



Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:
The 25th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Sheffield, UK / 30 Oct - 2 Nov 2024

THE UNFRIENDING PERFROMANCE: THE LOGIC OF DISCONNECTIVE ACTION IN CRISES

Gregory Asmolov
King's College London

Olga Logunova
King's College London

Introduction:

A broad literature addresses the role of crises as times of increasing connectivity and triggers for manifestations of "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), where digital media serve as organizing agents. However, crisis situations can also be seen as times for escalation of disconnectivity, relying on affordances that facilitate severing of social ties (e.g., unfriending, unfollowing, or banning). Therefore, alongside the logic of connective action, there is a need to explore *the logic of disconnective action as a process of social untying where digital media serve as disorganizing agents*. This analysis should be seen in the context of the rise of disconnective power (Light & Cassidy, 2014), as the capacity of hegemonic actors to rely on disconnective affordances to advance their political goals through the facilitation of fragmentation. In this light, an analysis of the logic of disconnective action aims to understand the role of social media in crises within the context of the tension between connectivity and disconnectivity.

Conceptual framework:

Crisis situations can be considered explosions of hidden social heterogeneity, where people discover unknown opinions of their "friends" about specific situations (Schwarz & Shani, 2016, p. 416). Increasing attention has been given to the phenomenon of disconnectivity in the context of conflicts (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; John & Gal, 2018). However, there is a challenge in exploring disconnection since disconnective action is often hidden by social networking platforms (John & Nissenbaum, 2019). Therefore, research on unfriending has mainly relied on data collection through interviews and surveys of users, allowing analysis of the motivations behind unfriending

Suggested Citation (APA): Asmolov, G., & Logunova, O. (2024, October). **The Unfriending Performance: The Logic of Disconnective Action in Crises** presented at AoIR2024: The 25th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Sheffield, UK: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

decisions. A phenomenon neglected as an object of investigation has been the public announcement of cases of unfriending.

Conceptualizing disconnection as an online "speech act" (Austin, 1962) that exercises "sovereignty over one's personal public sphere" (John & Gal, 2018, p. 2971) and as a performative act (Butler, 1990) that sets social boundaries in crises offers an opportunity for a quantitative turn in exploring disconnection. This research is focused on a *disconnective act* as a performative act that both offers and implements a structure of social categorization based on an attitude/position toward the crisis. Disconnective acts include online posts that engage publicly with disconnective practices. The performance of disconnection can be considered as a performative boundary-management practice, while crisis offers a stage for disconnective action. The analysis of disconnective performance allows to explore how disconnective power operates. The research seeks to identify the dominant forms, functions and drivers of disconnective action in a context of crisis.

Methods

To consider the role of disconnective power in authoritarian environments, the data collection focused on public posts addressing unfriending practices gathered in the Russian-speaking segment of Facebook. The Russia Internet presented a methodological opportunity to explore disconnection in networks with a high level of political heterogeneity related to several factors including the political transformation of Russia toward increasingly authoritarian state and a war, where a significant number of users from both sides of the conflict speak the same language and use the same platforms. Relying on social media listening methodology (Reid & Duffy, 2018) the data collection focused on mentions with disconnectivity wording from Facebook public posts for the given period. The data collection relied on two phases:

1. Attitudes towards Covid-19 pandemic and vaccination
2. Disconnection following Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine

The first phase of this project identified variables that assist in detecting disconnective waves during crises. It also allowed to identify viral disconnective effect when a chain of disconnective acts triggered by one post and discuss the role of disconnective leaders that play a role in shaping the logic of disconnection a strategic behaviour. This phase also allowed to identify the resources of online heterogeneity including classmates, neighbors, acquaintance from dating apps and family members.

The second phase illustrated the framework's value based on the analysis of 78,512 public posts collected from Facebook starting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The analysis detected several waves of disconnection after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, related to the start of military aggression, the celebration of Victory Day in WWII, and the large-scale military mobilization of Russian citizens in Autumn 2022. The celebration of Victory Day in WWII was chosen as the empirical case that allows to identify the logics of publicized disconnective acts.

Empirical case:

Scholars highlight the dialectical nature of memory as a continuous conflict about the history between "a spectrum of official and other narratives" that takes place in the public sphere (Blacker et al., 2013). An escalating clash between competing memory narratives is observed in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war (Bernstein, 2016; Gauffman, 2015; Makhortykh, 2017; Zavadski and Toepfl, 2019). Scholars highlight how

the past becomes a resource for propaganda, using historical events to introduce interpretative frameworks for describing current events. With the connective turn (Hoskins, 2011), the contest between history-related narratives increasingly rely on digital mediation (Fridman, 2022). To delve into the nature of the disconnective turn, this explores disconnection related to the celebration of May 9th (Victory Day in Russia). Drawing on data collected from Russian-speaking Facebook during the first two weeks of May 2021, 2022 and 2023, the analysis identifies a dataset of posts that present a performative case of disconnection within the context of the Victory Day. The disconnection takes place in the context of the contest between hegemonic vs. critical narratives of memory namely unfriending due to someone's refusal to celebrate May 9th and unfriending due to celebration of May 9th. The Victory Day is seen as an opportunity to "clean" the feed", while others report numerous unfriending instances. In addition the analysis identifies a set of symbolic triggers of unfriending including flags and George's Ribbon (the Russian symbol of celebration) on personal profile photos. The analysis identifies several logics of disconnective acts that constitute the repertoire of disconnective action :

- "Unfriended": A public announcement of a specific case of unfriending as a sanction for a specific opinion
- An "unfriending warning" that anyone supporting a specific opinion will be unfriended
- "Unfriend me": a call to action from any friends supporting a particular opinion/person
- "You may unfriend me": recognizing that a statement about controversial issue may lead to unfriending by others

The data also indicates how disconnection is linked to digital vigilantism as a form of participatory regulation and surveillance (Loveluck, 2019). A call to action to unfriend someone due to celebrating/ignoring the Victory Day can be seen as a manifestation of the disconnective surveillance.

Conclusion

Digitalization is often associated with reconfigurations of global politics, emphasizing the increasing role of networks (Castells, 1996) and networked individuals (Rosenau, 2007). Yet, these technologies also enable a reversal of global political transformations. Autocratic regimes leverage digital mechanisms to advance fragmentation in their quest to preserve political legitimacy. The rise of disconnective politics relies on disconnective affordance as a major element in the technology of power. The new forms of digital authoritarianism harness the affordances of disconnection to transform network society into disconnective society that relies on the application of disconnective power. That is the power of disintegration and untying in different spheres of lives, starting from economic relationships and ending with personal interactions.

The discussion of how memory operates by leveraging the affordance of disconnection allows to examine the manifestation of disconnective power in the context of "memory wars". The disconnective memory plays a substantial role in shaping individual and collective identities by offering new forms of categorization and shaping social boundaries in conflicts. The disconnective turn can be seen in the context of the increasing capacity of the institutional actor to rely on digital affordance to achieve their political interests through interference within horizontal structures and restructuring the relationships between individual users.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words* (2nd ed., J. O. Urmson & M. Sbisá, Eds.). Harvard University Press.
- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739-768.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. Routledge Classics.
- Bernstein, S. (2016). Remembering war, remaining Soviet: digital commemoration of World War II in Putin's Russia. *Memory Studies*, 9(4), 422-436.
- Blacker, U., Etkind, A., & Fedor, J. (2013). *Memory and theory in Eastern Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society* (Vol. I). Blackwell.
- Fridman, O. (2022). *Memory activism and digital practices after conflict*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Gaufman, E. (2015). World War II 2.0: Digital memory of fascism in Russia in the aftermath of Euromaidan in Ukraine. *Journal of Regional Security*, 10(1), 17-35.
- Hoskins, A. (2011). Media, memory, metaphor: Remembering and the connective turn. *Parallax*, 17(4), 19-31. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605573>
- John, N. A., & Dvir-Gvirsman, S. (2015). 'I don't like you any more': Facebook unfriending by Israelis during the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2014. *Journal of Communication*, 65(6), 953-974.
- John, N. A., & Gal, N. (2018). "He's got his own sea": Political Facebook unfriending in the personal public sphere. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 2971–2988.
- John, N. A., & Nissenbaum, A. (2019). An agnotological analysis of APIs: or, disconnectivity and the ideological limits of our knowledge of social media. *The Information Society*, 35(1), 1-12. DOI: 10.1080/01972243.2018.1542647
- Light B & Cassidy E (2014). Strategies for the suspension and prevention of connection: rendering disconnection as socioeconomic lubricant with Facebook. *New Media & Society* 16(7): 1169–1184.
- Loveluck, B. (2020). The many shades of digital vigilantism. A typology of online self-justice. *Global Crime*, 21(3-4), 213-241. DOI: 10.1080/17440572.2019.1614444
- Makhortykh, M. (2017). Remediating the past: YouTube and Second World War memory in Ukraine and Russia. *Memory*, 1, 1-16.

Reid, E., & Duffy, K. (2018). A netnographic sensibility: developing the netnographic/social listening boundaries. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34(3-4), 263-286. DOI: 10.1080/0267257X.2018.1450282

Rosenau. (2007). *People count!: Networked individuals in global politics*. Routledge.

Zavadski, A., & Toepfl, F. (2019). Querying the Internet as a mnemonic practice: how search engines mediate four types of past events in Russia. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41(1), 21-37.