Introduction

Reckoning with Social Media in the Pandemic Denouement

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Once celebrated for connecting people and circulating ideas, social media have been problematized as a necessary evil for getting by and getting on in platform capitalism, especially during Covid-19 disruptions to workspace and social life. Criticisms and moral panics about social media's hold over individuals and leverage over society have always accompanied their rise to dominance. In 2016, these criticisms burst into public consciousness in what became known as the 'techlash'. Su, Lazar, and Irani (2021) inform that the techlash normalized critique of big tech and public demands for accountability for their platforms' anticompetitive reach, extractive-addictive design, and toxicity to democracy. Galvanizing questions and criticisms by journalists, users, politicians, and tech workers, the techlash reckons with social media by asking platforms to account for being too big, too engaging, too unruly. Scaffolding public debates and affects, techlash documentaries such as (Amer and Noujaim 2019) and *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski 2020) often weigh strategies to regulate how platforms operate technically, economically, and legally against individual tactics to manage the effects of social media by disconnecting from them.

These disconnection practices—from restricting screen time and detoxing from device use to deleting apps and accounts—often reinforce rather than confront the ways social media organise attention, everyday life, and society. *Reckoning with Social Media* challenges the prevailing critique of social media that pits small adjustments against big changes, that either celebrates personal transformation or champions structural reformation. This edited volume reframes evaluative claims about disconnection practices as either restorative or reformative of current social media systems by beginning where other studies conclude: the ambivalence and complicity of separating from social media, which has been compounded in the pandemic's state of exception.

As we write this introduction, the vaccine's steady roll-out in North America and Europe stands in cruel contrast to the virus's ravage of communities in India and Brazil. In Canada and Portugal where we are based, social media feeds loop from the reserved gratitude of vaccine selfies to the utter devastation of mass cremations, keeping users glued to their screens in states of suspended affective animation. As countries battle waves of Covid-19 infections and its variants with domestic confinement, commercial suspension, and physical separation, social media platforms have further entrenched themselves as a basic infrastructure for work and leisure (Neves and Steinberg 2020). The pandemic's cascade of crises—from the public health breakdown of cities to the economic ruination of communities—has spun ambient anxieties into a state of perpetual disorientation (Means and Slater 2021) that has arguably disrupted the momentum of the techlash. The crises of Covid-19 have hollowed out the techlash's criticism into satire and its radicalism into resignation. Joseph Masco (2017, S65) explains that because of its media saturation and eschatological associations, 'crisis' has lost its power to shock and mobilize: 'It is thus a predominantly conservative modality, seeking to stabilize an existing structure within a radically contingent world.'

While the spread of social media—if we follow the viral metaphor—has been pandemic, worldwide, border-crossing phenomena affecting the many, the forms of reckoning are endemic: localized forms of resistance actualized through connectivity. How do these everyday practices and meanings of restricting and rejecting apps and devices constitute cultures of connection that iteratively configure social media platforms? How can we mobilize such iterative processes of constitution and configuration towards more ethical social media ecosystems? This volume tackles these questions by addressing how disconnection practices imbricate across regulatory, collective, and individual levels.

By grounding critical inquiry in the analysis of interpretive meanings, the chapters in this book situate the conspicuous non-consumption (Portwood-Stacer 2013) of disconnection practices within the politics of networked visibility (Banet-Weiser 2018) and the ambivalent dependence on social media platforms. The chapters put user anxieties about the techlash in critical conversation with civic exigencies about platform economics and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019). Drawing from media and cultural studies, contributions to this volume cut through the scandals of big tech and the outrage of the techlash to examine how everyday resistance to and negotiation of apps and platforms impede and invigorate changes to social media's modulation of what we do, how we think, and how we relate to each other.

Reckoning with Social Media engages with critical debates and pressing issues in a growing corpus of book-length studies on disconnection (Light 2014; Karppi 2018; Brennen 2019; Syvertsen 2020; Stäheli 2021a) that predominantly address resistance to social media either by making sense of the

meanings of disconnection from user studies or by mapping out the imperatives of platforms through political economic and media-theoretical analyses. The proposed volume does not just illustrate the multiplicity, normativity, and contradictions of disconnection practices. The edited chapters go further to interrogate the meshwork of individual and collective practices, personal and structural agency, and restorative and transformative resistance towards social media that make up the dialectics of disconnection. The contributions investigate common themes through complementary methodologies ranging from qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to textual approaches such as discourse analysis and critical theory. This edited volume puts established digital media scholars in conversation with emerging researchers across Nordic, European, British, North American, and South American case studies and field sites.

How we name the processes of reckoning with social media matters. Non-use (Selwyn 2006) and abstention (Portwood-Stacer 2013) direct the attention to the systematic exclusion of connectivity; detox (Sutton 2017; Syvertsen 2020) evokes the context of well-being; opting out (Brennen 2019) speaks of user choice; unfriending (John and Dvir-Gvirsman 2015), undoing (Stäheli 2021b), and disconnective practices (Light 2014) bring us to the activity of managing connections where avoidance is one choice among others (Lingel 2020). This limited example of the conceptual cornucopia illustrates the elusiveness of our object of study and the different approaches developed to make sense of it. We locate practices and discourses of reckoning in the context of disconnection studies, which provides a conceptual register for synthesizing the aforementioned arguments and commitments.

This edited collection is thematically structured around defining the stakes of disconnection for users and researchers, beginning with laying the conceptual groundwork of disconnection studies and its conceptualization of subjectivity. The book proceeds by politicizing desires to disconnect through qualitative and textual analyses of how social media users make sense of their practices and how mobile device designers and artists mobilize imaginaries of disconnection.[1] The book concludes with the temporal politics of disconnection, which provides an analytical lens to understand the nostalgia for communicative immediacy, the leisure of bike touring, and pandemic work-life balance. *Reckoning with Social Media* highlights the disjuncture in scales of inquiry between the interpretive focus at the level of individual users and the critical and theoretical focus at the level of platform regulation. This translation between experiential and infrastructural scales and between

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[1] The image on the cover of our book is from the IP/Privacy collection by fashion designer Nicole Scheller. Scheller designs ways to live with and resist automated facial recognition technologies and forward-looking infrared cameras tracking our identities. Photograph: Franz Grünewald; Model: Christina Dalbert; Design: URBANPRIVACY by Nicole Scheller.

empirical and theoretical approaches is vital to understanding and politicizing disconnection.

DEFINING DISCONNECTION

In 'Defining Disconnection,' Magdalena Kania-Lundholm's chapter 'Why Disconnecting Matters? Towards a Critical Research Agenda on Online Disconnection' maps different approaches in this field of study in the past 17 years. She examines 72 academic texts and shows how studies of disconnection have transformed in tandem with changes in our digital environment. Kania-Lundholm maps the dominant narratives of disconnection studies from the early framings of non-use and digital and social exclusion to different forms of disconnection such as detox, temporary breaks, and the overall interest in the management of connectivity. She points out that in the postdigital era the narratives are again changing. Based on this existing scholarship Kania-Lundholm initiates a critical research agenda for our time, which challenges normative ideas of connectivity, usage, and participation, and asks readers to consider disconnection as both contingent and contextual.

Annette N. Markham's chapter 'The Ontological Insecurity of Disconnecting: A Theory of Echolocation and the Self' theorizes contemporary self-making as constituted through feedback from constant connection on social media. Using the metaphor of echolocation, Markham shows how young people's sense of self relies on getting a response to one's performance of self in everyday life and, increasingly, on social media. Echolocation is communicative, locative, and requires constant connection. Drawing from an eight-year ethnographically grounded study of young people's everyday online experiences, Markham argues that when identity relies on the echolocational response from social media, disconnecting can cause inchoate feelings of existential vulnerability. Theorizing social media through echolocation demonstrates how connection is fundamental to social existence: continuous interaction demarcates the ontological boundaries of the Self and modulates relational positionalities with other people. By attending to micro-processes of sensemaking, the theory of echolocation helps us to understand disconnection, not in terms of binary states, but as modulations of modes, degrees, and moments of connection and disconnection that are entangled in multiple sociotechnical and ideological forces.

DESIRING DISCONNECTION

In 'Desiring Disconnection,' chapters combine interviews, surveys, and thematic analysis to generate critical insights from the interpretive meanings of

disconnection's circuits of desire: its commodification through logics of networked visibility such as influencer culture, its tensions between authenticity and anxiety, and its epistemology of choice as consumer citizens within (neo) liberal democracies. Approaching disconnection through the problematics of commodification, ambivalence, and agency, these chapters demonstrate how individuals deal with social media amid a dialectic between individual tactics and macro-structural pressures and norms. They also demonstrate the intersection between affectivity and materiality present in practices of disconnection.

Ana Jorge and Marco Pedroni analyze how influencers from different categories and origins perform authenticity in their visual and textual content about social media detox. '"Hey! I'm Back after a 24h #DigitalDetox!": Influencers Posing Disconnection' reveals how influencers present themselves as hyperconnected subjects under continuous pressure to be accessible to social media audiences and relevant in the attention economy. Influencers use different strategies to disconnect through temporal bounded activities (holidays, weekends) that are narrativized in a variety of ways: oscillating from being the main focus of their content to being a part of their discourses as lifestyle gurus. Some of the social media detox content is sponsored by brands and corporations, which is yet another level of commodification of disconnection. The analysis suggests that influencers accrue symbolic capital for online self-promotion by deploying tropes of mindfulness, mental health, and well-being, while positioning themselves through increased self-control that they inspire other users to adopt.

In their chapter, 'Privacy, Energy, Time, and Moments Stolen: Social Media Experiences Pushing towards Disconnection', Trine Syvertsen and Brita Ytre-Arne interview Norwegian social media users: one set of interviewees were 'ordinary' users, while others self-identified as 'detoxers'. Their analysis maps out gradations of ambivalence between seemingly opposing positions towards social media use between authenticity and performance, euphoria and anxiety. Users from both samples express overlapping discomforts and fascinations with social media, hence the analysis supports the view that connection and disconnection should not be treated as dichotomous positions. The authors propose to look at four non-exclusive dimensions of social media that push towards disconnection, namely systemic, technological, public, and personal aspects. These can, to varying degrees, influence individuals to perceive the need for disconnection. They find that users are ambivalent not just to social media but also to the strategies and solutions they choose to handle social media problems.

In 'Quitting Digital Culture: Rethinking Agency in a Beyond-Choice Ontology', Zeena Feldman probes these feelings of ambivalence through an analysis of 491 responses to an online survey, 12 semi-structured

interviews, and 169 'audience statements' from a participatory art installation from the Quitting Social Media project. According to Feldman, discourses of disconnection admonish tech while valourizing and commodifying individual choice and responsibility. At the level of participants, networked practices were framed as existing beyond choice because of its structural necessity for themselves and society. The author then considers these findings in relation to economist Albert Hirschman's (1970) seminal framework about consumer power strategies of 'voice' and 'exit'. In making sense of the ways user participation and resistance operate alongside one another, Feldman proposes how viable user agency can be recovered in sociotechnical contexts where permanent disconnection proves increasingly untenable.

DESIGNING DISCONNECTION

Ideal uses and users are always part of technology design (Grint and Woolgar 1991; Akrich 1992; Docherty 2020). Since the early 2000s, the designs of social media have focused on connections. People, services, products, but also desires, behaviours, and traits, have been brought together by the designs of social media. Through these designs, companies in charge persuade us to believe in their vision that technology unifies us and turns the world into a better place (Vaidhyanathan 2018). This vision has always had its cracks, which the techlash has rendered even more visible: fake news, hate speech, and emotional manipulation are examples that have gained publicity. These cracks are deepened by fears of exploitation, manipulation, marginalization, and discrimination that can erode solidarity and sociality (Yeung 2018). When the utopias of social media turn into dystopias, designs of disconnection come into play.

Simone Natale, Paolo Bory, and Gabriele Balbi (2020) describe the narratives where digital media companies position themselves as agents of social change as 'corporational determinism'. Niall Docherty (2020) has explicitly described how social media sites appropriate the idea of healthy habits and well-being into their ideal user models and nudge them towards better and healthier social media choices. Docherty (2020, 9–10) points out that when social media sites begin to script what is healthy, they do it within the parameters of their business. In this model, reckoning with social media does not mark a point of departure from social media but rather is an intensification of the logic of connectivity; it gives the user a feeling of being in control. The interest in user health and well-being can also be read in the wider context of business ethics, which, in this volume, Aleena Chia and Alex Beattie point out has become an important component for product development and public

relations. The two chapters of this section trace the designs of disconnection on two levels: the corporate and the individual.

In the chapter 'Ethics and Experimentation in The Light Phone and Google Digital Wellbeing', Chia and Beattie analyze The Light Phone and Google's Digital Wellbeing Collection to understand how designs of disconnection destabilize dominant ways of seeing, doing, and thinking. Central to their argument is that products of disconnection have the capability to produce disconnection as a sensation: experiences of distance from devices and platforms that do not actually break digital connections. Following Kathleen Stewart (2011), this chapter analyzes disconnective sensations as 'atmospheric attunement'. Important here is that while the designs they examine are part of corporate branding, atmospheric attunement is an affective relation that does not exhaust the potential of disconnection. As such, their argument can be placed in contrast to Simone Natale and Emiliano Treré (2020) who argue that 'the emancipatory potential of disconnection as a form of critique and sociopolitical change is often deactivated and subsumed by the dynamics of digital capitalism under the innocuous facade of escape'. In other words, Chia and Beattie show that while corporations protect themselves with disconnective designs, these designs do not foreclose but engender other ways of living that engage with the politics of the techlash in agnostic ways.

Start-ups are designing 'dumb' phones, fashion designers create clothes that protect from surveillance, even technology companies think of how to design models for healthy use. But what would it mean to drop out of this rat race entirely? Can one design a life that is disconnected and does not agree to the terms and services of these companies? How can we locate this other way of living? In their chapter 'From Digital Detox to 24/365 Disconnection: Between Dependency Tactics and Resistance Strategies in Brazil', Marianna Ferreira Jorge and Julia Salgado address these questions by examining a project by Brazilian artist Ana Rovati who decided to live a life without connective media for one year. For the authors, Rovati's project makes visible that one does not simply choose to disconnect but needs to design their life around that decision—so intertwined are our daily lives with computational networks that Rovati lost contact with 90% of her friends to the extent that, for some, her project was comparable to self-harm. But this self-imposed solitary unhappiness also pushes the artist and the authors alike to ask how we mix happiness with the endless rhythms and flows of stimuli that the commodified forms of social networks throw towards us at accelerated paces. The story of Rovati illustrates that the script for a happy life that is disconnected is not in instant reliefs defined by isolated moments and events. Rather, it exists in longer durations where real changes can take place and become visible.

DELAYING DISCONNECTION

Disconnections are practices of temporal modulation that operate through the earmarking, extending, and abbreviating of time on sites, in apps, and with devices. In 'Overcoming Forced Disconnection: Disentangling the Professional and the Personal in Pandemic Times', Christoffer Bagger and Stine Lomborg interviewed knowledge workers about their pandemic lockdown, asking how communication media structured and shaped a new normal of everyday working life. Bagger and Lomborg report that the domain of the professional was often experienced as all-encompassing: eclipsing spatial boundaries, temporal divisions, and social contexts. Covid-19 restrictions meant that knowledge workers had to renegotiate boundaries between the professional and the personal, by holding the fort of home against the assimilative tide of work demands. Left to their own devices—literally and figuratively—knowledge workers had to demarcate the use of videoconferencing apps for social activities and social media apps for work activities. Bagger and Lomborg conclude that, more than rejection, disconnection can be understood as practices of selecting the optimal mode from a range of alternative modes of communication.

In their chapter 'Disconnecting on Two Wheels: Bike Touring, Leisure, and Reimagining Networks', Pedro Ferreira and Airi Lampinen use interviews with enthusiasts to investigate bike touring as a disconnective activity. While both are interested in the boundary play between work and leisure, Bagger and Lomborg investigate the everyday rhythms of domestic space, while Ferreira and Lampinen investigate temporary liberties outside of ordinary life on the open road, thereby positing an analytic of disconnection as inspiration for the design of the self. The analysis suggests that digital technologies hold some promise in addressing the loss of self-control. Like the other chapters in this volume, the authors eschew easy dichotomizations of connection and disconnection, and its associations with authenticity and artifice in communication. Instead, this chapter uses niche leisure activities to question the normativity of the techlash by reframing problematic smartphone use on the level of individuals and communities of practice.

Clara Wieghorst concludes the volume with the chapter 'Analogue Nostalgia: Examining Critiques of Social Media', which analyzes the conservatism of the techlash veiled in semantic networks of nostalgia that connect public desire and popular critique. Combining etymological analysis with close readings of prominent social media scholarship, Wieghorst shows how the 'analogue' is actively produced through the moralizing of connection as the original sin. Based on a fallacy of presentism, the analogue fans desire for disconnection through fantasies about a media-free state associated with conversation and connectedness. By historicizing nostalgia,

Wieghorst shows how the analogue is framed in opposition to a state of connectivity associated with technology and standardization. Instead of mapping disconnective desire onto an arrow of time, this analysis recommends denaturalizing humanities approaches to disconnection to go beyond regressive imaginaries of sociality before media. This will involve reckoning with social media through its socio-technological materialities and alternative temporalities.

Alexander Means and Graham Slater (2021, 517) predict that the pandemic conjecture demands political articulation towards 'common horizons, collective agency, and livable futures.' Sean Cubitt (2021) states that, in order to stamp the future with the demands of the present, the work of planning for post-pandemic futures must be undertaken in crisis. As we reckon with the pandemic denouement on platforms, policies, and psyches, this book presents a preliminary plan to reconstitute and reconfigure the techlash.

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