the ages been characterized by different groups’ struggle from religious and political restrictions and suppression. Although different freedom movements have arguably been successful, the very foundational freedom to choose what you devote your thoughts and feelings to is again on the agenda.

Philosopher, and former Google-insider, James Williams (2018: xii), claims in his book *Stand Out of Our Light* that ‘The liberation of human attention may be the defining moral and political struggle of our time’. The success or failure of freeing our attention from digital distractions is a

prerequisite for all other struggles in contemporary society is Williams' sweeping postulate. Williams also draws on insights from the ancient Greeks, but this time Diogenes of Sinope who according to legend one day is visited by Alexander the Great, the world's most powerful man at the time, and which holds great admiration for Diogenes and promises to grant him any wish Diogenes may desire. Diogenes' surprising answer to Alexander and the crowd watching is 'Stand out of my light!' Williams (2018: 3). Williams' point is that today's leading Big Tech companies, promises to provide us with everything, but like Alexander, in reality, clouds not only our vision but also our attention. Williams (2018) maintains that the question of attention is basically the fundament for all other freedoms. As one of the seminal texts on freedom reminds us, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, freedom of mind, consciousness and attention is a prerequisite for the freedom of expression. This also means that the question of disconnection cannot be reduced to a psychologised frame of attention, according to Williams, like popular self-regulative strategies like 'digital detox', 'unplugging' or 'mindfulness' want us to believe. In order to truly free ourselves, we must first realise what Winston Churchill did before us with architecture that first we shaped our digital surroundings and now they shape us. Williams (2018: 12) concludes his call for freedom and resistance in the attention economy as follows:

In order to do anything that matters, we must first be able to give attention to the things that matter. It is my firm conviction, now more than ever, that the degree to which we are able and willing to struggle for ownership of our attention is the degree to which we are free.

Within this position it is evident that Williams' critique is not only about intrusive media, but about Western society's organisation, not least late modern capitalism, which has found its most cunning expression yet through the media technology that provides the platform for what he and others has labelled the attention economy. This also means that media becomes more important in established discussions about freedom, since they at least according to Williams and his like-minded, are currently like Alexander offering us 'everything', yet blocking our joint efforts to see past the streamline lure that holds such a lasting grip on our hearts and minds. Williams argument is also evident in Baym, Wagman and Persaud's (2020) Facebook-deactivation and mindfulness-study, as they come to the conclusion that platforms like Facebook are like the landscape traps of everyday life in which even rejuvenated mindful scrolling ultimately fails to alter the infrastructure of.

From this fourth position, it follows that digital disconnection is good for winning back our fundamental independence of mind.

Disconnection as sustainability

A final, more tentative, yet emerging position on digital disconnection is tied to environmental and climate issues. While the previously discussed position focuses on societal structures, this position addresses a global level, but is focused on one specific policy issue: Climate change. Clearly, climate change brings us very far away from the traditional focus of self-help literature and issues of individual medical detoxing. Yet, we will argue, abstaining from digital media is now seen also as a tool for minimising consumption and/or energy use, as signalled in concepts such as 'green media'. While this discussion to a substantial extent is based within media research literature, it also extends to other fields such as environmental studies, and beyond that to books for the general audience. On that basis, it makes sense to consider this position in our review.

The literature on green media is manifold and extensive, and some of this at least implicitly relate to the topic of digital disconnection – for example, when discussing the environmental problems with smartphone production, use and disposal (Maxwell and Miller, 2020). However, the link between these policy issues and digital media abstaining is more explicit in other writings. In her

slow media manifesto, Jennifer Rauch (2018: 7) defines ‘sustainable media as values and practices characteristic of a media culture able to indefinitely maintain biodiversity and a high quality of life while avoiding the long-term depletion of natural and human resources’. To be clear, such discussions of slow media and journalism is not merely about the nature and climate – Rauch is inspired among other things by the slow food movement – but her starting point is in the 1970s environmental movements, and she discusses such issues as energy use of digital media and e-waste.

Again, responsabilisation seems to be relevant lens to view this position through: Debates about climate change swings between urging politicians and those in power to take action, and the call for individual citizens to do what they can to change the course. The position on digital disconnection as sustainability must be understood as belonging to the latter camp. By changing your use of media content and hardware, you make an effort and set an example. Moreover, the fact that media as energy-consuming practices and gadgets made for planned obsolescence play a key role in discussions of climate change and sustainability testifies to their pervasiveness in everyday life.

Historically, media has not featured prominently in environmental policy and sustainability discourse. As opposed to the position on disconnection for existentiality, as found in Williams’ formulation, digital media does not at all take centre stage in discussions on sustainability. In a sense, the topic of environmental change sits uneasily with the genre of self-help. The attention given to media technology, infrastructure and use seems, then, to follow from more and more phenomena getting digitalised, resulting in media technologies and mediated communication taking over previously unmediated domains. Watching a movie at home has always come with an environmental price: You would drive your car to the movie theatre or video rental shop, and use electricity to display the movie itself. Now, the whole procedure is digital, and thus, as all forms of energy use increasingly is scrutinised for its climate impact, the energy use of streaming services comes into the spotlight.

From this fifth position, digital disconnection is claimed to be good for our climate and environment.

Conclusion

This article took as its starting point the observation that not only media, but also the disconnection from media, now gets attention from a wide range of actors, linked to a range of merely loosely interlinked domains of social life. To facilitate an exploration of what role disconnection from digital media is given in different wider public debates, we have focused on self-help and related books, employing them as key illustrations of five different positions, built from basic categories associated with the expanding notion of self-help: Health, concentration, existentiality, freedom and more tentatively, sustainability.

The positions hold disconnection to be good for physical and mental health, for personal efficiency and success, for our presence, for winning back our fundamental independence of mind, and for our climate and environment – respectively. Across the five positions we have identified, disconnecting is held forth as clearly positive: whether digital disconnection is seen as an answer to health issues, the lack of productivity, a loss of direction in life, an unjust society or a dying Earth, it is presented as normatively superior to connection. We find few traces of the more nuanced work we have surveyed from within media studies of the challenges with disconnecting (e.g. Bucher 2020), or of critical discussions about the lack of political potential in disconnecting (e.g. Natale and Treré 2020).

Rather, digital disconnection is often portrayed as a necessary first or decisive step, and even sometimes the solution, to the most fundamental human conducts people frequently seek, yet, dubiously also appears to further enhance individualisation and responsabilisation.

Our analysis demonstrates that digital disconnection now permeates a wide area of research fields, whereas media and communication research being only one of them, as media technology appears to be at the centre for a range of societal dilemmas from our health to the economy and ecology. As such, it is not just the media that are pervasive in society and everyday life, but also the disconnection from such media. This also implies that responsabilisation appears as progressively dominant in life in the 21st century, and is intensified through intrusive media and the need for digital disconnection.

The limitation of our conceptual analysis is foremost that unlike a traditional literary review we have not secured a representative sample of the positions that we have chosen to highlight and analyse in depth. Therefore, there might be areas of digital connection that we simply have overlooked, or areas that we have overemphasised, that are given an unreasonably amount of space and attention, where its actual size and influence are smaller than we credit it for. One such bias could stem from the lack of alternative perspectives that stem from our attention to self-help books, which clearly operates within a set of genre conventions and typically originate from a certain world view. Moreover, it should be noted that even those contributions we have discussed which argue for societal change, by and large address liberal democratic settings. In societies with severe restrictions on freedom of speech, where, for example, censorship of digital media is prevalent, we should expect different positions on digital disconnection, perhaps related to the motive of privacy (as identified by Syvertsen, 2020).

Still, by identifying these wide-ranging positions and highlighting how digital disconnection is connected to different agendas and positions, we have brought light on how other disciplines and scholarly debates relate to the home turf of media and communication research. This should allow for a better understanding of how the concerns entangled in digital disconnection is tackled from different perspectives, but also of how media and communication research can contribute to further society's understanding of (the limits of) digital disconnection and its potential effects.

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