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## THE DISCONNECTED THAT REMAIN CONNECTED: PRACTISING PARTIAL DISCONNECTION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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### Introduction

This paper explores managing connectivity through disconnecting practice, or more specifically, quitting some (social) media platforms while continuing to use other communication tools and information systems. As the intersections between media, technology and our daily lives continue to increase, it seems to be more and more difficult to quit using new technologies. By studying the lived experience of seventeen individuals who, after having actively used the tool or platform, deliberately leave their account to distance themselves from the platform's services or its other users, I argue that selecting to disconnect from some media is not equal to becoming disconnected. Instead, alternative structures for connectivity are discovered and created.

There are some common generalizations about people practising disconnection that are fed by stories in popular media. Typical assumptions refer to the elderly who are disconnected because they don't understand new technologies, people in rural areas who are cut off from otherwise available online infrastructures, and teenagers who disconnect because they've been cyberbullied or otherwise hurt online. Research points to other groups that opt out, including people who cut themselves off from technology or media as a means of resistance (c.f., Portwood-Stacer, 2012) and people who are or become disconnected for economic, demographic or cultural reasons (c.f., Wyatt, 1999; Wyche & Baumer, 2016). Others have studied managing online connections and relationships via disconnection as a way of keeping a distance with selected connections in their networks (c.f., Karppi, 2010; Light, 2014).

Based on similar studies and assumptions, we could expect non-users, passive users, and quitters to have a clearly stated reason for their withdrawal from the online media platform or technology. Even though people are socially, culturally, or politically

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influenced in their disconnecting practice, I question whether the practitioners are aware of the motivation to their rather uncommon act. Thus, I focus on the practices of opting out and the findings that emerge from the lived experience of disconnection in the digital age and not on specific reasons *per se*.

## **Methodology**

This paper presents partial findings from a larger study of people, who self-identify as selectively disconnected – meaning, they have left from a social media platform while continuing to use their other social media account(s). A snowball sampling strategy was used, following the guidance of qualitative research techniques for locating people who might be otherwise difficult to find (Tracy, 2013).

The approach is influenced by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), which enables the researcher to engage in constant comparison of emerging concepts until a level of saturation is reached where we are not learning any more about the situation. This also demonstrates a theoretical sampling (c.f., Charmaz, 2006), since the aim is to explore a particular type of disconnection, regardless of participant demographics.

## **Findings**

There are some prerequisite settings for selective disconnection. The relevance of online and offline networks is reported to have a crucial role in ‘enabling’ this type of disconnection but not in making the decision to disconnect. The assumed cost and consequences of disconnecting are compared to the ‘real price’ of the experience after-the-fact, guiding participants to discover the appropriate conditions for selective disconnection. The subjectively calculated ‘cost-efficiency’ of disconnecting varies across experiences, depending on the self-perceived relevance of the network to the disconnecting individual.

The generally assumed cost of disconnection is not reflected in the lived experience of selective disconnection. The experience of partial disconnection is described as rewarding and positive, in contrast to the rather negative main discourses of disconnecting (e.g. social rejection and FOMO). Instead of arguing with the common generalizations, the disconnected justify the fallacious perceptions of disconnection induced by the remaining users in their network. The controversy remains unsolved as the real experience is poorly discussed, with the main assumptions left unchallenged in wider discussions.

‘New school’ and ‘old school’ tools are used to manage connectivity without the renounced platform. In search of alternatives, other ways for getting in touch with the networks are not created after-the-fact, but chosen from the already used platforms. The affordances of existing technologies are discovered and twisted to tailor appropriate workarounds that fit to the users’ ‘real needs’. While appropriating their own use of social media, the disconnected often make other users aware of the alternatives for remaining connected without the most habitual platforms or features.

The idea of networks becoming more valuable for users as its population grows is challenged. The disconnected point to a need for connection management that becomes relevant when being connected with such vast networks as today's social media scene. Instead of appropriating a platform or just agreeing to its settings, people are willing to give up their online connections to a network if the pre-set structure of the interface and the social norms that complement its use conflict with their personal preferences.

## **Conclusion**

Disconnection is often perceived as a negative response to technology, or a desire to escape. When we look below the surface level of anecdotes and popular media explanations, we find nuance. The practitioners of disconnection make calculated or spontaneous decisions about how they want to experience digital culture, not necessarily escape from it. As they are pushed to find alternatives for technology-supported connection that fit better with their needs and personal preferences, the disconnected find workarounds or learn to settle with less.

Consequently, while denying a system, a new structure for staying connected is created based on other available tools are used prior to disconnecting. Although the participants don't self-identify their actions as a part of some new movement or supporting some form of activism, their absence can be considered as an indirect political attitude and criticism towards the current tools and affordances of the networks and platform(s) they are stepping out and off from.

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