



Connect, Disconnect, Reconnect

Historicizing the Current Gesture towards Disconnectivity, from the Plug-in Drug to the Digital Detox

Pepita Hesselberth, Leiden University / University of
Copenhagen

Abstract

This essay picks up on the invitation extended by the sessions on ‘Media Archeology: Network(s)’ at FilmForum 2017 to engage, with some political urgency, in ‘an archaeological excavation of the post-Fordist, post-industrial and global emergence of the Network(s).’ In a time and age in which the network, to speak with Galloway and Thacker, ‘has emerged as a dominant form describing the nature of control today, as well as resistance to it’¹ such a historicizing move seems all the more important, not just for the sake of historical depth, but also, in particular, in our attempts to refine our understanding of the present-day situation. Taking up their invitation and yet giving it a somewhat different twist, in this paper, I will appraise a genealogy of what could be seen as the inverse of the network, or the idea of networked connectivity, which, I argue, in the last decade has manifested itself most clearly in the desire to disconnect. Drawing a link between the current preoccupation with digital detoxing and anti-television movement of the 1980s onwards, I will reflect on the relevance of doing such a historicizing comparative analysis.

Digital detox holidays, phone stacking dinners, virtual suicide, a year without Internet. In a culture obsessed with social networking, participation and connectivity, to disconnect has come to mean going off-line: to reclaim presence in the physical world; to revitalize face to face communication; to salvage the actual over the virtual. To disconnect signals a desire to re-connect: with ones off-line identity, with friends, with the spiritual values of life, with ones natural environment, with the world at large. Disconnectivity thus bespeaks connectivity, and vice versa. For every form of connectivity, whether desired or feared, there is a correlative form of disconnectivity, dreaded or longed for. Each connection

¹ Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 4; here quoted in ‘FilmForum Udine/Gorizia, XV MAGIS Spring School’, *Program*, 2017, <<https://filmforumfestival.it/program/programs-in-pdf/program-2017.pdf>> [accessed 21 April 2018]. I thank Diego Cavallotti, Simone Dotto, and Andrea Mariani and the anonymous reviewers at *Cinéma&Cie* for their generous support and productive commentaries on earlier drafts of this article.





Pepita Hesselberth

evokes the possibility of a disconnection that would instantly annul it, that precedes it, and that conditions it.²

In this paper, I would like to expand on this discussion on disconnectivity as played out in public and scholarly discourse alike by offering a brief commentary, in the first part, on one of the more dominant strands within the existing research on disconnectivity, i.e. the discussion on technology non-use, which stands out in the present context for its often overt lack of (critical) historicity. Then, in the second part, I will respond by considering one possible way of historicizing the current gesture towards disconnectivity. I will do so by drawing a link between the call for digital detoxing that seems to have permeated public discourse today and the anti-television movement's appeal against the 'plug-in-drug' television from the mid-1980s onwards. To conclude, in the final section I will end with some remarks on the relevance of doing such a historicizing comparative analysis.

1.

One of the more dominant trends within the existing research on the desire to disconnect largely has its roots in the social sciences and emerged, first and foremost, out of the investigations into the *uses* of technology instigated by the advent of the digital in the 1990s. The realization that non-use can provide valuable insights into the social functioning of technology more or less coincided with the diffusion and arguable 'domestication' of the digital technology itself from the mid-2000 onwards.³ In the social sciences this resulted in an expanding body of empirical studies that not only challenge the pro-innovation bias of digital media technologies (and arguably of media studies as such), but that also seeks to depart from the user/non-user binary, thus opening up the way to conceptualize technology non-use beyond the initial digital divide research. This, amongst others, has given rise to a number of alternative taxonomies of non-use that seek to complement and refine the typologies of 'haves', 'have-nots', and 'want-nots' to include more nuanced categorizations of non-users, like 'rejecters'

² Elsewhere I have commented on the structuring paradox at play here, in part, by considering how the (im)possibility of 'opting out' in an 'always on' culture is ruminated in scholarly discussions on technology non-use, media resistance, and media disruption in particular. So many articles on each of these topics have been published that it would take up way too much space to list them all here, and any selection would be random without further comments. However, the reader will find an extended (but by no means extensive) literary overview in the article listed below (with which this article could be well read in tandem), as well as my take and a more elaborate reflection on the gains and limitations, pendulums and pitfalls of the scholarly discourse on disconnectivity. Pepita Hesselberth, 'Discourses on Disconnectivity and the Right to Disconnect', *New Media & Society*, 20.5 (June 2017), 1994–2010.

³ The reference here is to Roger Silverstone, 'Domesticating Domestication. Reflections on the Life of a Concept', in *Domestication of Media and Technology*, ed. by Thomas Berker and others (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), pp. 230–48.





Connect, Disconnect, Reconnect

and ‘resisters’, ‘rare users’ and ‘lapsed users’ to name but a few.⁴ These studies are illuminating in that they draw attention to the complexity and ambiguity of people’s motivations for, and practices of, technology non-use. Furthermore, these studies are historically interesting because they all signal a growing unease with the ubiquitous presence of connective media devices within our everyday life and environment. The significant increase of these publication over the last decade suggests that this unease has substantially grown from the mid-2000s onwards.

It is not my intention to downgrade the relevance or validity of these studies, or of other persons perceived, performed, or uttered opposition to technology-use as such. However, what bothers me about most of these studies into the non-use of technology is their often manifest — or at times even blatant — lack of (critical) historicity. To put it boldly: with its primary focus on the role of individual agency in the social construction of technology — a focus that is at times well motivated, and indeed historically well fought over — along with the often descriptive use of data-driven taxonomies, these studies tend to privatize and de-historicize the gesture towards disconnectivity without paying heed to the historicity of the gesture, and therewith, to the specificity of its (re)incarnations under the conditions of neoliberalism and our so-called ‘culture of connectivity’.⁵

But the gesture towards disconnectivity, we know, is hardly a new phenomenon. Resistance to (modern) technology is of all times, as are other forms of collective or solitary reclusion. Practices like simple living and the slow movement find their roots in anarcho-primitivism and the back-to-the-land movement that emerged in the aftermath of the second industrial revolution, after the first had given rise to the Luddites’ opposition to modern technology, which in turn finds its contemporary in today’s neo-Luddite and other anti-technology movements (including, arguably, Salafism). And the list goes on. That we are able to establish such links requires hindsight, and does not mean that these movements are necessary the same. But it does mean we can learn from them.

⁴ See, for example, Sally Wyatt, Graham Thomas and Tiziana Terranova, ‘They Came, They Surfed, They Went Back to the Beach: Conceptualising Use and Non-Use of the Internet’, in *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality*, ed. by Steve Woolgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 23–40; Neil Selwyn, ‘Digital Division or Digital Decision? A Study of Non-Users and Low-Users of Computers’, *Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research in Culture, Media and the Arts*, 34.4-5 (2006), 273–92; Christine Satchell and Paul Dourish, ‘Beyond the User: Use and Non-Use in HCI’, in *Proceedings of the 21st Annual Conference of the Australian Computer-Human Interaction Special Interest Group OZCHI 2009* (New York: ACM, 2009), pp. 9–16, <<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/1738826.1738829>> [accessed 6 December 2016]; Eric P. S. Baumer and others, ‘Limiting, Leaving, and (Re)Lapsing: An Exploration of Facebook Non-Use Practices and Experiences’, in *Proceedings to the CHI 2014 Workshop: Refusing, Limiting, Departing* (New York: ACM 2013), pp. 3257–66, <<http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2470654.2466446>> [accessed 6 December 2016].

⁵ The reference is to José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); for a more elaborate discussion of (the limitations of) this debate and the paradox inherent to it, see Hesselberth.





Pepita Hesselberth

In the remainder of this paper I would like to trace one of such possible lineages — for indeed there are many: some compelling research has already been done in this direction from the mid-2010 onwards. Here I think of the studies of, for example, Ethan Plaut, who has likened today’s self-monitoring apps to the swear jar as an early technology of communication avoidance; of David Banks, who has traced the etymology of the distinction between ‘on- and off line’ back to the emergence of the railroad in the late nineteenth century; and of Florian Sprenger, who in a forthcoming paper reflects on the persistence of notions of dis/connectivity in the earliest fantasies of electricity.⁶

My ambition, here, is slightly less ambitious, and indeed less vested in the archive or the histories of ideas as such, if only because, first, the lineage I trace — from the digital detox to the plug-in-drug television — goes far less back in time, and, second, my paper, in a way, is more critical than historical in intent. What it shares with the aforementioned publications, however, is the acute awareness of the need to historicize the contemporary gesture towards disconnectivity, an interest that serves at once a cultural analytical and media-archeological end.

2.

That pre-occupation with the possibility ‘opting-out’ or ‘going offline’ is not a new phenomenon, becomes clear when we compare the current fixation on media addiction and digital detoxing to the moral concerns — expressed in both public and scholarly discourse alike — about the ‘plug-in drug’ television, as, for example, reflected in the following quote from one of the exponents of the anti-television movement in the 1990s, TV-Free America:

TV-Free America ‘encourages Americans to reduce, voluntarily and dramatically, the amount of television they watch in order to promote richer, healthier, and more connected lives, families, and communities’.⁷

A similar vocabulary and intent is resounded in the definition of Digital Detox

⁶ Ethan R. Plaut, ‘Technologies of Avoidance: The Swear Jar and the Cell Phone’, *First Monday*, 20.11 (November 2015) <<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6295>> [accessed 6 December 2016]; David A. Banks, ‘Lines of Power: Availability to Networks as a Social Phenomenon’, *First Monday*, 20.11 (2015) <<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6283>> [accessed 6 December 2016]; Florian Sprenger, ‘Continuity and Disconnection, Flows and Bursts: On the Interruption of Communication’, unpublished guest lecture given at the University of Copenhagen on 13 February 2017; also see Florian Sprenger, *The Politics of Micro-Decisions: Edward Snowden, Net Neutrality, and the Architectures of the Internet*, trans. by Valentine A. Pakis and Christopher M. Kelty (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2015), pp. 100–04.

⁷ Here quoted in Jason Mittell, ‘Cultural Power of an Anti-Television Metaphor: Questioning the “Plug-In Drug” and a TV-Free America’, *Television & New Media*, 1.2 (May 2000), 215–38 (p. 215).





Connect, Disconnect, Reconnect

that can be found in the online Oxford *Living* Dictionaries (emphasis in the original; the pun, however, seems unintended):

Digital Detox

NOUN

A period of time during which a person refrains from using electronic devices such as smartphones or computers, regarded as an opportunity to reduce stress or focus on social interaction in the physical world; *break free of your devices and go on a digital detox*.⁸

Indeed, it is easy to see how the current discourses on disconnectivity tap into some of the same metaphors used by the anti-television movement in the 1980s and '90s, as eloquently described by Jason Mittell in his essay 'The Cultural Power of an Anti-Television Metaphor'.⁹ Here one can think, for example, of the discursive framing of entertainment media as 'low culture' or a 'time waste' (especially when compared to other activities); of their shared cultural nostalgia for a 'pre-screen' era, when (or indeed where) people spend their time in physical and mental good health, connecting with nature, family and friends, unspoiled by the detriments of mass distraction; and finally, of the recurrence of the drug metaphor in phrasings such as 'plug-in-drug' and 'digital detox'.¹⁰ Of these three, Mittell convincingly argues, it is first and foremost the latter that allowed these media to be 'viewed as a social problem [...] worthy of a grassroots movement dedicated to its eradication'.¹¹

Mittell goes on to unpack the metaphor of television-as-drug in a series of tropes, or associated meanings, that again ring home to today's discourses on disconnectivity. Signaling the ubiquitous presence and overuse in the everyday lives and environments of people (often supported with objective numerical facts: so many hours of use, so many devices, and so on), these discourses tend to stress the physiological effects of these omnipresent media on both the individual and the social body, framing overuse as a public health issue (or even crisis) in need of social control. This is reinforced by the equation of these media with mind-altering substances — whether they be sedative, (over)stimulating,

⁸ 'Digital Detox', *Oxford Dictionaries | English* <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/digital_detox> [accessed 3 October 2016; emphasis in the original].

⁹ The anti-television movement also had its contemporary scholarly discourse, where television consumerism by some critics was considered a threat to democracy and even seen as a potential source of violence. See for example George Gerbner and Larry Gross, 'Living With Television: The Violence Profile', *Journal of Communication*, 26.2 (1976), 172–94 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1976.tb01397.x>> [accessed 3 October 2016]; Karl R. Popper and John C. Condry, *La Télévision : un danger pour la démocratie*, (Paris: Anatolia, 1994). Popper's BBC interview 'Against Television' (13/04/1993) also circulated widely in academic discourse, especially in Italy.

¹⁰ Mittell, pp. 216–17. The term 'plug-in drug' in Mittell is derived from Marie Winn, *The Plug-In Drug: Television, Computers, and Family Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

¹¹ Ivi, p. 216.



or hallucinatory —, by extension of which their usage is framed as a dangerous habit, causing long-term degradation that must be eliminated for the sake of one's own health. This feeds into a third trope, which is the suggestion that these media are addictive, causing people to struggle with their 'use' and suffer from 'withdrawal symptoms' when they stop using. '[T]o complicate notions of personal responsibility and consensual activity' even further, Mittell observes, these discourses are often centered around children, thus strengthening the call for political action.¹²

Drawing on Janice Radway's examination of the metaphorical framing of the reading of popular literature in terms of 'consumption' (Radway's essay is called: 'Reading is not Eating'¹³) Mittell maintains that the seeming simplicity of these metaphors work to structure the very way we conceive of these media in terms of consumption and sedation – whether it be popular literature (in Radway), television (in Mittell), or connective media (as in our case). Instead of being likened to a drug, they become identified with them, thus working to naturalize the metaphor at hand (from being 'like-a-drug' to 'is a drug').¹⁴ This is problematic, Mittell contends, not in the least because the drug metaphor is premised on a circular logic¹⁵: it is because our engagement with television is framed in terms of addiction that they are perceived as like-a-drug. Yet, at the same time its framing in terms of addiction is already predicated on the assumption that television is like-a-drug, rather than, say, a legitimate leisure activity (which indeed would significantly have altered the discourse).

What Mittell's analysis of the profoundly reiterative effect of drug metaphor makes clear, is how it works to obscure the complex socio-economic processes of which these media and their reception partake, thus allowing for these media to be constructed 'as a scapegoat for social ills'.¹⁶ Crucial to the latter move, Mittell observes, is the 'understanding that it is the medium itself, not its programming or its mis-use, that is the cause of the problem'.¹⁷ The same, I would argue, holds true for today's discourses on disconnectivity, in which the drug-metaphor still strongly reverberates.

3.

That the drug-metaphor persists so strongly within today's discourses on disconnectivity is perhaps not altogether surprising. Mittell — writing in 2000 —

¹² Ivi, pp. 220–30; quote is on p. 230.

¹³ Janice A. Radway, 'Reading Is Not Eating: Mass-Produced Literature and the Theoretical, Methodological, and Political Consequences of a Metaphor', *Book Research Quarterly*, 2.3 (September 1986), 7–29.

¹⁴ Mittell, p. 218; this argument is brought to the fore in Mittell's critique of Winn.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 222.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 235.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 234.

notes in the first footnote to his paper that: ‘Ironically, TV-Free America has not come out with any positions about the medium of computers and the Internet, a format that they willingly use for publicity, yet do not criticize (or defend) for its similarities to television.’¹⁸ A lot has changed since. TV-Free America, now goes by the name of the ‘Center for SCREEN-TIME Awareness’ (CSTA), while their annual event, the ‘TV Turnoff Week’ — in which millions of Americans are said to have participated since its initiation in 1994 — was renamed ‘Screen-Free Week’ in 2010 by the ‘Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood’ (CCFC), after it was first transformed into ‘Digital Detox Week’ by Adbusters in 2008, to reflect the growing prominence of digital devices in our everyday environment.¹⁹ But of course the spin-offs are numerous, and, somewhat ironically perhaps, widely circulate online.

Situating the current discourses on disconnectivity against the backdrop of Mittell’s reading of the anti-television movement, then, is illuminating in that it reveals, how, in the seemingly smooth transition from the anti-television movement into the digital detox discourse, the drug-metaphor is retained, as are its associated meanings. The comparison is also productive, however, in that it brings to the fore some notable differences between the anti-television movement and the current call for disconnectivity, of which the preoccupation with digital detoxing is but one case in point.

As already becomes clear from the various name changes above, for example, the current discourses on disconnectivity and digital detoxing, which have proliferated significantly, are much less unilaterally directed towards one specific medium or device, but rather pertain to a wide variety of forms of mediated connectivity (including screens but also, for example, wireless connectivity). In addition, the current discourses on disconnectivity are much more ambivalent in what they aim to achieve. To silence one’s digital device, to go off-line, to unglue from the screen, or to unplug from wifi-connectivity are all identified as a (seemingly self-imposed) means to often uncertain and wavering higher ends. The Oxford *Living Dictionaries*’ definition of digital detox quoted above is illuminating here. On the one hand, it demotes the current discourses on disconnectivity to a singular problematic — i.e. that of the omnipresence of (addictive or poisonous) media devices in our everyday environments. On the other hand, however, it leaves undecided

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 235.

¹⁹ ‘Screen-Free Week 2017’, *Screen-Free Week* <<http://www.screenfree.org/>> [accessed 10 April 2017]; admittedly a rather dubious website that also gives advice on cosmetic dental surgery for children, presented by ‘Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood’ <<http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/>> [accessed 10 April 2017]. Adbusters has removed almost all but one reference to the Digital Detox Week, which can be found here: Andrew Tuplin, ‘Digital Detox Week Archives: Journal of the Mental Environment’, *Adbusters: Journal of the Mental Environment*, <<http://www.adbusters.org/tag/digital-detox-week/>> [accessed 10 April 2017]; further see ‘Screen-Free Week’, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Screen-Free_Week&oldid=756449484> [accessed 10 April 2017].



Pepita Hesselberth

to what ends such detoxing may be put, thus allowing the fantasy or desire of disconnectivity and technology non-use to tap into a more complex and multifarious social dynamics than the sheer material presence of these screen devices in our everyday lives alone suggests.

Significantly, in the Wikipedia entry ‘Digital Detox’, concerns about time waste, loss of touch with reality, and addictive behavior, are complemented with concerns over privacy, reduced productivity, increase of stress, and attention deficit disorder. This mix of concerns, which resonates with the overall public discourse on digital detoxing, both on- and off-line, conspicuously ties various micro-stressors (like fear of reduced productivity and ‘time waste’) to a single macro-stressor, that is: the loss of certain ways of livelihood associated with the advent of connective media, which, in turn, cannot but be linked to concerns over labor loss due to automation and the flexibilization of labor under the conditions of neoliberal reform. Moreover, where television was fiercely criticized for its leisurely appeal from which the arguably ‘vulnerable’ viewer²⁰ then had to be emancipated or saved, the digital detox discourse started to emerge at the precise moment when the initial appraisal of the so-called ‘new’ media — which were celebrated for their emancipatory and democratizing potential and their invocation of a renewed sense of agency long lost to the image of television’s ‘couch potato’ —, started to make way for more critical views of mass online connectivity.²¹ While echo’s of the concerns over the viewers/ users vulnerability, thus, can still be found in today’s discourses on disconnectivity, the general tone of the current debate is significantly different, not in the least because it largely retains the rhetoric of emancipation and a reclaimed control. Consequently, contrary to in the anti-television discourse, the need for digital detoxing today is often much less strongly defined around what it is *against* (television, consumerism, time-waste). Consider, for example, the ‘Facts and Manifesto’ on digitaldetox.org, which is indeed far more ambivalent in this regard, in part because it is less univocal.²²

²⁰ For a reflection on this discussion in the Dutch context of public broadcasting, see Vincent Crone, *De Kwetsbare Kijker: Een Culturele Geschiedenis Van Televisie in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Vossiusperts UvA/Amsterdam University Press, 2007); the notion of the ‘vulnerable viewer’ is derived from there.

²¹ Illustrative, here, in my view, are the progressive titles of Sherry Turkle’s writings, from her 1984 classic *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, reprinted for the 20th anniversary edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), to her more recent *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012) and *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016) (and everything in between), which have become ever more critical.

²² ‘Facts & Manifesto — Digital Detox®’, *Digital Detox* <<http://digitaldetox.org/manifesto/>> [accessed 10 April 2017]; the manifesto is included as a whole; the European equivalent of these ‘facts and manifesto’ can be found on Timetologgoff.com, ‘home of the Digital Detox’ in Europe, here: ‘Digital Detox Facts | Internet Addiction Facts’, *Time to Log Off* <<https://www.itstimetologgoff.com/digital-detox-facts/>> [accessed 7 May 2017]; and here: ‘Manifesto’, *Time to Log Off* <<https://www.itstimetologgoff.com/digital-detox-manifesto/>> [accessed 7 May 2017].





Connect, Disconnect, Reconnect

THE FACTS: WHY DIGITAL DETOX®?

- 61% admit to being addicted to the internet and their devices
- The average American dedicates 30% of leisure time to perusing the web
- 50% of people prefer to communicate digitally than in person
- 67% of cellphone owners find themselves checking their device even when it's not ringing or vibrating
- One out of ten Americans report depression; heavy internet users are 2.5 times more likely to be depressed
- The average employee spends 2 hours a day recovering from distractions

Fig. 1

Although addiction and time abuse are still listed as number one threats in the list of alarming ‘facts’ about our media usage (fig. 1), the ‘manifesto’ itself (fig. 2) brims with positivity and empowerment, postulating all the things ‘we believe in’ (i.e. — personal! — freedom, joy, mindful living, and integrity) and ‘we value’ (real smiles and creativity, IRL — in real life — community experience, and the outdoors).

DISCONNECT TO RECONNECT.

Human beings are incredible.
The value of our ability to connect and share experiences is infinite.

We believe in living a life of freedom, balance and joy. We believe in a world where people are given permission, resources and the opportunities they need to feel alive, whole, complete and deeply connected to the beauty that is life. We believe in the power of play, mindfulness, integrity, intention, spontaneity, self expression, audacity, creativity, community, authenticity and vulnerability.

We believe that technologies should serve as tools to connect us to these tenants as we celebrate life, truly improving our unique existence, instead of distracting, disturbing or disrupting us. And we believe that these technologies should be created mindfully and ethically, for the benefit of and not at the cost of consumers and users. In fact, the relationship that grows between the creator and consumer should be truly symbiotic and honest.

We value smiles, DIY, nature and the great outdoors, long hugs, laughter, tears, good eye-contact and IRL (in real life) community experiences. Life is about about sharing moments with the people sitting around us on a bus ride to work, across from us at the dinner table, or walking by us on the street. It's about creating a new code of ethics and etiquette where people and nature come first, amongst everything else.

We believe that it's time to ask really big questions of the things we've taken for granted. To work really hard to remind ourselves of the simple things we've forgotten. And to take a big deep breath, pause and remember that we are all in this together.

So that someday, our grandchildren will look back on the choices we've made and say thank you.

Fig. 2

More than an attempt to reclaim life in the face of mass media consumerism, then, the current discourses on disconnectivity, of which the digital detox craze seems symptomatic, in my view signals something else. Here I would like to quote Tiziana Terranova who summarizes the argument poignantly in her brief comparison between television and digital media in her seminal essay on ‘Free Labor’, stating that, where television is characterized by its ‘majoritarian discursive mechanisms of territorialization’ and the application of morality, these mechanisms have become largely redundant on the net, which in turn is driven, first and foremost, by ‘an abundance of production, an immediate interface with cultural and technical labor whose result is a diffuse, non-dialectical antagonism and a crisis in the capitalist





Pepita Hesselberth

modes of valorization as such.²³ Elsewhere I have elaborated more extensively on the link between free labor and the ‘the right to disconnect’ discussion.²⁴ Suffice it to say for here, is that there is a significant difference between the morality of anti-television movement and the digital detox discussion, which is intimately tied up with the changing status and flexibilization of labor under the conditions of neo-liberal reform and our increasingly media saturated culture. Watching less television, in other words, was seen to make you a better person, spending less time (wastefully) on-line, is above all seen to make you a better worker: more productive and less prone to stress and burn-out — for which, incidentally, we now increasingly seem to be held personally accountable. Such is the might of the digital detox discourse: it privatizes the solution to what is in fact, and is seen by many, as a mounting social problem, which is mass online connectivity.

Symptomatic, here, is the slippery slope in the digital detox manifesto ‘Disconnect to Reconnect’ between quality of living (real life experience), stress reduction (mindful living, joy, the great outdoors), and increased productivity (reduce distraction). The addition ‘to reduce stress’ in the aforementioned definition of Digital Detox in the Oxford *Living* Dictionary, in my view, is crucial here, as it unveils how concerns over the ubiquitous presence of connective media in our everyday lives and environments that are biased towards constant availability have become linked to concerns over attention deficit disorder, labor precarity, and the desire, need or even ‘right’ to disconnect. Rather than obscuring the complexity of the social processes of which these technologies partake, then, as Mittell claimed in relation to television, I argue that the current discourses on disconnectivity are interesting precisely for what they *reveal* about the complexity of the social processes of which these technologies take part, so that it may be argued that it is in these discourses in particular that the limits of our current ‘culture of connectivity’ are most forcefully negotiated.

Funding

This work was supported by the Danish Council for Independent Research Humanities | Culture and Communication (grant no. 5050-00043B)



DET FRIE FORSKNINGSRÅD
DANISH COUNCIL FOR
INDEPENDENT RESEARCH

²³ Tiziana Terranova, ‘Free Labor’, in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. by Trebor Scholz, (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 33–57 (p. 52; first publ. in *Social Text*, 18.2, Summer 2000, 33–58).

²⁴ See my aforementioned essay on ‘Discourses on Disconnectivity and the Right to Disconnect’ with which this essay can be read in tandem. Also see Pepita Hesselberth, ‘Creative Control: Digital Labour, Superimposition, Datafication, and the Image of Uncertainty’, *Digital Creativity*, 28.4 (October 2017), 332–347.

