

Introduction

The digital backlash

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ABSTRACT

What we in this volume call the “the digital backlash” covers a range of social and cultural practices of digital disconnection, as well as critiques of the impact of digital technologies and platforms in the world today. It thus includes a variety of overlapping and multifaceted changes and tendencies across societies, including digital disconnection, digital detox, the right to disconnect, media refusal, and what has been called “the techlash”. Hence, it can best be described as a kind of zeitgeist: a period in history in which the norms about digital behaviour, consumption, and habits are being questioned, and where the hype of the early digital era beginning in the 1990s is being challenged. In this introduction, we set the scene of the book by giving an overview of these tendencies and the history of digital critiques, serving to provide a framing for the chapters in the book.

KEYWORDS: disconnection, digital backlash, techlash, digital detox, media critique

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The Swedish government recently announced that it will drastically change the syllabus for pupils in preschools. More specifically, it will remove the requirement to use digital media as pedagogical tools in teaching (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023). This represents a significant change compared with the previously strong focus on digitalising teaching and learning across schools and other educational institutions. With reference to recent research on potential harms caused by too much screen time, the official approach of “the more digital tools the better” – which has led some Swedish schools to not use any printed books – has been supplanted by a more restrictive approach. This example is, however, indicative of a general zeitgeist that extends far beyond Sweden. The question is: Are we experiencing a digital backlash?

There is a current surge in debates and concerns tied to the social, cultural, and political impacts of digital devices and platforms in contemporary society. This includes calls for more restrictive, or more “mindful”, uses of digital technologies and digital media (see, e.g., Jansson & Adams, 2021; Karppi, 2018; Syvertsen, 2020), as well as cases of employers implementing work regulations along the lines of a “right to disconnect” framework, or workplaces deliberately incorporating “digital dead zones” in their office layouts. It also includes the rise of new entrepreneurs in the growing “digital detox” business, who offer a range of commodities such as apps, self-help books, vacations, workshops, and “dumb” media devices that are meant to help us “opt out” of being constantly connected to the digital (Karppi et al., 2021). Parents are increasingly also encouraged to track and regulate their children’s screen time, while many schools are rendered mobile-free. Meanwhile, tech businesses adjust their public relations campaigns, as well as their goods and services, to the new norms of disconnection, trying to save face in the wake of growing public critique by acting ethically. Google’s Digital Wellbeing project, which among other things instructs users to “unplug more often”, is a case in point.

These examples are all instantiations of what we in this book term “the digital backlash”, which is to be understood as a broad umbrella term, covering critiques of the role that digital devices, technologies, and platforms play in contemporary society. This includes examples of what has been labelled “the techlash” (see Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume), which points to public debate and social, political, and cultural critique of the role of Big Tech companies, such as Facebook or Google. It also includes a range of different practices of digital disconnection and people’s mundane, reflexive responses to the role that smartphones and computers should play in everyday life. Disconnection is sometimes tied to the perceived negative consequences of social media platforms on the mental health of especially young adolescents (Haidt, 2024; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018; Kardefelt-Winther et al., 2020; Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021), and more generally with concerns about people’s dependence on digital connectivity across spheres of daily life. Disconnection also speaks

to how traditional pre-digital (Stäheli & Stoltenberg, 2024) cultural practices are reinvented in lieu of these new reflexive stances towards all things digital.

The digital backlash is therefore not just one “thing”: It involves different changes and tendencies across societies. It can indeed best be described culturally and sociologically as a kind of *zeitgeist*, as a moment in history where norms about digital habits, consumption, and behaviour are being called into question, and where the assumptions of the first eras of the digital and Internet revolutions since the 1990s are being challenged. Indeed, this is also what is captured in the idea of the “post-digital”, of which new types of digital consumption patterns are emerging (see Fast & Syvertsen, Chapter 3 in this volume). This edited volume is an attempt to provide a collection of empirical and theoretical chapters that examine this societal and cultural shift, with a distinct and specific focus on social practices and discourses related to new ways that people adapt and appropriate digital technologies in everyday life.

Our motivation for putting together this volume is twofold. Firstly, we wanted a collection of chapters that include both theoretical outlooks on the many facets of the digital backlash and detailed empirical studies of social domains where digital critiques and dependencies, as well as practices of disconnection, take on specific meanings and cultural significance. Secondly, and building on this point, we wanted to show how such critiques and practices vary depending on context, technologies, platforms, ethics, and other parameters, yet are all connected by being instantiations of the same overarching *zeitgeist*.

The book consists of 19 chapters, including this Introduction, seventeen chapters, and an Afterword by Tero Karppi, whose work has significantly fuelled the agenda of disconnection scholarship. To address the broad scope of the topic, the book is divided into four main parts, each focusing on specific themes where digital critiques and disconnection practices unfold: 1) Discourses and disputes, 2) Work and productivity, 3) Children and youth, and 4) Leisure and recreation. Throughout the chapters, the contributors present empirical studies and theoretical discussions that are nested in media and communication studies, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and related fields. Each of the four parts of the book starts with a short editorial introduction, which provides an overview of the most important questions and topics that cut across the contributions. By dividing the chapters into these four parts, we aim to highlight that the varied shapes of the digital backlash depend on the cultural and social domains and situations in which they unfold. In this Introduction, we set the scene of the book by first giving a brief historical overview of the digital backlash, as well as providing a contextualisation of the many different types of digital critiques and practices of digital disconnection, which serves as a frame for the contributing chapters.

From digital optimism to digital backlash

With the growing availability of digital devices such as computers and mobile phones, and the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, the world was set for a digital hype. While there were indeed critiques and calls for caution amongst commentators about the impact of computers, gaming, and other digital wonders (e.g., Brook & Boal, 1995), there was a widespread optimism connected to the benefits that information technology (IT) in general could bring to society and culture. Soon, societies across the Western world – and later most other parts of the world as well – would become increasingly reliant on digital infrastructures and communication technologies. With the IT bubble and the millennial Y2K scare, however, the first wave of widespread public concerns about our reliance on digital communication technology started to emerge. Yet the digital revolution rolled on into the 2000s, and with the emergence of Web 2.0 – where social media platforms supplanted websites as the primary focal points for online culture – a new era of digital excitement emerged alongside the widespread rollout of smartphones, tablets, and constant online connectivity.

Around the beginning of the 2010s, however, something changed. First, the Snowden leaks in 2013 gave the public insights into a world of widespread international surveillance, which had been facilitated by the rollout of cables around the world and by digital platforms where users happily gave up their personal information, without paying attention to the potentials risks of doing so. In parallel to concerns tied to government surveillance as exposed by the Snowden leaks, digital disconnection practices began emerging. One famous example of this is Camp Grounded, which has been highlighted as a key example of digital detoxing. In Sutton's (2017, 2020) seminal work on Camp Grounded, she highlighted how people were motivated to attend the camp through a sense of being unable to disengage from their smartphones and other digital devices through the phrase “disconnect to reconnect” (see also Enli & Syvertsen, 2021). In a Nordic setting, 2010 was also the first year Syvertsen and colleagues (2019) found instances of digital detoxing in Norway.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal that came in the wake of Brexit and the 2016 American presidential election represented another pivotal moment in time. The scandal made it publicly clear that concerns about the misuse of people's data on social media platforms were warranted, as it revealed how Facebook user data was used to micro-target voters for political campaigning without their knowledge or consent. Critiques of Big Tech corporations had already been voiced for some years (e.g., Lanier, 2011), and there is a longer history to public debate about the role of Silicon Valley's inventions and business models (see Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume). Yet, the Cambridge Analytica scandal became the catalyser for what we now refer to as the techlash, whereby widespread critiques of Facebook

(now Meta), Google, Amazon, and other Big Tech corporations drew headlines across the world. The techlash marks a point in time where Big Tech and platforms are sought to be held accountable by politicians, journalists, nongovernmental organisations, interest organisations, individual citizens, and regulatory bodies (Chia et al., 2021). This development also made the question of whether to quit social media platforms even more pertinent for people, as using these platforms was now not only tied to concerns about whether constant connectivity is healthy, but also a moral and political question (Brown, 2020; Chia et al., 2021). Users of social media platforms, as several studies note, were consequently also performing media refusal as a form of social and political activism against Silicon Valley capitalism (Kaun & Treré, 2020; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). This has, in turn, given rise to a host of self-criticism from former tech employees that are publicly staged in performative and theatrical ways (see Jespersen & Albris, Chapter 4 in this volume; Karppi & Nieborg, 2021).

In recent years, practices of disconnection and digital detoxing are becoming more widespread and are even being offered as tourism packages (Stäheli & Stoltenberg, 2024) where people can vacation “off the grid”. Digital detoxing is simultaneously being merged with mindfulness and well-being practices in a wide range of ways, through courses, coaching programmes, corporate retreats, and meditation (Syvertsen, 2020). Yet, there does not exist any uniform or unilateral way that people practice disconnection or take a critical stance towards digital devices, technologies, or platforms. Indeed, disconnecting from one’s smartphone, computer, or tablet is fraught with questions of morality and ethics (e.g., “what is a good life in the digital age?”), on the one hand, and practical and social dilemmas confronting people if they choose to limit their digital usage (e.g., fear of missing out or being cut out from social networks), on the other.

As a testament to the growing popular interest in disconnection and digital well-being, one need only consider the plethora of popular texts and phenomena that have surfaced in recent years. A few examples are the popular documentary films *Offline is the New Luxury* (2016) and *The Social Dilemma* (2020), the “National Day of Unplugging” initiative, the selection of the “Mobile Phone Box” as the 2019 Christmas Gift of the Year in Sweden (see Fast & Syvertsen, Chapter 3 in this volume), the Swedish radio show *Nedkopplad* [*Disconnected*], and bestselling self-help books such as Cal Newport’s *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (2019), Jennifer Rauch’s *Slow Media: Why Slow is Satisfying, Sustainable, and Smart* (2018), Imran Rashid’s *Sluk* [*Turn Off*] (2017), or Tanya Goodin’s *Off: Your Digital Detox for a Better Life* (2017). All these films and books are examples of cultural products that are widely seen and read, and which signal that the public interest in limiting one’s own use of digital devices has significantly increased.

Contextualising the digital backlash

As noted earlier, the digital backlash encompasses a broad range of cases and societal trends – from people explicitly trying to minimise the role of digital technologies in their lives, to public worries of the detrimental effects of especially social media platforms and demands for holding Big Tech accountable. It includes practices and discourses that signal a general cultural turn against the hitherto hegemonic notion that digitalisation always leads to something good, as well as the ingrained techno-digital determinism espoused by countless Silicon Valley executives (Williams, 2018). These discussions are different, and they unfold in different contexts and situations.

This is especially so with respect to the overarching term digital disconnection. What does this term mean, and which types of practices, ideas, and discourses does it encompass? And what does it mean for individuals to disconnect? Regardless of whether people perceive digital disconnection as a good and desirable thing to engage in, they encounter a range of pull factors towards remaining or becoming increasingly digitally connected: from having to deal with their own forces of habit to accessing state welfare services through digital platforms (see Lai & Cone, Chapter 14, and Klausen, Chapter 8 in this volume), to the experience of peer pressure to be part of specific social networks. Digital disconnection also requires *work* on the part of those wanting to disconnect. Several studies have empirically analysed the varied strategies and navigational tactics that people use when trying to “break out” from constant connectivity (Russo et al., 2019), also in cases where there is simply no opt-out button to press (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2022), where disconnection requires a great deal of time investment, or where it is outright impossible. For social media platforms such as Facebook, wanting to limit one’s use or to disconnect entirely is, as Karppi (2018) has shown, fraught with a range of “affective bonds”. In this sense, disconnection can involve several paradoxes and dilemmas.

The digital backlash is also coupled with mindfulness and meditation practices that were perhaps once considered fringe or tied to a “New Age” identity (see also Sutton, 2020), but which are now promoted at the highest echelons of power to combat the perceived crisis of attention amongst political leaders (Cook, 2016; Pedersen et al., 2021). This tendency also points to the fact that pushbacks against hyperconnectivity and an unlimited digital presence are increasingly becoming institutionalised and scripted. For instance, as Syvertsen (2023) has shown, many digital detoxing initiatives can be considered ambiguous forms of contemporary activism, ranging from self-help to corporate action.

Discussions about the impact and role of digital technologies and platforms often verge on moral panics – that screen time is inherently bad for us all, especially the younger generation (for public discourse analyses of this debate, see Størup & Lieberoth, 2023; Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021). This is especially

pertinent concerning the question of whether digital devices and certain platforms are indeed addictive, and whether we can even say that things such as Internet addiction or smartphone addiction exist (Panova & Carbonell, 2018; Sutton, 2020). While there are genuine scientific discussions around whether something like Internet addiction exists, the debate also has far-ranging political and practical implications, for instance, in terms of whether such addictions should be incorporated into official lists and indexes of recognised behavioural disorders (Helm & Matzner, 2023). It is therefore important to remain critical about comparisons between, for instance, smartphone use and substance addiction. If commentators, either in academia or public debate, discursively evoke, for instance, Instagram use as a form of “digital drug”, on par with cocaine addiction, it becomes difficult to discuss the many nuances and variations that people’s everyday use of digital platforms entail, as several of the contributions to this book attempt to show.

Closely related to the scientific and political debate about digital forms of addiction is the question of well-being in relation to ubiquitous and constant connectivity (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Twenge et al., 2022). Discourses of well-being are increasingly being tied to whether there is such a thing as digital overuse, and how people try to organise their lives in meaningful ways when they are dependent on digital technologies (see Andelsman Alvarez, Chapter 12, and Gandini, Chapter 11 in this volume), while also remaining critical of the role they play (Büchi et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2021; Sullivan & Reiner, 2021). Yet, what well-being means obviously differs between geographical and cultural contexts, and across age groups and socioeconomic parameters. As such, discussions of well-being in relation to the digital condition are not of much use unless they are situated in relation to specific social, political, and cultural circumstances.

There are, in other words, a range of both normative and moral discussions about the proper and correct ways we should use digital technologies in society, and knowledge controversies and disagreements that coalesce with these normative discussions. This ought to also serve as a reminder that the debate about the role and impact of digital devices and platforms is highly politicised and entangled with a variety of discussions about cultural values and social norms, which change according to context. Understanding these debates, and how they relate to people’s everyday experiences with using digital technologies and disconnecting from them, is an integral part of what we seek to offer to readers of this book.

Themes of the book

The chapter contributions to this edited volume have been divided into four parts that deal with different thematic perspectives on the digital backlash. In the following, we explicate and qualify why these four themes are central.

The short introductory sections that can be found at the beginning of each part serve to further situate the individual chapters in relation to the respective themes.

Part I – Discourses and disputes – includes five contributions that present case studies and overviews of public debates about digital technologies and platforms. The digital backlash signals a broad social and cultural shift in the way digital technologies and platforms are discussed and debated. The contributions in this part of the book aim to highlight different examples of how societal communication and political opinions on digital issues change societies, and are in turn being adapted to the changing stances and wishes of the general public, interest groups, corporations, and policymakers. Through analyses of significant cases such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the *Social Dilemma* film, and the mobile phone box, the contributors seek to discuss how individual events and initiatives generate and catalyse debates about digital technologies in the public sphere. This part of the book also provides an overview of the role that researchers play in digital connectivity and disconnection debates and what the state of the art currently is with respect to digital disconnection research.

Part II – Work and productivity – includes five contributions that deal with different aspects of how digital connectivity and disconnection relate to work. As the contributions show, digital disconnection as a social and political issue is highly visible and riddled with ambivalences in the context of workplaces and other contexts in which people do “work”. As Fast (2021) has noted, digital disconnection both redefines work ideals and shapes the culture of workplaces. Indeed, there are numerous examples today of schools, workplaces, and other institutions that are instituting policies and rules for how to limit digital use, carried forward by policies for promoting more healthy digital practices. While the Internet revolution has profoundly altered the labour market and welfare institutions across societies, the role that digital technologies and platforms should play in the structuring of work relations or in health systems – to take a few examples – is increasingly becoming part of public conversations and debates. In doing so, the contributions to this part of the book also probe questions about the good life and the ethics of everyday life, and how these questions intersect with and create ambivalences around the use of smartphones and other digital devices.

Part III – Children and youth – includes three contributions that in different ways seek to understand questions of digital critique, digital dependency, and digital disconnection in the context of parenting, from the perspective of young people and across contexts of home and school life. Echoing a concern that permeates many people’s everyday concerns with the role of digital technologies, parents attempt to find all sorts of ways to orchestrate daily family life with digital devices that are, from their perspective, in line with modern ideals of child rearing. From the perspective of young people, one

of the contributions seeks to understand the complex reasonings that adolescents give when they explain their desires to disconnect from their phones and other digital devices, yet choose not to do so. In the context of schools, both pupils and teachers must make sense of an everyday institutional life where the reliance on digital devices has by now become a premise, testifying to the limits of the digital backlash.

Part IV – Leisure and recreation – includes four contributions that turn attention towards the many cases and examples of how the digital backlash, and in particular digital disconnection, are tied to travelling, free time, and tourism. In everyday lives saturated with connectivity, leisure is a sphere where many try to regain some disconnected time, yet tensions and dilemmas prevail about how people are more apt to limit and control their screen time and digital consumption, and how such practices are tied to notions of what counts as “authentic”. The chapter contributions in various ways show how digital disconnection practices become commodified and advertised to convey a sense of mindfulness, authenticity, and nostalgia about a world before the digital revolution. This can either be in the form of people travelling to “dead-zones”, places located outside of wireless Internet connection, or how people make sense of attending outdoor camps where they are asked to digitally detox for a short period of time. In such leisure and recreational contexts, digital disconnection practices need to be situated in relation to the personal values and motivations of the individuals in question, and especially how people make sense of the notion of being digitally free.

Aims and scope of the book

The study of the digital backlash as it manifests across societal debates and individual practices is still a nascent research field in the social sciences and humanities. Yet, the amount of research being published on the topic of disconnection as one instantiation of the digital backlash is growing fast, as Bagger also notes in his contribution to this volume (Chapter 6). A few path-breaking books have been published in recent years (e.g., Jansson & Adams, 2021; Karppi, 2018; Ytre-Arne, 2023) – including by some of the editors of this book (Syvertsen, 2020). Several special issues devoted to the topic have been coming out in recent years (e.g., in journals *Media, Culture & Society* and *Convergence*), and in successful special themed conferences, pre-conferences, and panels (e.g., Geomedia 2021: “Off the Grid”; the ECREA pre-conference “Advancing Digital Disconnection Studies”; Digital Cultures: Unrelating: Infrastructures, Imaginaries and Politics of Disconnection; ICA pre-conference “Key themes in digital disconnection”), as well as popular seminar series that we as editors of the volume have organised in recent years as part of different research projects. Yet, there is a need for studies that tie

disconnection research to more foundational problematics and ambivalences of digital connectivity across personal, work, and institutional contexts of everyday life. With this book, we aim to provide this precise combination.

This book has a general focus on Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Norway, and Sweden – which is evident given the case studies found in the chapters that are localised in these countries. A few chapters present case studies from other contexts, for instance, Italy (Gandini, Chapter 11) and Portugal (Jorge, Chapter 16), or present country comparisons (e.g., Denmark and the US, see Jespersen & Albris, Chapter 4). A central question that arises in lieu of this regional focus is how user modes and sentiments pertaining to the digital backlash surface in the Nordic countries. The Scandinavian context is interesting because of its high levels of connectivity and its long tradition of media politics along the lines of a media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Furthermore, it represents a context in which ideals of hyper-connectivity exist next to oppositional values, such as living a simple or “authentic” life close to nature but far from screens. Yet, it is of course important to stress that the Scandinavian context simultaneously foregrounds some perspectives. The empirical cases and themes might look quite different were we to focus on, for example, Southern Europe, North America, Eastern Africa, and so on.

It is, however, our hope that this volume can become a resource for readers around the world, and even outside of academia, to acquire insight into the digital backlash and disconnection. In the context of growing public concerns about the impacts that the ubiquitous digitalisation and datafication are having on society, academic books play a key role in explaining, nuancing, and criticising current trends. As such, discussions around digital disconnection are not merely academic and theoretical, but deeply practical and political. In a similar vein, with this book we aim to contribute both theoretically and empirically with analyses of digital disconnection that can inform audiences beyond academia, including policymakers, journalists, think tanks, and youth education (i.e., high schools). For Nordic policymakers, for whom the idea of a media welfare state has been principal (Syvertsen et al., 2014), this book should be relevant and noteworthy. Moreover, we aim for the book to be a critical contrast to the expanding market of digital detox self-help books, which in and of itself is proof of the growing interest in digital disconnection outside of academia. Such books typically construct media dependency as an individual problem, rather than approaching it – as we aim to do in this book – as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon, infused with moral questions and practical concerns that change according to context.

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