

# To disconnect or not to disconnect

## A question negotiated between unequal structures and different scopes of personal agency

VICTORIA A. E. KRATEL

Institute of Media Studies, University of Tübingen

### Abstract

In the “digital age” (Ahmed, 2020) and its “constant connectivity” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), the countertrend of digital disconnection is gaining momentum in both popular culture and academia. And although media non-use practices seem more relevant than ever, not everyone is able to self-determine their media use. This scholarly essay seeks reasons for the unequal access to digital disconnection. The theoretical basis is provided by contributions of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens to the structure and agency debate. Building on this, I introduce the fictitious agent of *homo disconnectus*, who is given maximum agency and the best structures to digitally disconnect. The *homo disconnectus* thus serves as a tool to illustrate contrasts between privileges and marginalization. A deeper examination of gender and class reveals that digital disconnection is particularly difficult for women and low-income earners. Therefore, I conclude that research should not focus solely on digital disconnection that is already practiced but should also closely investigate where and why it cannot take place.

Keywords: *digital disconnection, self-determined media use, homo disconnectus, structure and agency, right to disconnect, gender, feminism, social class*

In an interview with the lifestyle magazine *Elle*, musician and actress Selena Gomez stated that she no longer had social media apps installed on her smartphone. She admitted that she did not want to be tempted to waste time as she “could spend hours looking at other people’s lives” (Chocano, 2021). Even though Gomez is not the only person who wants to spend more time outside the online world, there is one peculiarity: With more than 400 million followers, Selena Gomez is the most-followed woman on Instagram (CBBC, 2023). But how does one of the most successful online personalities manage to be offline? While she retains a say in which content is posted, her accounts are managed by her assistants (Chocano, 2021). The example of Selena Gomez makes it clear that status and money allow her to use social media only by proxy. The effort is mainly made by others. This leads to the assumption that as long as you have the resources, you can be somewhat digitally disconnected and connected at the same time. Since only a few have the possibility to have their online presence managed by an own team

of assistants, the self-help industry sensed its chance to cash in by pointing to other possibilities to decrease one’s media use. Be it through books, expert talks, detox camps or apps, media users are marketed various ways to optimize their consumption (Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020). And even if you do not have to be a globally successful musician and actress to do this, the suspicion is growing louder that some people have better prerequisites than others. To put it in the words of Laura Portwood-Stacer: “It takes privilege to opt out” (Portwood-Stacer, 2014). In this essay, I will deal with the unequal structural conditions that can deny the opportunities for digital disconnection for certain groups of people and thus hinder them from self-determined media use.

Initially, the conversation on media non-use was mainly on closing the digital divide by granting everyone access to the Internet (e.g. Richardson, 2015; Wyatt, 2003). Since then, a paradigm shift, a “wider disconnection turn” (Fast, 2021), has taken place. People are saturated with the overabundance of digital media and are looking for solutions.

The focus is primarily on various ways to disconnect from digital media. These practices have led to the emergence of their own field of research, “disconnection studies” (Kania-Lundholm, 2021; Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021), forming the basis for this very contribution. In addition to the widely used term of digital disconnection, the included empirical research and theoretical contributions make use of various labels such as “disentanglement” (Adams & Jansson, 2021), “unplugging” (Morrison & Gomez, 2014), and “demediatization” (Grenz & Pfadenhauer, 2017; Kopecka-Piech, 2020). Regardless of their name, they all describe practices of media non-use ranging from final termination and temporary abstention to smaller scale adjustments (Zurstiege, 2019). Still, people seem to be at the mercy of digital media. Therefore, in this scholarly essay, I examine the question of who is assigned responsibility while reflecting on the significance of individual privileges. While the self-help industry thrives off the allegation that the extent of media consumption is an individual decision, science is increasingly pointing out the significance of societal structures. In the tradition of the sociological structures and agency debate, which was contributed to by Pierre Bourdieu (1990) and Anthony Giddens (1984), tension between individual scope for action and social constraints can also be identified in the realms of digital disconnection. Within this theoretical frame, I continue by sketching the image of an ideal disconnecter, the *homo disconnectus* who is given unrestricted agency and the ideal structures for *self-determined media use*. The traits listed are composed of various structural privileges that, according to disconnection studies, particularly favor voluntary forms of digital disconnection. In this way the *homo disconnectus* functions as a tool to show that disconnection as a phenomenon is neither generic nor egalitarian. This can also be seen in the social categories of gender and class, which I will continue to discuss in more depth. Addressing gender, it is noticeable that women are subjected to a stronger set of expectations than men. And it seems that they can never get it right: While in some communities digital disconnection is enforced as a female virtue, others expect women to conduct care work in the digital

(Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2017; Portwood-Stacer, 2014). Unfair societal expectations are also directed at people of lower classes. This is especially apparent in terms of labor. While low-income earners were among the last to gain digital access, they are now economically dependent on the Internet (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). As a result of the “new work culture” (Mehta, 2020), the low-wage sector has gone online too.

The examination of the utopian ideal conditions of digital disconnection through the depiction of a *homo disconnectus* and unequal social structures such as gender and class show that a broadening of the focus is needed: Not only real disconnection behavior should be considered, but also the reasons why digital disconnection cannot be practiced.

### Connected to structures, disconnected from agency

Life in the “digital era” (Ahmed, 2020) is characterized by being in a state of “constant connectivity” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) and the overall demand to be “always on” (Turkle, 2008). As technology extensively evolved, especially over the last three decades, a “pro-innovation bias” (Hesselberth, 2019) has prevailed. Due to that it has not only become possible, but a societal norm to be online anywhere at any given time. However, the conquest of time and space through digital media came with the hefty price of its appropriation. This is sometimes even referred to as “colonization” (Kania-Lundholm, 2021) or “intrusions” (Syvertsen & Ytre-Arne, 2021) through technology. When you wake up with the alarm clock of your smartphone in your bed, you are one of many people granting technology access to one of the most personal spaces in your life. And when you start scrolling right after turning off your alarm, then be prepared to feed into the overall trend of increasing screen time. But it is not just the mere presence of digital devices in personal times and spaces that can prove to be problematic due to their intrusive nature. Rather, it is the gateway to a whole range of disadvantages. For one, the default mode of being online is increasingly associated with expectations such as staying on top of the news or being in reach for

family, friends, and acquaintances. This can lead to negative feelings such as news fatigue and social overload (Andersen, 2020; Zhang et al., 2016), taking a toll on one's mental health. Further discourses on the harms of the online world include cyber bullying, political unrest, and surveillance (Zurstiege, 2019). Hence, people are not just online reaping the benefits of living in the digital era but are seemingly "tethered" (Turkle, 2008) to the online world and its downsides. Yet apparently there seems to be a simple solution that allows one to cast off the shackles: digital disconnection. This includes different forms of media non-use such as a complete termination of media use, a temporary break, or the application of a predefined set of rules (Zurstiege, 2019). Regardless of which form is practiced, they can all be described as acts of opting out of a persisting system. Therefore, disconnection is often framed as "refusal" (Portwood-Stacer, 2014) or "rejection" (Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015). It is much more an act of omission than an action itself. Instead of a doing, a negative sociology of not-doing takes place (Kaun, 2021). So, while one might decide to digitally disconnect in one way or another, the great scheme of things remains unaffected leaving everyone else still connected. Accordingly, disconnection behavior predominantly takes place at the individual level. This narrow sphere of action is increasingly pointed out in disconnection literature. Trine Syvertsen (2020) accuses the digital detox industry to spread the mantra of "you are the problem!" (p. 49). She links this to the term *responsibilisation*, a term coined within the realms of governmentality (Juhila & Raitakari, 2019), which describes how responsibility is shifted from causative structures to single individuals. It is not about how digital media impacts individuals but to what extent individuals allow digital media to impact them. *Responsibilisation* is a recurring theme in phenomena that are linked to the self-help industry where happiness and well-being must be pursued alone instead of questioning the overall circumstances (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). Görland and Kannengießer (2021) participated in the exposure of this mechanism dealing with the triad of digital media, time, and sustainability. They perceive time as a sustainable human resource that can be capitalized on by digital media. In this

context, the role of the individual should not be exaggerated but rather the exploitative character of societal contexts and ideologies of capitalism should be taken into consideration. Magdalena Kania-Lundholm (2021) argues similarly by proposing a critical research agenda on online disconnection addressing "the conditions of power and labour in digital capitalism" and "the ideological underpinnings of capitalism".

It is a reoccurring motif that digital disconnection is not a personal decision but is negotiated somewhere between individual needs and societal constraints. In this sense, Zeena Feldman (2021) argues that there might be a choice as to which media is used, but the overall demand to be online remains undisputed. From her empirical results, she derives a beyond choice ontology and discusses digital disconnection within the domain of personal agency. Along these lines, a link can be drawn to the longstanding sociological debate about the relation of agency and structures. Pierre Bourdieu (1990a) describes this relation as an "absurd opposition between individual and society" (p. 31). He depicts personal needs and overriding demands as contrasting forces resulting in conflicts of interest. As humans try to navigate through this, they are each embodying a certain habitus. This includes, on the one hand, socialization through experiences and expectations due to the location of the social position of the individual, which Bourdieu understands to be the *field*. On the other hand, the habitus is also geared towards maintaining or acquiring capital, i.e. personal advantages (Bourdieu, 1997). With structuration theory, Anthony Giddens (1984) builds on this understanding but extends it to include a "duality of structure" (p. 15). The structures are thus the product and medium of social actions which in turn indicates that structures and agency are not isolated but intertwined. While this contains an emancipatory potential for change, agency is not equally attained. Therefore, it is important that agency is viewed in a differentiated manner. Agency is not something that is either completely at one's disposal or not at all, but is gradual as it is dependent on multiple factors. The overall result is that unequal living conditions lead to unequal opportunities to change things. This refers to both the individual scope and the

ability to transform social structures. Applying this theoretical insight to digital disconnection, it can be assumed that not everyone is given sufficient agency to self-determine their media use. This includes both, the possibilities to get connected in the first place and the freedom to get digitally disconnected. Therefore, I pledge that digital disconnection should not be treated as a generic phenomenon equally applicable to all, but as highly specific.

### The homo disconnectus as an ideal disconnector

The examination of structures and agency in an unequal society includes that there are the marginalized. But before I go into more detail on them, I am going to clarify who has the “privilege to opt out” (Portwood-Stacer, 2014) mentioned in the introduction. A central connecting point is provided by Alex Beattie (2020), who describes the “ideal disconnection subject”. He attributes the ability to digitally disconnect to “hegemonic masculinity” and its encouragement of “regular independence or social disconnection” that excuses men from performing affectionate labor. Consequently, disconnection is portrayed as a male virtue that is also applicable to digital disconnection. Building on Beattie’s ideal disconnection subject and further contributions that I have encountered through a literature review, I have collected further sociodemographic factors that enable individuals to digitally disconnect. They are the ideal structures to obtain maximum agency to self-determine one’s media use. Inspired by the theoretical models of homo economicus (Pareto, 1906; Spranger, 1966 [1914]) and homo sociologicus (Dahrendorf, 1977) I am proposing another fictitious agent, the homo disconnectus. While the homo economicus and the homo sociologicus describe the ideal means for a human being in an economical or sociological environment, I have considered factors that enable a human being to digitally disconnect in a highly connective environment. The homo disconnectus thus joins a tradition of fictional agents who are known for their capability “of grasping the conditions of human action and social order” (Reckwitz, 2002). They are able to depict both structural

conditions as well as means of agency, which corresponds to the theoretical basis used in this very essay. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that the models are abstractions. For example, they do not consider the impact of shared knowledge that shapes the way people make sense of reality (Reckwitz, 2002). Therefore, it must be noted that the depiction of the homo disconnectus is not a checklist that has to be worked through in order to be able to disconnect, but rather a metaphorical tool. This also explains why Selena Gomez, who served as an example in the introduction, can also practice digital disconnection even though she is a woman. She possesses other traits attributed to homo disconnectus. In a comparable matter, Beattie (2020) also describes how the ideal image of a man often remains an unfulfilled aspiration for real men. The homo disconnectus serves as a utensil to highlight the contrasts between those who cannot disconnect and those who can, ultimately granting insight to the root causes that can interfere with the free decision to use or not use digital media. However, these are always embedded in individual circumstances.

Having explained the functions of the homo disconnectus, he<sup>1</sup> can be described as a white man who lives in a heterosexual marriage, has a college education, and holds a position as a knowledge worker in a high-income country. Situated in this way, the homo disconnectus does not have to practice digital disconnection but is in the ideal spot to make a conscious decision on this matter and act accordingly. At the core of this argument lies voluntariness. As early as 2003, Sally Wyatt dealt with the aspect of voluntariness in the context of the digital divide. In her taxonomy of non-use she introduces the terms *want nots* and *have nots*. The *want nots* are composed of the resisters and the rejectors who have never used the Internet, simply never want to, or voluntarily broke away from it. On the other side are the *have nots*. They are socially and technically excluded as they were never granted access or expelled from the Internet as they have lost access. Wyatt thus describes that there is one group that can easily access the Internet but makes the conscious decision to not do so while others

<sup>1</sup> As I am portraying the homo disconnectus as male, I proceed to use the male pronouns of he, him and his.

cannot. Even though disconnection is more of a gradual phenomenon and does not require total dismissal of digital media, the traits of the ‚want nots‘ can also be applied to the here depicted homo disconnectus. He definitely has the means to appropriate digital media, be it through infrastructure, financial resources to buy the needed devices, or the competence to operate them. He is financially well off and lives in a region where the digital infrastructure has been greatly expanded (Tréré, 2021). Hence, his non-use is in no way due to a lack of money, structural access, competence, and knowledge but to an assertion of independence and willpower (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Since the homo disconnectus is aware that the use of digital media makes demands on his time and energy, he uses digital disconnection as a deliberate “strategy for work” (Fast, 2021). As a knowledge worker in a neo-liberal environment, he knows that he must eliminate distractions to be productive (Fast, 2021; Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2021). His work also allows him zones of recreation such as weekends and vacations. There, homo disconnectus can rest so that he can again give everything to his career. After all, full concentration is demanded of him in the office. In this respect, digital disconnection is a form of “efficiency engineering” (Gregg, 2018). The professional comes first, private use of digital media is more of a frill. As stated by Beattie and indicated by others, maintaining a social environment via social media is demanded of him as a man only to a limited extent and most parts of his social responsibilities are handed over to a female person close to him (Portwood-Stacer, 2014). In a heteronormative manner the homo disconnectus becomes a user by proxy of his wife. She is the one expected to send digital birthday greetings on his behalf as well as filter and forward any other relevant information. Instead of reflecting on his privileges and showing gratitude, he boasts about his position. The fact that he does not need digital media is an achievement on display which is referred to as an act of “conspicuous non-consumption” (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). The homo disconnectus is thus a beneficiary of the structures granting him the most agency. And even if he wants to emancipate himself from the overall system

that he profits from, he can revolt by making use of strategies of civil disobedience. In his privileged role, he does not have to fear any personal consequences, or at least has the resources to conquer them. The means to fight back and bring change are thus only available to a few (Hesselberth, 2018). It is the homo disconnectus alone who is given the highest degree of agency regarding his media use.

### **Gender: The pitfalls of maneuvering digital media not being a man**

One of the most salient features of Homos disconnectus is his gender as he is unmistakably male. Gender is thus a decisive category when it comes to self-determined use of digital media. This significance cannot be attributed to biological sex, but to the socially constructed gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Boys and men therefore do not inherently have a wider range of abilities regarding media use but are granted more leeway due to existing power structures. The performativity of doing gender is benefiting men by granting them a maximum of self-determination over their media use. But what about everyone else? There is not only a clear androcentrism that favors males, but also a prevalent cisnormative understanding of gender that excludes the experiences of non-binary people. While gender studies and queer studies have examined the non-binary representation in the media (e.g. Miller, 2019; Quinan & Hunt, 2021), there is little clear-cut evidence regarding the use of digital media of genderqueer people. Therefore, no statements can be made here about their disconnection behavior or their possibilities for self-determined media use. However, their non-mention at least implies that they do not have the male privileges. These privileges are also denied to women. As already indicated, girls and women are subjected to different standards that decrease their capabilities of self-determining their use of digital media. This includes denying women access to digital media and enforcing that they be disconnected. An example of this are conservative communities such as the Amish and the ultra-Orthodox. In general, these women are granted some sort of agency, since they are responsible for enforcing and passing on existing rules. Per contra, they are expected to severely limit their media use

in the face of their patriarchal traditions and the role assigned to them therein (Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2017). In more liberal communities more subtle mechanisms are used. There is no strict employment of rules, but rather different forms of discouragement and gatekeeping. The overriding view is that girls and women do not have the basic competence to use digital media (e.g. Brosnan et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2019). The self-determination of girls' and women's media use is therefore curtailed, and their digital disconnection is imposed on them when the legitimacy of their use is denied. But it is not only involuntary non-use that can be problematized. At the other end of the spectrum, girls and women are coerced into media use and are not given opportunities for disconnection. The cause lies in capitalist structures that require women to perform unpaid care work. It is their obligation to look after the well-being of their family and closer social environment. With increasing digitalization, affective labor has also shifted to the online world (Portwood-Stacer, 2014). While it could be assumed that the development of technologies provides some kind of support for women, Judy Waycman (2015) noted that "technologies rarely reduce women's unpaid working time and even, paradoxically, produce some increase in domestic labor" (p. 118). The newly emerged "digital mundane work" (Wilson & Yochim, 2017) includes a broad range of tasks such as "replying to emails or texts, sending happy birthday messages on social media or simply checking in on close friends and family" (Beattie, 2020, 175). But women are not only required to devote themselves to these social tasks for their own benefit. In heteronormative dualism between breadwinner and caretaker, a wife is attributed the responsibility to manage everyday life around the employed husband, regardless of whether she has a job herself. Thus, she also must assume his tasks. While he can be disconnected, she keeps him "abreast of the news that gets announced online" (Portwood-Stacer, 2014). Doing so, she fulfills the role of Kylie Jarretts (2016) figure of the *digital housewife* who is devoting her cognitive and affective efforts to engage in "creative acts of social reproduction" (p. 3). Based on this, Karin Fast (2021) claims that the digital housewife has also become aware of the disconnection turn and has

evolved to the *Post-Digital Housewife*. She is no longer solely responsible for the affective work that is done both online and offline but must now find the right balance between the two in order to maintain digital health for her family members and herself. Hence, "[t]he Post-Digital Housewife would advise the Digital Housewife to go offline and do some post-digital housekeeping" (Fast, 2021, 9). Even when their devotion towards digital care work is demanded, they are expected to know the limits. This in turn means that practices of disconnection are also becoming work.

In the digital age, women can't seem to please anyone: The demands placed on them range from enforced disconnection and its opposite of hyper-connectivity to the quixotic expectation to negotiate in-between them. In none of these expectations are women allowed to completely self-determine their use of digital media, their agency is always restricted. Interestingly, women often defend and uphold these set of rules they are subjected to. For example, the women from restrictive communities declare that they find empowerment in their renunciation (Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2017). In a similar manner, the modern women claim to enjoy online networking as "they are sincerely devoted to their families, and they are comfortable in a social role in which they facilitate the transmission of information, affection, and resources among their loved ones" (Portwood-Stacer, 2014). These alleged preferences might be a product of the patriarchal bargain. Therein women maintain patriarchal structures because they were able to negotiate arrangements that grant them certain benefits. To oppose patriarchal expectations is to lose those advantages and be completely cast out (Kandiyoti, 1988). Female refusal is thus a highly political matter that is drawing on personal resources. In the end, female self-determination remains an illusion granting them no other option than to surrender to their expected media. In this sense, the justification of one's own circumstances forms to be a coping mechanism when agency is lacking.

### Social class and labor: Click to exist

While the homo disconnectus boasts of conspicuous non-consumption, this status

symbol is not available to all. Otherwise, it would not be a status symbol. Yet, according to Bell Hooks (2000), it is actually “conspicuous consumption” that frees people from class shame. However, the tables have turned: It is not the latest smartphone model that is being bragged about anymore but the rudimentary “dumb phone” (Bearne, 2022). Closely linked to the issue of consumption, digital disconnection is also a matter of social class. Since there have been numerous suggestions in scholarly discourse to define, model, and classify social class, I choose to focus on class in terms of labor. Lower classes are characterized accordingly by a lower income and are largely referred to as the working class (e.g. Nolan & Weisstanner, 2022; Reuning & McElwee, 2021). Labor is also a recurring issue in disconnection studies (e.g. Fast, 2021; Hesselberth, 2018; Syvertsen, 2020), fostering the discussion of class. As illustrated through the homo disconnectus, digital media is seen as a threat to productivity within neoliberal culture. Just a quick glance at your smartphone can tempt you into an hour-long session of doom scrolling, leaving you unprofitable. But mixing leisure and work works both ways. Whereas in the past, employees could only be reached in an emergency after hours, on weekends, or even on vacation, today they are just a text message, email, or phone call away. To protect workers from exploitation, the automotive companies *Volkswagen* and *Daimler* are known to have their own policies to prevent communication outside working hours. Meanwhile, the matter has been raised to a legislative level. Various countries followed France’s *El Khomri Law* and passed bills drawing a clear line between work and leisure. What is popularly known as the *right to disconnect* is considered a contender for a new human right (Von Bergen & Bressler, 2019). But while the right to disconnect is viewed as a milestone for digital disconnection, it is still subjected to legitimate criticism. In this context, Pepita Hesselberth brings up the structuring paradox of disconnection that implies that one has to be connected at some point to make use of the right to disconnect. Opting out indicates that “one (first) has to connect more, that is, spend more time, energy, and effort engaging with these connective technologies, even if they

are the very thing, or paradigm, one wishes to opt out from” (Hesselberth, 2018). The right to disconnect consequently becomes an achievement that must be earned first.

Although I acknowledge the right to disconnect as a step towards self-determined media use, there is an underlying classist understanding of work that needs to be addressed. To be precise: The right to disconnect seems to be only useful to those who work in white collar jobs in bigger companies leaving their desk directly after they have finished their 9 to 5 workday. It does not draw any new boundaries but merely helps to enforce the working hours that are already regulated by the employment contracts. People with flexible work hours or no steady employment are largely left out of the conversation. Still, they are the ones who are particularly affected, since remote activities and shift work require additional arrangements, which are made via digital media (Gregg, 2011).

Not only are the boundaries between work and leisure becoming fundamentally blurred, but also between corporate profit and personal gain. The Internet has increasingly become a “professional necessity” (Beattie, 2020) for marketing one’s own work to secure future employment. The extent to which professional networking and the promotion of one’s own performance are also pursued outside the office hours is therefore up to the individual. This applies to a broad range of highly respected professions such as journalism, public relations, and academia (Beattie, 2020). For the precarious sector it becomes even more drastic. The linchpin forms the gig-economy. While many see an opportunity to earn big money online, the gig economy has established parlous working models. Be it passenger transport services and food deliveries or the sale of self-made goods as well as creative skills: “The tasks that underpin the gig economy are also typically short, temporary, precarious and unpredictable, and gaining access to more of them depends on good performance and reputation” (Woodcock & Graham, 2020, 9). On the part of the employees, this means little long-term security and a high dependence on the Internet. There is no steady income, but only payment in the course of each performed gig. This working model is therefore not only in conflict with digital disconnection but is

also fundamentally subject to inadequate labor standards. The situation can be made even worse through intersections of the lower class with other socio-demographics. Often the described work performed by migrant workers who have additional dependencies on digital media as they are geographically separated from their social environment and need digital media to maintain contact (Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2021; Van Doorn et al., 2020). Moreover, an even greater global disparity can be identified. Large companies are increasingly taking advantage of the massive supply of labor in low-wage countries and outsource their clickwork. The consequences weigh heavily, because not only the pay, but also the overall working conditions are exploitative (Mehta, 2020). Digital disconnection is neither a quick fix, nor is hyperconnectivity just a first world problem. This is particularly evident in how the classist structures of labor affect media use. It seems that the more precarious the work, the more people are pushed into digital dependency. In addition, other intersections can come into play. For instance, a woman working in the low-wage sector is also subjected to the expectations described in the section on gender above. Thus, the self-determined use of media is made more difficult for her from several sides. And although there is a clear need to create protective structures for the vulnerable, responsabilisation pins down the already affected individual. People from lower classes are “living on the edge” (Pascale, 2021), their scope of self-determination lies in assessing their pain tolerance and how much they can take. Different models of work and intersections of discrimination categories reveal the yearning for broader perspectives.

### **Concluding remarks: The digital disconnection that does not happen**

In this article, I have shown that the individual possibilities to digitally disconnect are deeply embedded in social structures that are shaped by sociodemographic factors such as gender and class. While in today's normative environment almost everyone is demanded to be online, marginalized people face even greater pressure to use

digital media. They are often expected to perform tasks for privileged individuals. The husband relaxes offline not worried about missing out as his wife forwards him anything important. The Silicon Valley worker enjoys his stay in a digital detox camp while the low wage workers click to secure their existence. No wonder the *homo disconnectus*, my proposal of an ideal disconnecter, appears as the epitome of a privileged person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: white, male, heterosexual, educated, knowledge worker, and living in a high-income country. Fulfilling most social norms, he is granted the “luxury” (Feldman, 2021) to opt out, refuse and reject digital media as he is given high agency to self-determine his media use. At the same time, I do not claim that the *homo disconnectus* depicted here is complete nor set in stone. I have deliberately designed the fictitious agent in such a way that the traits can be reflected and, where necessary, supplemented. However, the recognition that the individual and subordinate structures are not isolated from each other, but interdependent, should remain a guiding principle. In the sense of the long-running sociological structures versus agency debate and Giddens' (1984) contribution of duality of structure, disconnection behavior can and should be holistically acknowledged as a product of agency and structure.

With the perspective on agency and structures presented, a deeper exploration of digital disconnection is enabled. While it is interesting how and why digital disconnection is performed, there remains a blind spot: The digital disconnection that does not happen through limited agency. Of course, it is important to examine digital disconnection that is already put in practice. But we should not ignore the fact that not all people have the means to engage in them. Inspired by Sally Wyatt (2003) and her take on involuntary and voluntary non-use differentiating between *can not*s and *want not*s, one could speak here of involuntary use and refer to affected individuals as *have tos*. Instead of focusing exclusively on the digital disconnection that happens, there should be a greater focus on the digital disconnection that does not happen and why it remains unperformed. This essentially corresponds



with the examination of people who have no or only limited resources to self-determine their media use. Therefore, we should give them a space to express their desires and what they need to self-determine their media use. However, as described by the term responsabilisation (Juhila & Raitakari, 2019; Syvertsen, 2020), it is not up to the individual alone to articulate their needs to improve their situation, but institutional support is also required. This is where science and public discourse come into play. Only in this approach, opportunities can be created to call out and eliminate inequalities holistically. Giving a voice to those who cannot digitally disconnect can also result in something grotesque: They might not want to. Instead, they might state that they are satisfied with their current situation. Since people are pressured by societal expectations to use media in a certain way, it is especially interesting to look at those who willingly surrendered to their circumstances. Still, this is a very ambivalent undertaking. It is understandable that people somehow have

to come to terms with their situation as they alone cannot change it. Accordingly, they make peace with their situation by upholding an illusion of agency. They do not necessarily position themselves as victims, but rather reproduce the expectations and arguments of the systems of oppression. Due to their situation, they lack the means for reflection as depicted in the remarks on the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988). But completely invalidating these statements is skating on thin ice. Because in the course of this, an already marginalized person is denied the credibility and legitimacy of their own opinion. Considering the duality of structure, social expectations and personal preferences must also be recognized to be interdependent. The ultimate goal should be to grant everyone the highest possible degree of agency, not just the illusion of it, so that they can self-determine their media use. We should not dismiss disconnection as a mere longing but reflect on self-determined media use as a fundamental human need.

## References

- Adams, P. C., & Jansson, A. (2021). Introduction: Rethinking the Entangling Force of Connective Media. In A. Jansson, & P. C. Adams (Ed.). *Disentangling: The Geographies of Digital Disconnection*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.003.0001>
- Ahmed, S. T. (2020). Managing News Overload (MNO): The COVID-19 Infodemic. *Information*, 11(8), 375. <https://doi.org/10.3390/info11080375>
- Andersen, K. (2020). Realizing good intentions? A field experiment of slow news consumption and news fatigue. *Journalism Practice*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1818609>
- Beattie, A. (2020). *The Manufacture of Disconnection*. PhD Thesis, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Te Herenga Waka – Victoria of University of Wellington, New Zealand.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. (1984). *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. (1990). *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*. Polity Press.
- Bearne, Suzanne. (2022). Not smart but clever? The return of ‘dumbphones’. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60763168>
- Brosnan, M., Joiner, R., Gavin, J., Crook, C., Maras, P., Guiller, J., & Scott, A. J. (2012). The impact of pathological levels of internet-related anxiety on internet usage. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 46(4), 341–356. <https://doi.org/10.2190/EC.46.4.b>
- Cabanas, E., & Illouz, E. (2019). *Manufacturing Happy Citizens. How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control our Lives*. Polity Press.
- Chocano, C. (2021). The Return of Selena. *Elle*. <https://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/a37319287/selena-gomez-interview-2021/>
- CBBC (2023): *Selena Gomez becomes Instagram most-followed woman once more*. CBBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/65007236>
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity.

- Dahrendorf, R. (1964). *HOMO SOCIOLOGICUS. Ein Versuch zur Geschichte, Bedeutung und Kritik der Kategorie der sozialen Rolle*. 4th Edition. Köln, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Fast, K. (2021). The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnective work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1615–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211033382>
- Feldman, Zeena. (2021). Quitting Digital Culture. Rethinking Agency in a Beyond-Choice Ontology. In A. Chia, Jorge, A., & Karppi, T. (Ed.), *Reckoning with social media: Disconnection in the age of the techlash*, 103–123. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Görland, S. O., & Kannengießer, S. (2021). A matter of time? Sustainability and digital media use. *Digital Policy, Regulation and Governance*, 23(3), 248–261. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DPRG-11-2020-0160>
- Gregg, Melissa. (2018). *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Grenz, T. & Pfadenhauer, M. (2017). De-Mediatisierung: Diskontinuitäten, Non-Linearitäten und Ambivalenzen im Mediatisierungsprozess. In M. Pfadenhauer & T. Grenz (Ed.), *De-Mediatisierung. Diskontinuitäten, Non-Linearitäten und Ambivalenzen im Mediatisierungsprozess*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2–23.
- Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hesselberth, P. (2018). Discourses on disconnectivity and the right to disconnect. *New Media & Society*, 20(5), 1994–2010. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817711449>
- Hooks, Bell (2000). *Where we stand: Class matters*. New York: Routledge.
- Jarrett, K. (2016). *Feminism, labour and digital media: The digital housewife*. Routledge.
- Juhila, K., & Raitakari, S. (2019). Responsibilisation in Governmentality Literature. In K. Juhila, S. Raitakari, & C. Hall (Ed.), *Responsibilisation at the Margins of Welfare Services*, 11–34. Routledge.
- Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3), 274–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004>
- Kania-Lundholm, M. (2021). Why Disconnecting Matters. Towards a Critical Research Agenda on Online Disconnection. In A. Chia, Jorge, A., & Karppi, T. (Ed.), *Reckoning with social media: Disconnection in the age of the techlash*, 13–34. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Karlsen, F., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Intrusive media and knowledge work: how knowledge workers negotiate digital media norms in the pursuit of focused work. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1933561>
- Kaun, A. (2021). Ways of seeing digital disconnection: A negative sociology of digital culture. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1571–1583. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211045535>
- Kopecka-Piech, K. (2020). Methodological Aspects of Research on Mediatization and Demediatization of Everyday Life. Current State and Key Challenges. *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia De Cultura*, 12(4), 113–121. <https://doi.org/10.24917/20837275.12.4.9>
- Lee, A. M., Holton, A., & Chen, V. (2019). Unpacking overload: Examining the impact of content characteristics and news topics on news overload. *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, 8(3), 273–290. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms\\_00002\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms_00002_1)
- Lomborg, S., & Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Advancing digital disconnection research: Introduction to the special issue. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1529–1535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211057518>
- Mehta, B. S. (2020). Changing Nature of Work and the Gig Economy: Theory and Debate. *FIIB Business Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2319714520968294>
- Merisalo, M., & Jauhiainen, J. S. (2021). Asylum-Related Migrants' Social-Media Use, Mobility Decisions, and Resilience. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 19(2), 184–198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2020.1781991>
- Miller, Q. (2019). *Camp TV. Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History*. Duke University Press.
- Moe, H., & Madsen, O. J. (2021). Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1584–1598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211048969>

- Morrison, S. L., & Gomez, R. (2014). Pushback: Expressions of resistance to the “vertime” of constant online connectivity. *First Monday*, 19(8).  
<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i8.4902>
- Neriya-Ben Shahar, R. (2017). Negotiating agency: Amish and ultra-Orthodox women’s responses to the Internet. *New Media & Society*, 19(1), 81–95.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816649920>
- Nolan, B., & Weisstanner, D. (2022). Rising income inequality and the relative decline in subjective social status of the working class. *West European Politics*, 45(6), 1206–1230.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2038892>
- Pareto, V. (1906). *Manuale d’economia politica con una introduzione alla scienza sociale*. Piccola biblioteca scientifica, 13. Milan: Società editrice libraria.
- Pascale, C.-M. (2021). *Living on the Edge: When Hard Times Become a Way of Life*. Cambridge, Medford: Polity.
- Portwood-Stacer, L. (2013). Media refusal and conspicuous non-consumption: The performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention. *New Media & Society*, 15(7), 1041–1057.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812465139>
- Portwood-Stacer, L. (2014). Care Work and the Stakes of Social Media Refusal. *New Criticals*.  
<http://www.newcriticals.com/care-work-and-the-stakes-of-social-media-refusal/print>
- Quinan, C. L., & Hunt, M. (2021). Non-binary gender markers: Mobility, migration, and media reception in Europe and beyond. *European Journal of Women’s Studies*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068211024891>
- Reckwitz, A. (2022). Toward a Theory of Social Practices. A Development in Culturalist Theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5(2), 243–263.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431022225432>
- Reuning, K., & Mcelwee, S. (2021). The precarious: how American voters view the working class. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 1–19.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2021.1908149>
- Ribak, R., & Rosenthal, M. (2015). Smartphone resistance as media ambivalence. *First Monday*.  
<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i11.6307>
- Richardson, S. (2015). Beyond Diffusion: A Conceptual Approach to Studying (Non) Users of Information and Communication Technologies. *Journal of Technologies and Human Usability*, 10(3-4), 31–44.  
<https://doi.org/10.18848/2381-9227/CGP/v10i3-4/56437>
- Spranger, E. (1966 [1914]). *Lebensformen: geisteswissenschaftliche Psychologie und Ethik der Persönlichkeit*. 9th Edition. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Syvertsen, T. (2017). *Media Resistance Protest, Dislike, Abstention*. Palgrave Macmillan.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46499-2>
- Syvertsen, T. (2020). *Digital detox: The Politics of Disconnecting*. Emerald Publishing Limited.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787693395>
- Syvertsen, T., Ytre-Arne, B. (2021). Privacy, Energy, Time, and Moments Stolen. Social Media Experiences Pushing towards Disconnection. In A. Chia, Jorge, A., & Karppi, T. (Ed.), *Reckoning with social media: Disconnection in the age of the techlash*, 85–102. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Treré, E. (2021). Intensification, discovery and abandonment: Unearthing global ecologies of dis/connection in pandemic times. *Convergence*. 27(6), 1663–1677.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211036804>
- Turkle, S. (2008). Always-On/Always-On-You: The Tethered Self. In J. Katz (Ed.), *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*, 121–137.  
<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262113120.003.0010>
- Van Doorn, N., Ferrari, F., & Graham, M. (2020). *Migration and Migrant Labour in the Gig Economy: An Intervention*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3622589>
- Von Bergen, C. W., & Bressler, M. S. (2019). Work, non-work boundaries and the right to disconnect. *The Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 21(2), 51–69.  
<https://doi.org/10.33423/jabe.v21i1.1454>

- Wajcman, J. (2015). *Pressed for time the acceleration of life in digital capitalism*. Univ. of Chicago Press.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125–151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002>
- Wilson, J. A., & Yochim, E. C. (2017). *Mothering through Precarity. Women's Work and Digital Media*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/9780822373193>
- Woodcock, J. & Graham, M. (2020). *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge, Medford: Polity.
- Wyatt, S. (2003). Non-users also matter: The construction of users and non-users of the Internet. In N. Oudshoorn, & T. Pinch (Ed.), *Now Users Matter: The Co-construction of Users and Technology*, 67–79. MIT Press.
- Zhang, S., Zhao, L., Lu, Y., & Yang, J. (2016). Do you get tired of socializing? An empirical explanation of discontinuous usage behaviour in social network services. *Information & Management*, 53(7), 904–914. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2016.03.006>
- Zurstiege, G. (2019). *Taktiken der Entnetzung die Sehnsucht nach Stille im digitalen Zeitalter*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

VICTORIA A. E. KRATEL

served as a researcher in the project „Media Disconnection as a Self-Assertion Tactic in the Digital Age,“ funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) at the University of Tuebingen, Germany. Starting in August 2023, she will join the „Digitox“ project as a PhD fellow at Kristiania University College in Oslo, Norway.