CHAPTER 3

Post-digital consumption

The controversy surrounding the mobile phone box as a means of disconnection

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ABSTRACT

This chapter expands the understanding of contemporary disconnective technologies by providing a case study of a mundane, low-tech artefact that has gained popularity in both private and public spaces: the mobile phone box. A mobile phone box (or a phone basket, as it is often called) is a place to put away smartphones for shorter or longer durations; boxes range from sophisticated products to simple homemade solutions. In this chapter, we identify the mobile phone box as a post-digital consumer object, representing the disenchantment with hyper-connected life that is visible in studies of digital disconnection. To scrutinise the diverse meanings of the artefact – and the broader discussion about the role of connective technologies in our lives – we investigate the debate following a Swedish trade association's decision to award the mobile phone box the title "Christmas Gift of the Year" in 2019. Our analysis indicates that the box, and the solutions it embodies – putting away one's phone – is highly contested, yet also an indication that the digital backlash and disconnection sentiments have become part of mainstream culture. The chapter contributes insights into hitherto under-researched guises of the post-digital and the kind of discursive battles that this condition may trigger.

KEYWORDS: mobile phone box, post-digital, disconnection, digital detox, discourse

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the expansion of consumer products designed to solve problems typically framed as screen "over-use" or "addiction". Studies of digital detox apps and software to block access to Wi-Fi or social media offer insight into how disconnectivity may be stimulated – or simulated – through manoeuvring the very affordances of connectivity (see, e.g., Beattie, 2020; Beattie & Cassidy, 2021; Mannell, 2019; You, Chapter 9 in this volume). Less researched are disconnective designs that exist beyond the confines of our digital devices. This chapter expands the understanding of disconnective consumer products by providing a case study of the mobile phone box, a mundane, low-tech artefact that has gained popularity as a place to put away smartphones for a temporary break. While mobile phone boxes can be bought in many shapes and forms, they can also be homemade or created spontaneously with simple means – any basket or container will do. Hence, "the box" is a multidimensional object: It is an artefact, it can be a consumer product, but it is also an idea and a method for digital detoxing (Syvertsen, 2020).

The mobile phone box follows a historical trajectory of artefacts to deal with intrusive media (e.g., Syvertsen, 2017). However, in 2019, the mobile phone box received particular attention in Sweden, as it was elected "Årets julklapp", or "Christmas Gift of the Year" (CGY) by retail research organisation HUI Research. HUI Research is owned by Svensk Handel [Swedish Trade], an employer organisation promoting trade competitiveness. A primary criterion for the award was that CGY products should be emblematic of the times we live in, and, tellingly, in 1994, the mobile phone itself was awarded the label. 25 years later, CEO Jonas Arnberg motivated the phone box award by stating: "Swedes are reflecting more and more on the use of the mobile phone, and are now increasingly trying to adjust their behaviour accordingly" (HUI Research, 2019).

The announcement triggered mixed reactions: Online and mass media items immediately appeared to praise, ridicule, or criticise the award. We chose the CGY debate as an exemplary case for three reasons. First, it represents a microcosmos of the ongoing discussion about the use (and misuse) of connected devices and exemplifies how problem definitions and solutions are framed in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Second, it helps to establish the timeline for the digital backlash and disconnection sentiments and document the type of events constituting the post-digital condition in the Scandinavian context. Analysts and observers use mass and social media coverage to demonstrate that a backlash is emerging (see, e.g., Helles & Lomborg, Chapter 2 in this volume), and this event produced massive coverage. Third, the debate illustrates how different stakeholders defend their positions concerning connectivity in the public sphere, including how actors with blatant economic interests use diverse measures to deflect criticism. Events like the CGY award play into an existing discursive landscape where

stakeholders struggle for interpretive dominance. While disconnection studies often focus on individuals, in this chapter, we discuss a public event and adds information from a Scandinavian context (see, e.g., Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021; Sutton, 2020; Bagger, Chapter 6 in this volume).

We draw on the theoretical framework of the post-digital and identify the mobile phone box as a moral marker of the post-digital society. The post-digital society is simultaneously marked by the "disenchantment" of the digital and the increasing valorisation of objects, context, and practices that are or appear to be digitally disconnected (see, e.g., Cramer, 2015; Fast, 2021; Humayun & Belk, 2020; Thorén et al., 2019). Following Humayun and Belk (2020: 634), we recognise the mobile phone box as a post-digital object intended to provide an "escape" from "digital ephemerality". However, as we argue in this chapter, mobile phone boxes are not about permanent escape; rather, they signify the emerging insight from disconnection studies that breaks are almost always temporary and that self-regulating measures are part of managing everyday (digital) life (Light, 2015; Syvertsen, 2023; Ytre-Arne, 2023).

The overarching goal of the chapter is to discuss how sentiments related to disconnection and the digital backlash manifest beyond individual motivations and strategies. This overarching goal derives from our interest in historicising the post-digital condition and understanding societal aspects of disconnection (Fast, 2021; Syvertsen, 2023). Two analytical questions structure the discussion:

1. What problems is the mobile phone box supposed to solve?
2. Which ideological positions are explicated by stakeholders?

We begin the chapter with a theoretical elaboration of the mobile phone box as a post-digital consumer object, followed by a note on methods and sources. Then we turn to an "unboxing" of the discursive battles around the CGY award, explicating four central positions: 1) HUI Research's justification of the CGY award as a vehicle for mental health and sustainability, 2) retailers' promotion of commercial boxes as a consumer object to improve social relations, 3) telecom-related stakeholders' dismissal and ridicule of the artefact, and 4) the positions of bystanders and commentators who tag on with concerns of their own. In conclusion, we relate the analysis to the study's main contribution: insights into the post-digital condition and discursive battles in societies where the digital is simultaneously praised and problematised.

The mobile phone box as a post-digital consumer object

In this section, we first elaborate on the theoretical framework of the post-digital before turning to three critical dimensions of the mobile phone box as a post-digital object, emblematic of contemporary society.

The post-digital condition and the disenchantment of connectivity

As indicated above, the "post" in post-digital does not signify a shift from the digitalised world. Instead, as post-digital theorist Cramer (2015) remarked, it resembles the "posts" in concepts like post-colonialism or post-feminism, signalling continuations and mutations of the referred phenomenon rather than the absolute ending of it. The post-digital condition implies not only blurred boundaries between analogue and digital, but also "a contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets, or a period in which our fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical" (Cramer, 2015: 12). Cramer began his conceptualisation of the post-digital by referencing a popular Reddit meme from 2013 that points to a digitally saturated social context: that of the young, urban, and fashionable "hipster". The meme, with the words "You are not a real hipster unless you take your typewriter to the park", helped Cramer (2015: 11) introduce what is significative of the post-digital condition:

> In 2013, using a mechanical typewriter rather than a mobile computing device is […] no longer a sign of being old-fashioned [, but rather] a deliberate choice of renouncing electronic technology, thereby calling into question the common assumption that computers, as meta-machines, represent obvious technological progress and therefore constitute a logical upgrade from any older media technology.

Cramer's (2015) conceptualisation has lately been effectively engaged in empirical analyses of post-digital artefacts. Thorén and colleagues (2019) drew on Cramer's work when exploring the promotion of digital disconnection through hybrid technologies, such as the "dumb phone". Relatedly, Humayun and Belk (2020: 634) engaged the concept of post-digital consumption to understand how analogue artefacts – notably paper notebooks and film cameras – may be used to "escape from our digital world". As they observed, "the role that objects play in contradiction to digital ephemerality has been neglected thus far" and "consumers are seeking to escape the relentless march of the digital through the use of non-digital analogue objects" (Humayun & Belk, 2020: 634). Post-digital consumption, they argued, offers a kind of "mundane resistance" (Humayun & Belk: 634–635) against the digitally overloaded society.

Hence, the concept of the post-digital implies that connectivity is not, by default, superior to disconnectivity (Humayun & Belk, 2020). This is, indeed, the leitmotif of the expanding digital detox industry which symptomatically gained momentum, not with the arrival of digital technology, but with the *normalisation* of constant connectivity through wireless Wi-Fi, mobile devices, and "smart" technologies in the 2010s (see, e.g., Syvertsen, 2020).

What makes the mobile phone box post-digital?

Following and advancing the notion of the post-digital condition, we highlight three interrelated dimensions defining the mobile phone box as a post-digital object.

The first dimension concerns the historical embeddedness of the mobile phone box. Employing a box or a basket to put away one's phone was triggered by problems emblematic of our deeply mediatised culture (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2019). The box belongs to the digital age, as there were, so to speak, no boxes where you could put a landline phone. A survey of mass media items and relevant Instagram hashtags indicates that commercial and homemade boxes and baskets for this purpose emerged in the broader consumer market in the mid-2010s, alongside a rise of digital-free holidays (Li et al., 2018) and digital detox apps (see You, Chapter 9 in this volume). The Factiva database, which holds media items worldwide, contains articles about "phone baskets" earlier than 2015, but as a referent for something different; for example, an item from 2007 suggests how one can have a basket of toys to give to the kids when one wants to speak uninterrupted (!) on the phone (Factiva, 2007). Even though there were no specific analogue frontrunners, the use of tools to restrict media use is not unique to the digitalised society (for historical measures of media resistance, see, e.g., Syvertsen, 2017; Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021). Many historical media technologies have also been "boxed in"; a prominent example is the television or radio cabinets where closed doors hid the device. In a sense, the mobile phone box alleviates the placelessness of contemporary mobile media (Kleinman, 2007) and provides the smartphone with a home base, so to speak.

While the contemporary mobile phone box is not a retro object like the typewriter or other technologies dubbed post-digital (Cramer, 2015; Thorén et al., 2019), many are designed to *look* retro – to have an "authentic" feel to them. This takes us to the second post-digital dimension of the mobile phone box: aesthetics and design. As argued by Humayun and Belk (2020: 635), the post-digital does not foreshadow a new age of the non-digital, but "it does often emerge as a form of old-world nostalgia for the vintage and retro". The empirical analysis reveals that retail mobile phone boxes come in various appearances and price categories. Many are designed as decorative interior items, sharing traits with iconic analogue objects such as Moleskine notebooks or beautifully crafted board games (e.g., chess sets). At the high end, there are design products, such as the "mobile phone bed" sold by author and entrepreneur Ariana Huffington's Thrive Global – an organisation dedicated to wellness and bearing the same name as Huffington's book *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder* (published in 2015). The product costs 65 American dollars and is made of "solid wood with velvet-lined compartments and satin liners" (Thrive Global, 2022). It also has built-in charging possibilities for up

to ten devices. On the other end, there are inexpensive, un-electrified wooden boxes, often with a moral or uplifting message (e.g., "Life is too short to be scrolled away") in handwritten style (see Figure 3.1). These are frequently sold in romantic settings like farm shops or vintage stores that sell old or vintage-looking artefacts.

FIGURE 3.1 "Life is too short to be scrolled away" mobile phone box

Comments: Inscription on a wooden mobile phone box. The box was marketed by the retailer, Textil & Presentia, as "shabby chic", a decoration style associated with simulated vintage and retro.

Source: photo by Karin Fast

Instagram posts demonstrate how phone boxes can be made from diverse materials (see, e.g., posts with the hashtags #mobillåda [mobile phone box] or #mobilkorg [mobile phone basket]). Although cases made of plastic are common in stores, mobile phone boxes displayed on Instagram – including homemade DIY (do-it-yourself) objects – are often made of organic or re-used material such as wood, glass, carton, concrete, ceramics, textile, wicker, straw, or leather. Several, including some plastic ones, are made of recycled material. Arguably, the aesthetic and design lend a form of authenticity, warmth, and a "sense of humanity" to many boxes (Humayun & Belk, 2020: 635), typical of post-digital consumer objects and experiences (see also Enli & Syvertsen, 2021; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Also, the fact that many boxes include digital components – ranging from Huffington's electrified "bed" to standard cases

that also work as charging stations – reflects how post-digital artefacts may blur the line between analogue and digital (Cramer, 2015; Thorén et al., 2019). Especially when serving its very purpose – to contain a digital device – the mobile phone box becomes as a sort of "hybrid assemblage" (Thorén et al., 2019: 337), where the digital and the analogue co-exist (see also Yuan, 2021) and where the "offline" solution supports online life.

The third post-digital dimension of the mobile phone box is its *social context*. As disconnection research discloses, disconnective initiatives are typically individualistic (Fish, 2017; Jorge, 2019; Kaun & Trére, 2020; Natale & Trére, 2020; Syvertsen, 2020, 2023), resting on the premise of self-help. The mobile phone box is no exception; it is regularly promoted as a private object with which one can put their phone away, often in situations within a family or amongst friends. However, post-digital moralities extend beyond our private spaces. Fast (2021: 1618) proposed that what we currently witness is the instalment of post-digital capitalism, an accelerated political-economic regime where disconnection is neither just a "luxury" nor only a necessity for "surviving" in today's hyper-connected world, but increasingly also "*a moral obligation*", especially in working life. Symptomatically, the mobile phone box appears in public or semi-public spaces like workplaces, restaurants, bars, schools, kindergartens, and holiday resorts.

Hence, the mobile phone also reflects ambitions to regulate the behaviour of a wider public, connoting authority and (paternalistic) control. In workplaces, the artefact symbolises the tendency of imposed regulation and disconnective work modes (Fast, 2021; Guyard & Kaun, 2018). On this note, the management magazine *Chef* featured a short article in response to the 2019 announcement, rhetorically asking its readers: "Is this year's Christmas present a dream for all managers? For how often have you not sat in meetings where employees secretly worked on their mobiles – or even worse, scrolled through Instagram and Facebook" (O'Mahony, 2019).

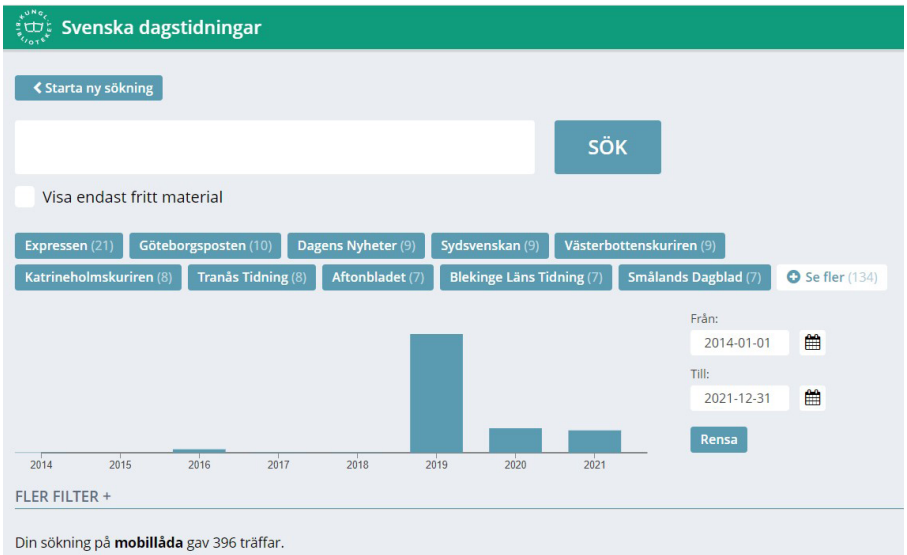
Furthermore, online and social media representations include numerous mobile boxes used in schools, ranging from homemade solutions (a simple plastic box) to elaborate metal or plastic lockable "mobile hotels" or "mobile prisons". These solutions are also recommended for cultural and sporting events, holiday destinations, and restaurants. An example of the fuzzy area between voluntary and enforced disconnection via the mobile phone box is the vintage table-top boxes at the Hearth Restaurant in New York (Ballentine, 2018). The encouragement to put away the mobile device is found inside the box. Operating at the meso level of society, these boxes are not individualistic but neither are they seriously challenging the power of technology on the societal level, for example, by being a signpost in favour of regulation. Arguably, they are post-digital also in the sense that they reflect the need to "escape" but also that "escapes are only temporary or partial" (Humayun & Belk, 2020: 635).

Method, data, and analytical framework

Our study maps the emergence of a contemporary phenomenon and relates it to cultural and political debates. The research design resembles historical studies using digitised archive material. As Brennen (2017: 101) noted, historians "gather as much documentary evidence as possible" about their topic, "evaluate that evidence for reliability and authenticity", "interpret the significance and meaning of the evidence", and "craft stories about their findings". As with many historical items, abundant evidence is available on the mobile phone box, necessitating selection based on relevance.

The selection of analytical material is based on a three-step search strategy. The first is broad searches on Google, newspaper databases, and social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook) to locate the phenomenon in context and map relevant terms and concepts. We searched keywords both in English and Scandinavian languages (such as "mobillåda", "mobile box", "phone basket", and more). To narrow down the material for textual analysis, the second step was to identify media texts reacting to the CGY announcement. Figure 3.2 illustrates how the announcement triggered commentary and debate.

FIGURE 3.2 Screenshot of search results for "mobillådan" [mobile phone box], 2014–2021



Comments: Results from svenska dagstidningar [Swedish daily newspapers] database (National Library of Sweden), searched 23 April 2022.

The third step was to select the precise sample based on two criteria: 1) whether the mobile phone box was explicitly featured and placed in an ideological or rhetorical context, and/or 2) whether it featured stakeholders contributing to constructing the box as a post-digital artefact.

The analysis of the selected sample is guided by the research question and the theoretical framework of the post-digital, focusing on how the box is framed as a solution to problems inherent to the post-digital condition. Specifically, we discuss how different stakeholders discursively construct the mobile phone box. Discourse analyses map struggles around the meaning of events and objects and how these reflect historical and cultural contexts (Brennen, 2017: 2). The analysis identifies ideological positions in the text, what is considered common sense and "natural", how texts and objects reinforce consensual interpretations, and which conceptions are challenged. The analysis furthermore includes elements from rhetorical analysis (Brennen, 2017: 216–217), noting how the texts aim to persuade readers. As the analysis reveals, stakeholders appeal to readers through references to facts and scientific evidence, but also by appealing to emotions using humour, irony, and sarcasm. We have translated all quotes not originally in English.

Unboxing the mobile phone box: Four positions

The empirical section identifies significant facets of the CGY debate, pointing to different stakeholders and their discursive stances toward the artefact. Four ideological positions and types of stakeholders are identified.

First, the position and motives of HUI research are explicated. They argued that overuse of mobile phones is associated with mental health issues and pointed to the box as a sustainable solution: You do not have to buy anything this Christmas, you can even make your own box. Second, we discuss the discourses of retailers selling boxes. They promote commercially made boxes and take the Christmas Gift Award literally: You need to buy a box to spend quality time with family over Christmas. Third, we turn to the interventions of connectivity stakeholders – those representing telecommunication or smartphone industries. They oppose the idea that the mobile phone is a problem and point instead to the award as a problem: If you support the box, you suffer from collective moral panic. Fourth, we turn to the discourses of bystanders and commentators in mass and social media. The CGY rapidly became the object of a meta-debate where commentators with various axes to grind exploited the award's publicity to promote their concerns. The widespread commentary indicates that the discourses associated with the post-digital condition, such as digital overuse, disconnection, and nostalgia for pre-digital artefacts, are well-known cultural phenomena, and that the award plays into an already established discursive landscape in Sweden anno 2019.

Mental health and sustainability: The Christmas Gift of the Year announcement

HUI Research was founded as Handelns Utredningsinstitut [Trade Research Institute] in 1968, and they conduct research, investigations, and analyses about trade and tourism (HUI, n.d.). The CGY award was introduced in 1988 to increase publicity around the organisation's Christmas trade forecast (Dagens Nyheter, 2018). The product is chosen by HUI analysts based on market research (Rågsjö Thorell, 2018), and the first award was to the bread-making machine. Given the criteria stipulated by the organisation – the product should be new, have high sales value, or represent the time we live in – it is perhaps no surprise that many CGY products are media or "smart" technologies.

Among the 32 products that have hitherto been announced CGY are, for example, the video camera (1989), the CD player (1991), the mobile phone (1994), the "Internet package" (1996), the computer game (1998), the DVD player (2000), the flat screen television (2004), the audiobook (2006), GPS (2007), the tablet (2010), the smart watch (2014), the robot vacuum cleaner (2015), and VR (virtual reality) goggles (2016). Although the mobile phone box is one out of many technology products that have been appointed CGY, it represents a break with the HUI tradition of commercially pushing new digital consumer products into the market.

In the CGY announcement on 20 November 2019, the HUI website and *Christmas Report* acknowledged structural changes, making the mobile phone box a timely object (quotes derive from their website; see HUI, 2019). "Swedes love their mobile phones", HUI has asserted, yet, in 2019, more "have opened their eyes to the impact of mobile phones on our lives". The announcement acknowledges that "there are apps to regulate screen time" but promotes the mobile phone box as "an aid during the times of the day you want to put away your mobile to read a book instead, sleep or spend time with the family". Although positive functions of online communication are mentioned, a "balance between connectivity and freedom from screens" is needed. Furthermore, excessive phone use is explicitly linked to mental health issues:

> Today, 92 per cent of the population over the age of 11 have a smartphone. On average, we spend over three hours in front of screens every day and the use increases every year. At the same time, as the mobile phone constantly demands our attention, we sleep one hour less per night than 100 years ago, and mental illness is increasing. (HUI, 2019)

HUI's arguments problematise the effects on our brains linked to meaningless social media use (we are told that "only one in four Swedes" finds social media "meaningful"). To back up their argument, HUI refers explicitly to popularised research by Anders Hansen, a psychiatrist known to the Swedish public through numerous television and radio appearances (see also Forsler et al., Chapter 5 in this volume). Hansen's book, *Skärmhjärnan: Hur en hjärna*

i osynk med sin tid kan göra oss stressade deprimerade och ångestfyllda [*The Screen Brain: How a Brain Out of Synch with its Time Can Make Us Depressed and Anguished*], was also published in 2019, solidifying Hansen's role as an influential commentator. Other factual sources lending authority to the decision are the Internet Foundation and eMarketer.

> The impact of the mobile phone on the brain has been highlighted in 2019, in more and more forums. Existing research results have been highlighted and new ones have been added. Books, magazines, TV programmes, and this year's most downloaded summer talk [radio feature with Anders Hansen] have made more Swedes open their eyes to how mobile phones both adapt to and shape our brains. (HUI, 2019)

In addition to problematising negative effects of communication technology, HUI Research uses the award to mark another break with the past. In an interview in *Resumé*, a magazine and website specialising in media and marketing, CEO Jonas Arnberg pointed to how the mobile phone box represents a turn towards sustainability as a critical value (Törner, 2019). From its inception in the late 1980s, the CGY award has been condemned by critics – such as non-profit member organisation Sveriges Konsumenter [Swedish Consumers' Association] – for being nothing but a public relations trick to promote sales. CGY products have been criticised for being expensive (Sydsvenska Dagbladet, 2017) and the award itself for stimulating over-consumption (Dagens Nyheter, 2018). When asked if the mobile phone box (and the 2018 election of the recycled garment as the CGY) represents a "shift from previous years' more commercial products?", CEO Arnberg replied:

> Yes, I agree. We try to reflect the time we live in, and we can see that people are thinking more about the issue of sustainability. Depending on how broadly the concept of sustainability is defined, one could say that the need to disconnect is also about some form of sustainability. (Törner, 2019)

As HUI Research also points out at the beginning of their announcement, "the mobile box can be a box that you buy, already have at home, or manufacture yourself" (HUI, 2019).

By emphasising mental health and sustainability, HUI Research signals responsibility for two contested aspects of consumer capitalism: the scarcity of attention and the scarcity of natural resources, both accentuated by over-consumption of "smart" communication products. While there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of the analysts, the justification includes elements of "greenwashing". The award gives the impression that "we care" about social problems while obfuscating how HUI Research is associated with a lobbyist promoting trade. Nevertheless, HUI Research helps constitute the post-digital condition by alluding to the benefits of a simpler and more authentic life, where neither connection nor consumption is a condition for health and happiness.

Buy a box and be sociable over Christmas: Mobile phone box retailers

The CGY award became immediately and widely exploited in retailer marketing. Ignoring the make-your-own sustainability argument, producers and retailers latched on to a welcome possibility to increase sales. For example, Swedish online store CDON began selling their mobile phone boxes with direct reference to the award. The company, which also sells mobile phones and other electronic gadgets, offers the box in many designs, including 8 × 15 centimetre black or white wooden cases. In humorous jargon – and with an emphasis on the assumed difficulties of celebrating Christmas without a mobile phone – the company promoted the product as the solution to the problem of mobile phone distraction in social situations:

> Now it's time to challenge the whole family for a mobile-free Christmas. Can you hold a digital detox throughout Christmas Eve? No – you may not even use the phone as a timer during the Christmas gift game! One may think a box would be unnecessary to put the phone away successfully. But the fact is that it becomes much easier to not go stare at the screen time after time when it has a special place. Focus on not burning the meatballs and hugging the ones you like a little extra. Just do it! (Retrieved from the CDON website 7 April 2022)

Online retail store iphonebutiken also made explicit references to the announcement on their website, where they also sell mobile phones. The retailer's three designs of mobile phone boxes were all introduced with reference to unspecified "research" and "large studies" suggesting that a designated box is needed (Retrieved from the iphonebutiken website 7 April 2022). As in the case of CDON's promotion, the problem with excessive use is chiefly constructed as a social one. The box is thus sold as an instrument for reclaiming sociability and taking a temporary break:

> Since the iPhone and other smartphones became commonplace, researchers have been fighting for funding to conduct research in the field. The main question has obviously been: How will people ever be able to socialise again, without staring at screens? According to large studies that have been done, the researchers came to the conclusion that a box is needed. (Retrieved from the iphonebutiken website 7 April 2022)

One of the boxes sold by iphonebutiken is lockable. A more extreme variant of lockable mobile phone boxes is the cage, which comes in many designs. One design, called "Mobile Phone Prison" (see Figure 3.3), is sold by previously mentioned CDON on the premise that mobile phones interrupt social situations, such as parties or dinners. The "prison", according to the e-retailer, allows you to "keep your mobile phone safe" (from burglary, one can assume) as well as to "lock the kids' mobile phones for mobile-free family evenings!" (Retrieved from the CDON website 7 April 2022).

FIGURE 3.3 "Mobile phone prison"

Comments: A lockable cage for mobile phones. The retailer, CDON, markets the product as a "safe" storage of your own – or "the kids" – mobile phone. In addition, the box is promoted as a tool for enhancing family sociality.

Source: photo by Trine Syvertsen

Another type is sold by TUPP Reklam, a Swedish advertising profiling company whose lockable cage-looking box holds up to six phones and is equipped with USB sockets for charging possibilities. Albeit focused on the product's technical qualities rather than its assumed usefulness, the company used the CGY announcement to promote what they call "the mobile phone box 2.0" (Retrieved from the Tupp Reklam website 10 March 2022).

As these examples indicate, there was a tendency in the commercial promotion of the mobile phone box to construct the problem with screen or phone overuse as, first and foremost, a problem concerning interpersonal communication. The mental health aspect – which dominates the CGY announcement and related communication – is less present among those selling both digital and post-digital objects. Hence, the original justification of the award is downplayed. The argument about sustainability is also lost. The presumed solution, in this case, is a commercial consumer product and, in many instances, a product which will get both the phone and the user back in the attention flow after a quick recharge. Rhetorically, retailers refer to

scientific evidence to sell boxes, although references are vague and unspecified. Nevertheless, these stakeholders have an explicit interest in the commercial success of the artefact.

Just another moral panic: Connectivity stakeholders

While some retailers used the award to sell mobile phone boxes, what we term connectivity stakeholders explicitly confronted the message of HUI Research. By connectivity stakeholders, we mean companies in the telecom business which have, although to varying degrees, an economic interest in the *failure* of the artefact. Norwegian-based Telenor, one of the dominant operators in the Scandinavian telecom market, chose a head-on attack: The same day as the HUI announcement, Telenor authored an opinion piece in the tabloid daily *Expressen* (Hamnholm, 2019). Signed by Katarina Hamnholm, trend analyst at Telenor, the article attacked the CGY announcement for "shaming" consumers, making them feel guilty about their phone use. Reflecting on the emerging techlash and disconnective sentiments, Hamnholm identified 2019 as "the most technology-anxious year so far". Hamnholm argued that anxiety is rooted in misconceptions or "myths" about the negative impact of screen time and a generalised "fear" of all things new. Hence, the mobile phone box is constructed as nothing but a recent manifestation of the long history of media-induced moral panic:

> But we humans are still generally afraid of change. Therefore, we easily see the new as a threat. This applies not least to new technology. When the video recorder came on the market, the new technology was quickly painted as destructive. Some years later, videogames came with the same debate about threats and dangers. Now we hear the same show about our mobile phone use. (Hamnholm, 2019)

Although acknowledging that "extreme over-consumption can of course be bad", the article argues that critique of screen use "makes many people feel ashamed about something they probably don't have to be ashamed about". Instead, Hamnholm emphasised the benefits of mobile phone use, including how it helps us "keep in touch with family and friends, learn new things, solve problems, apply for a new job and find a new partner". She argued that what she calls "the screen time debate" "should not be about time per se, but about how we use it", thereby diverting blame away from telecom operators and back towards individuals.

Telenor uses various measures to communicate its message, including website items and podcasts. In November 2019, on their Swedish website, the company introduced a podcast series called "Världen har förändrats: Likeraketer och skärmtidsångest – en podd om våra uppkopplade liv" ["The World has Changed: Like Rockets and Screen Time Anxiety – A Podcast about Our Connected Lives"]. In total, nine podcast episodes were published between

November 2019 and April 2020 during a period of "digital backlash", as Telenor called it. The heading "Remove the mobile phone box – I am actually an adult" on the company website was followed by a short preamble where the mobile phone box is dismissed as not "the right way to go":

> The mobile phone box, or mobile phone basket as it is also called, and screen time has become such a hot topic this year that the mobile phone box has been announced as this year's Christmas present [of the year]. And it has become increasingly common to present a box and ask guests to leave their mobile phones there. But many do not think it is the right way to go. (Telenor, 2019)

The article features an interview with comedian and author Elinor Svensson, who stated: "No bans please, away with the mobile phone baskets at dinner, we are adults. The solution is not a basket but perhaps rather that we learn to manage life offline and online in one great symbiosis" (Telenor, 2019).

Other stakeholders responded more sarcastically, as also *Resumé* was quick to notice (see Törner, 2019). On the same day as the announcement was made, Elgiganten, one of Sweden's leading chains in consumer electronics, published a facetious Facebook post declaring that, indeed, the forward-looking company has stored mobile phone boxes for several years. The photo showed a pile of empty cardboard boxes labelled "Free mobile phone boxes" and the words: "Welcome in and pick up your mobile phone box at our place, totally free of charge and first come first served!" (Törner, 2019). Elgiganten, like many other mobile phone retailers (including CDON and iphonebutiken) also sells mobile phone boxes, and their dismissal is playful and ironic. Others went further in ridiculing the mobile phone box and hailing the smartphone as a solution rather than a problem. Responding to the CGY announcement, Swedish telecom company Tele2 published a picture on Facebook, showing a man inside a branded box, with only his legs sticking out. The accompanying text reads:

> This year's Christmas present is here! A mobile phone box for you who want a moment of your own time with your mobile phone, take a break from your relatives with whom you have been hanging out for several hours. Have undisturbed text conversations with friends, enjoy comics, audiobooks and more! Completely unlimited with Tele2's own mobile box. #unlimited. (Törner, 2019)

The CGY announcement provided business stakeholders with a welcome marketing opportunity but also reflected how the industry counters bad press and defends its interests in the debate about intrusive connectivity. The industry stakeholders openly contested the problem definitions of the two previous groups of actors, arguing that the problem is not overuse, intrusiveness, or sustainability issues, but rather family pressures and an outdated technophobic outlook. Telenor's defence strategy explicates how the

academic terminology of moral and media panic is effortlessly adopted by connectivity stakeholders with blatant economic interests to defend. Tele2's tongue-in-cheek statement furthermore presumes that the positions in the debate are already well-known, and that humour and sarcasm are effective methods to promote the sale of electronic gadgets.

An established field: Puns, memes, causes, and experts

HUI Research has historically used the CGY award to attract publicity, and the mobile phone box award is no exception. Apart from the stakeholders who have a defined interest in the success or failure of the artefact, a range of actors exploit the publicity of the award to promote concerns of their own. Among the many contributions of bystanders and commentators, four types stand out.

First, there is a range of humorous expressions where different actors tag onto the award to increase interest in their social media messages. Numerous individuals post pictures of mobile boxes and play with puns and memes in a running commentary. Corporate actors with unrelated products use similar tactics; for example, pharmacy company Kronans Apotek published a Facebook post in a humorous tone explaining that their Christmas products come in recyclable boxes that can be made into "a practical mobile phone box" (Törner, 2019). This is perhaps the best indication of the post-digital condition; the disenchantment with the digital is so well established that it can be referenced to promote almost anything.

Second, we see instances of what has been termed whataboutism, defined as "the technique or practice of responding to an accusation or difficult question by making a counter-accusation or raising a different issue" (Dictionary, n.d.). Several commentators in the press used the award to comment ironically on the award as a symbol of what is generally wrong with society. In an editorial in *Dagens Nyheter*, called "The Christmas Gift of the Year is the morality box", columnist Erik Helmersson used the award to criticise moralism and consumerism in general, pointing out that the commercial box might well be replaced by "a shoebox" (Helmersson, 2019). His argument conveniently neglected that this was indeed a purpose of the award in the first place, as Arnberg at HUI Research was careful to point out that consumption is unnecessary: "Of course, you can buy a box that says 'mobile phone box', but I think most people have some kind of box at home that you can use or maybe you can make your own" (Törner, 2019).

Third, and more relevant to the award, are contributions of organisations promoting climate-friendly Christmas gifts. These actors have picked up on the sustainability message while paying less attention to overuse of mobile phones. The Swedish branch of the Red Cross used the announcement to promote their ideas for a sustainable Christmas, including suggestions to make your own mobile phone box, "in handicraft" or "with an old drawer or boxes" (Red Cross, 2019). A (rather cute) 45-second video published on

their Facebook page, Naturskyddsföreningen [The Association for Nature Protection], demonstrates how a mobile phone box can be made of LEGO (Naturskyddsföreningen, 2019). It is suggested that the money saved from the do-it-yourself version be donated to nature preservation, and viewers are invited to post their own ideas.

Fourth and last, the commentary tells us something about who are considered relevant experts in the field. Two days after the award decision, journalist Jan Andersson, in *Göteborgs-Posten*, commented on the contested nature of the object under the heading "The Christmas Gift of the Year Divides the Nation" (Andersson, 2019). Here, Andersson pointed to diverging comments from authors of popular self-help books, who presumably are the most authoritative voices of "the nation". We already saw that HUI Research referred to Anders Hansen and his popular book *Skärmhjärnan* [*The Screen Brain*] in their justification of the award (see also Forsler et al., Chapter 5 in this volume). Andersson's article pointed to two other authors of popular books with opposing views. Henrik Pallin is a social worker, educator, and author of the book *Kampen om skärmtiden: Vad varje förälder behöver veta om unga och nätet* [*The Battle for Screen Time: What Every Parent Needs to Know about Young People and the Web*], which was also published in 2019. He represents the techno-optimistic position and is cited as having dismissed the mobile phone box as nothing but – in Andersson's words – "poorly substantiated moralism". His arguments are balanced by Andersson with statements from Patrik Wincent, host of the reality show *Lyxfällan* (TV3), therapist, and author of several books about addictive media consumption, including *Digital Diet* and *Nomophobia*. Contrary to Pallin, Wincent is quoted as embracing the mobile phone box as a good solution to the problem of "stress" caused by high levels of mobile phone use.

Andersson's article ends with five recommendations – delivered by Wincent but familiar from self-help literature – on how to reduce screen time (e.g., "leave your phone at home when going for a walk" and "put your phone away one hour before bedtime"). Clearly, the public commentary fits into a discursive field where already established actors with books to sell are posed against others (also with products to promote) in an established dichotomy. While the self-help authors are constituted as authoritative sources, the political and academic field is largely unrepresented and not called upon to comment. Instead, the self-help tips and messaging imply that if there is a problem, it is yours to solve.

Concluding discussion

Our overarching goal in this chapter has been to discuss how sentiments related to disconnection and the digital backlash manifest beyond individual motivations and strategies. Against the backdrop of post-digital theory, we asked the following questions:

1. What main problems is the mobile phone box supposed to solve?
2. Which ideological positions are explicated by stakeholders in the CGY debate?

While largely supporting observations in other studies of disconnective technologies, studying the mobile phone box has provided additional cues to the material and discursive manifestations of the post-digital. Our study adds complementary perspectives to the ongoing debate about individualisation and responsibilisation in disconnection studies (see, e.g., Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020; Bagger, Chapter 6 in this volume) by focusing on a means of disconnection that is neither restricted to private use (e.g., personalised self-help apps), nor located on the level of policy (e.g., "right to disconnect" legislation), but rather as a tool for disconnection at the group or institutional level (e.g., in the family or workplace).

We have approached the mobile phone box as a post-digital consumer object based on three dimensions of the artefact: 1) its historical embeddedness in an époque marked by deep mediatisation and digital disenchantment; 2) its particular aesthetics and designs, which ultimately constitute the artefact as a "hybrid assemblage" (Thorén et al., 2019: 337), diffusing borders between analogue and digital; and 3) its context of post-digital capitalism, which makes the product relevant and desirable in diverse social settings, ranging from private to public and semi-public spaces. We have argued that the mobile phone box not only deserves attention because it serves as a container and "home base" for the signature technology of our time, but also for sentiments, moralities, and ideologies signifying the post-digital society.

Although disconnection sentiments circulate widely, it is important to investigate where – and whom – such sentiments stem from: to locate digital concerns in specific situations and to explore the relationship between stakeholders' material interests and symbolic interactions in the public sphere. From our review of existing digital disconnection studies, we can conclude that it is still rare to study how different stakeholders in specific cultural contexts (e.g., Sweden in the late 2010s around Christmas time), discursively position themselves in relation to a specific (low-tech) disconnective technology (e.g., the mobile phone box). By "unboxing" the mobile phone box as a contested artefact whose meaning derives from the public stance-taking of various agents, we add knowledge about what is considered "natural" or "common sense" in the post-digital society. On top of this, we learn about who is

present and who is absent in the debate about digital disconnection. Our analysis discloses that agents with something to *sell* – mobile phones boxes, mobile phones, books, news, pharmaceutics, and so on – dominate the debate, whereas media researchers, for instance, (see also Forsler et al., Chapter 5 in this volume) and politicians (see Fast & Enli, Chapter 7 in this volume) are far more or completely absent.

The fact that the mobile phone box was appointed as the Christmas Gift of the Year in Sweden in 2019 is evidence of how disconnection sentiments are legitimised by powerful actors. Although our analysis exposes conflicts rather than consensus in terms of problems and potential solutions pertaining to intrusive media, it also reveals how the trope of digital disconnection becomes increasingly mainstreamed by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. In our data, the mobile phone box manifests itself as a cultural referent that many agents, regardless of their attitude towards the object, can decode – and even play with and joke about. Apparently, disconnection discourse has become so well known that even organisations with no direct stake in the telecom market (e.g., non-profit environmental organisation Naturskyddsföreningen and Kronans Apotek) can use the CGY award to promote loosely related – or even unrelated – issues, such as nature conservation or pharmaceutical goods.

Through references to research and experts, HUI Research, retailers, and other promoters of the mobile phone box construct it as a tool for solving health problems (notably brain deficits caused by phone and social media overuse) and sociability (especially loss of interpersonal interaction). Although the focus on interpersonal communication and community was most likely enhanced by the Christmas gift context of the CGY announcement, these problem definitions are familiar from other studies of disconnection discourse, for example, in self-help books (see, e.g., Fast, 2021; Guyard & Kaun, 2018; Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020). Such discursive overlaps indicate, in turn, that the social construction of the mobile phone box does not happen in isolation but is constituted in a discursive field where polarised interpretations of connection and disconnection is already established.

Relatedly, it is not surprising to find that the mobile phone box, like many other historical measures of media regulation (Syvertsen, 2017), was dismissed by connectivity stakeholders and commentators for reflecting technophobia and moral panic (e.g., telecom company Telenor). On this point, we might, however, ask if whether certain connectivity stakeholders are too rash in their dismissal of the object. As has been noted, even temporary "escapes from our digital world" (Humayun & Belk, 2020: 634) might be the recipe for enduring the high levels of connectivity that tech businesses strive to achieve (see also, e.g., Karppi, 2018).

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