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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720914027>

PUBLISHER

SAGE Publications

VERSION

VoR (Version of Record)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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Natale, Simone, and Emiliano Treré. 2020. "Vinyl Won't Save Us: Reframing Disconnection as Engagement". Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/11925576.v1>.

Vinyl won't save us: reframing disconnection as engagement

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Media, Culture & Society
2020, Vol. 42(4) 626–634
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DOI: 10.1177/0163443720914027
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Abstract

Disconnection has recently come to the forefront of public discussions as an antidote to an increasing saturation with digital technologies. Yet, experiences with disconnection are often reduced to a form of disengagement that diminishes their political impact. Disconnective practices focused on health and well-being are easily appropriated by big tech corporations, defusing their transformative potential into the very dynamics of digital capitalism. In contrast, a long tradition of critical thought, from Joseph Weizenbaum to Jaron Lanier passing through hacktivism, demonstrates that engagement with digital technologies is instrumental to develop critique and resistance against the paradoxes of digital societies. Drawing from this tradition, this article proposes the concept of 'Disconnection-through-Engagement' to illuminate situated practices that mobilize disconnection in order to improve critical engagement with digital technologies and platforms. Hybridity, anonymity and hacking are examined as three forms of Disconnection-through-Engagement, and a call to decommodify disconnection and recast it as a source of collective critique to digital capitalism is put forward.

Keywords

digital activism, digital detox, digital disconnection, engagement

Introduction

Discourses around the need to disconnect from our digital devices and take a break from our data-saturated lifestyles are now a recurrent topic of interest in a variety of media outlets. This matches an increasing societal preoccupation about the consequences that

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the constant use and exposure to digital technologies is having on our health and well-being, the quality of our education, and our very capacity to act as free and autonomous human beings. Increasingly, educational facilities are banning or limiting digital technologies and Wi-Fi in class, detox tours are organised in remote locations where people momentarily abandon their smartphones, and a new wave of digital activism advocates for data detox to raise awareness regarding the threats that social media pose to our privacy and freedom (Karppi, 2018). Diverse domains of society are developing initiatives focused on the need to disconnect, pushing us 'to rethink the conceptual normalization of the digital' in our lives (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019: 2). In sum, we are living in the 'disconnection momentum', a particular historical phase where the perception of the saturation with digital technology has reached a climax.

To what extent, however, is disconnection a valuable form of critique and an alternative to the contradictions of contemporary digital societies? How can the discourse and the practice of digital disconnection contribute to shape activism and change? This article aims to address such questions and to reevaluate approaches that frame disconnection as a source of critique and resistance. We argue that the limit of existing approaches is that they conceive disconnection as a form of disengagement from digital technologies and systems. This, however, ultimately reduces its political meaning and outcomes, running the risk of turning disconnection from a reaction and critique to digital capitalism to a mere form of escapism. We contend that as a form of activism, disconnection can only be effective if it is instead embedded in a deep engagement with digital technologies and platforms. Pointing to the fact that critical approaches to digital media and the digital economy have emerged mainly through practices of engagement, we propose the concept of 'Disconnection-through-Engagement' as a way to capture the strategies and practices that characterize such approach. This apparently paradoxical term locates disconnection in nuanced and tactically situated forms of activism such as media hybridity, anonymity and hacking.

Escapism and the commodification of disconnection

The Apple Watch was launched in 2015 as a device that promised to free users from the oppressive pervasiveness of smartphones' buzzes and notifications. In the vision of Kelly Lynch, the developer in charge of the Apple Watch project, this new product was designed to provide us with a more human form of engagement, more respectful of our interactions with other people 'in the moment'.

It is easy to see the irony of this: a new device, one that would be attached to the wrist and always carried around by the user, was presented as an antidote to our dependency from digital devices and platforms. This example epitomizes how digital disconnection has been appropriated by big tech discourse and how its transformative potential has been defused into the dynamics of digital capitalism. This kind of paradoxes recurs in other attempts by the tech industry to monetize the stress and anxiety that derive from our 'permanently online, permanently connected world' (Vorderer et al., 2016). In line with the ethos of technological solutionism (Morozov, 2013), we are offered an increasingly larger number of apps and devices that would allegedly liberate us from the tyranny of other artefacts that were manufactured by the same technological companies. Take for

instance the rise of so-called ‘dumbphone’ sales, which include both old Nokia models and also new products like the minimalist Punkt mobile phone – that ‘only’ make calls and send messages and promise to give us a break from the distraction of permanent connectivity.

Disconnection is colonized by the neoliberal ideology through its framing as escapism. Detox summer camps like famous Camp Grounded promise to ‘disconnect to reconnect’ (Digital Detox, 2019). This slogan points to the key contradiction at the heart of contemporary disconnection. It evokes a nostalgic idea of a ‘locus amoenus’ where, free from the pressure of digital technology, we can finally experience a form of superior reconnection to a primordial state of nature. At the same time, it should be taken literally as an experience of *disconnection* leading to *reconnection*. In fact, many Camp Grounded participants are part of a tech-elite and will use this experience only as a temporary break to return fully regenerated to the same routines of their hyper-connected, highly paid jobs. This temporary ‘disconnective escape’ reveals itself as another way to increase productivity, and is thus, completely functional to the capitalist status quo.

As Fish (2017) points out, ‘technology retreats channel frustrations about social media use into opportunities for personal and corporate growth instead of political activism’ (p. 355). This kind of disconnective escapism is connected to the obsession for rediscovering and experiencing authenticity that pervades our culture and the concomitant rise of a self-regulation society (Syvertsen et al., 2014). In this society, individuals have both the burden and the responsibility to deal with the quandaries and pressures of disconnection, with mindfulness stripped of its transformative potential and reduced to a privatized self-help technique that reinforces systems of oppression and injustice (Purser, 2019).

Hence, the emancipatory potential of disconnection as a form of critique and socio-political change is often deactivated and subsumed by the dynamics of digital capitalism under the innocuous facade of escape in connection to issues of authenticity, mindfulness and nostalgia. Overconnectivity to digital technology is criticized, but only as a way to rediscover and reappraise ‘old’ media formats. Non-digital and offline media experiences are portrayed as somehow more genuine, purer, less toxic and intrusive forms of engagement and sociality. This nostalgic discourse around disconnection is being instrumentalized and exploited by digital corporations as a business opportunity, but it also frequently features in academic reflections on so-called slow media and technological nostalgia.

Yet, there is no easy escape from the complexities of digital societies and from pervasive phenomena such as datafication. We might find solace in disconnection and analog technologies, but we can be sure that vinyl records will not save us.

Technological engagement and critique

If disconnection is often framed as an individualistic choice, is biased towards privileged and educated actors, and always corresponds to some extent to disengagement, how can disconnection practices play a positive role in activism and critique towards digital capitalism? The answer is paradoxical: disconnection only works as critique when it is closely associated and embedded in a deep engagement with digital technologies and platforms.

Behind this apparent paradox lies the fact that critical approaches to digital media and the digital economy have emerged mainly through practices of engagement. Since pioneering works on digital media and software studies (e.g. Manovich, 2002), media scholars have acknowledged that attention to technical issues is central for the study of digital technologies. As Noah Wardrip-Fruin (2009) puts it, 'it isn't just the external appearance and audience experience of digital media that matter. It is also essential to understand the computational processes that make digital media function' (p. xi).

Critical digital media studies, in this regard, has posed its ground on a long-standing tradition of thought that initially emerged within and from computer science. Take, for instance, a very early example such as Joseph Weizenbaum's (1976) *Computer Power and Human Reason*. The book originated from the author's efforts to contextualize his work with pioneering Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies at MIT through different strands of media scholarship and cultural theory, from Lewis Mumford to Marshall McLuhan. Reading it more than 40 years after its publication, it is striking to see how Weizenbaum's concerns resonate in ongoing debates about the impact of computing and 'new' digital media. He underlined as a crucial problem, for instance, the circumstance that computer programmes are often beyond comprehension even to the very same computer scientists who programmed them, and that such inaccessibility of the internal functioning of computer operations was destined to become more and more evident. This is an issue that is now attracting growing concerns in relation with new AI systems based on deep learning and neural networks, whose functioning is often opaque even to the computer scientists who 'train' them. He foresaw the potential risks that speech recognition technology might bring for what concerns privacy and mass surveillance (Burrell, 2016). Much before Jaron Lanier's (2011) concept of the 'lock-in' (pp. 7–14), he pointed to the resilience of software, by which faults and problems are inherited by future generations through programmed systems that have become too complex to be revised, thereby limiting our choices on how to use and implement them. But most importantly, decades before the likes of Lanier, Weizenbaum (1976) called for computer scientists to reflect on the implications of their work, realizing that the main problems of computer science were not technological, but ethical:

They cannot be settled by asking questions beginning with 'can'. The limits of the applicability of computers are ultimately statable only in terms of oughts. (p. 227)

This call to criticism as embedded in practice and technical skills has reverberated in key academic scholarship, from digital ethnographies of online activism (e.g. Coleman, 2012) to political economy (e.g. Vaidhyanathan, 2011), from cultural studies of algorithmic bias (e.g. Noble, 2018) to media archaeological analyses of software (e.g. Chun, 2011). What all these strands of scholarship have in common is that they all rely on the combination of cultural theory with technically situated analysis. Outside of traditional academic platforms, moreover, hacktivist movements such as Anonymous and thinkers and activists such as Jaron Lanier and Edward Snowden have also advanced like-minded approaches, by which the opportunity for critique emerged from a deep engagement with digital technologies.

These experiences tell us that engagement with digital technology, rather than disengagement, is the source where the most influential and effective critique regarding social and political complexity of digital media emerge and circulate. It is for this reason that we argue that digital disconnection can only be effective as a form of critique if it is meant not as a form of escape, but on the contrary, as an opportunity to deepen and problematize our engagement with the digital.

Disconnection-through-engagement

But how can this apparent paradox be solved, and what does Disconnection-through-Engagement entail? Our goal here is to emphasize carefully situated practices that mobilize disconnection in order to improve qualitatively engagement with digital technologies and platforms, leading to opportunities for critique and digital activism. In what follows, we provide three examples of how this can happen in practice.

The first example is related to the role-played by disconnective practices within contemporary forms of hybrid media activism (Treré, 2019). While most of the literature on both digital activism (Kaun and Treré, 2018; Treré, 2019) and disconnection (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019) have tended to overtly focus on social media, many recent manifestations of activism are hybrid, encompassing and merging old and new media, and spreading across a wide spectrum of digital and analogue technologies (Chadwick, 2017). Activists from movements such as the Spanish Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, #YoSoy132 and the Arab Spring are vivid examples not just of digitally connected protesters, but also of selectively disconnected-engaged activists. Tactically, choosing the best constellation of media technologies, formats and infrastructure that best suit their needs for each political circumstance, social movement actors critically engaged with corporate social media, but also often disconnected from them when they generated their autonomous and alternative media technologies. When they were switched off, censored, denied access to or disconnected from certain platforms by authorities, they frequently migrated and activated other kinds of connection including the intensification of physical relationships, the circulation of leaflets and pamphlets and the appropriation of public space. So in a certain sense, many of the successful strategies of post-2011 protest movements can be best understood through the lens of disconnection-through-engagement that we advance in this article.

The second example is more specific and relates to disconnection through anonymity. As shown by Bucher (2020), the datification of contemporary societies means that every disconnection from online platforms is partial, as data are produced not only actively but also passively by individuals and groups. In this context, the use of online anonymizing tools such as Tor or VPN provides a powerful instrument not only to protect users from state and commercial surveillance, but also to disrupt the collection and use of data (Sarda et al., 2019). Disconnection, in this regard, results from obliterating the inherent logic of data circulation through which contemporary digital capitalism functions. Rather than being a marginal phenomenon, the use of anonymizing tools already involves large masses of people across the world – think, for instance, at its use to circumvent censure and state-controlled firewalls in the Chinese context.

The third example is hacking. Changing technologies and platforms, adapting them to different logics and needs, is a form of disconnection because it entails getting rid of the computational logic imposed by company-controlled platforms, and sharing tools for others to do the same. Kaun and Treré (2018) locate Anonymous practices of hacking within the realm of disconnection as resistance. Establishing a connection to the Luddites in the 19th century, Deseriis (2013) similarly argues that the main purpose of Anonymous is also to attack specific machines, in their case, machines that restrict the access to information or information technologies.

A potential criticism to Disconnection-through-Engagement is that all these examples entail the use of forms of technical knowledge, which means that they might exclude individuals and groups that do not have enough proficiency or access to technology. Accepting this argument, however, one risks to reproduce and support a key pillar of digital capitalism, by which surveillance and data collection is seen as a trade-off for the 'free' use of services and platforms, and users are supposed to simply avoid thinking about it. In order to counteract such principle, informed and reflective Disconnection-through-Engagement have to be encouraged as spaces leading to conscious engagement and activism. Such endeavours are not abstract aspirations with little possibility to be embraced outside small circles of technophiles and hackers. As shown by the example of the use of VPN in China, similar practices already involve large masses of users. Both media scholars and activists should in this sense move out from an interpretative framework that sees users as naive, to acknowledge the agency of 'non-expert' users as they navigate complex technical interactions with digital devices and software in their everyday lives. From a practice perspective, moreover, developing and promoting easy-to-use tools that enable forms of situated disconnections will only become more and more crucial.

Conclusion

In today's permanently connected societies, disconnection has the potential to be a powerful tool for political mobilization and social transformation. However, we have argued that in order for disconnection to become a positive input opening up towards activism, change and critique, it needs not to be embedded in forms of escape, nostalgia or disengagement from the digital. In contrast, disconnection should aim at deepening critical engagement with technology. Hence, disconnection can be reinterpreted as a set of situated practices that do not refuse, but instead, complexify our everyday encounters with digital technologies. In order to do so, we also need to infuse politics onto disconnection (Fish, 2017; Jorge, 2019), decommodifying it and recasting it instead as a critique to digital capitalism. Disconnection could be situated within a broader frame of collective political responsibility aimed at producing social and political change, opening 'new ways of imagining relations between technologies and freedoms, engagement and digitality and sociality and refusal' (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019: 2). This also means imagining more effective forms of collective disconnection and refusal that counteract the individualistic, atomized nature of the neoliberal society.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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