

Introduction

In Search of the Opt-Out Button

Today, digital communication technologies are increasingly embraced by industries, governments and everyday users. As both people and public services are imagined as digital or networked 'by default' (Fotopoulou 2016; Mejias 2013; GOV.UK 2013, 2017), engagement – whether civic, consumerist or otherwise – is now predominantly understood as digital. Those disconnected from the digital are seen as 'at risk' of being 'left behind' (Helsper and Galácz 2009; Straumann and Graham 2016). The global Covid-19 pandemic forced societies further into digital reliance, both in tackling the virus via contact tracing and other forms of digital surveillance of public health, *and* in shifting most everyday activities online, to facilitate social distancing and minimise exposure to coronavirus. Since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2019, individuals, institutions, businesses and organisations have found themselves facing a world where digitality has rapidly become compulsory. It was not necessarily the best suitable choice, nor one most considerate of access, equality or efficiency. Rather, it was broadly seen as essential for the necessity, survival and social responsibility of protecting human life. And now, those outside the digital world – disconnected due to lack of access to suitable devices or internet connectivity or forced to the frontlines of the physical world as essential workers – are facing an entirely new form of risk. The risk is no longer solely about being left out of civic or consumerist engagement, rather, it is also about the physical risk of navigating pandemic spaces, times and practices.

Concurrent with the push towards a digital-by-default society, and already occurring before the pandemic, the last decade has also seen a rise in calls to reduce both the range of digital devices and communication platforms, and time spent using them. Such calls are usually issued by those who are already connected, digitally savvy and feel there is *too much* digital connection. Activists

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have sought ways to resist platform labour or evade state, corporate and social media surveillance by switching off, adjusting digital tools, and/or moving to non-digital forms of communication. Bloggers have written about putting down their phones to (better) connect to family and friends. Initiatives such as ‘digital diets’ and ‘unplugging days’ have mushroomed. Populist experts have warned about ‘digital addiction’, to which businesses have responded with commercial packages offering ‘digital detoxes’ and other ‘disconnection commodities’ – from smartphone ‘killswitches’ to cosmetic products branded ‘Unplugged’ and ‘Offline’ (Karppi et al. 2021).

In the context of new pandemic digitalities, the calls to disconnect, albeit temporarily, have intensified. Mentions of ‘zoom fatigue’ have proliferated, acknowledging the necessity of video calls yet noting the accumulating negative impact they pose on communication practices, attention, focus, well-being and mental health (Jiang 2020). Disability justice advocates have noted that while remote communication has been highly beneficial for some, it has brought new (or intensified old) forms of ableist exclusion (Beery 2020; DARU 2020). Finally, digital responses to the pandemic – such as contact tracing apps and digital health tools – have also raised legal and ethical concerns over digital invasion, surveillance, and other data rights.

Whether these concerns are understood as neoliberal demands for a ‘better life’ or as political resistance against the growing power of digitisation, we must take them seriously. In particular, we must ask why the digital still remains the normative point of reference. Today, more than ever, it is an urgent question to consider, and we must rethink the conceptual normalisation of the digital as both the best solution to any emerging problem or crises, and as an assumed, expected form of mediation of social life.

Calling for a more critical approach to digitality and the contemporary compulsion to unnecessarily ‘fix things’ in our daily lives through technologies and digital ‘innovation’ (what he calls ‘technological solutionism’), Morozov (2013) relates this contemporary propensity to privilege technologies, and the internet in particular, in all spheres of our lives. Referring to ‘smart’ technologies as offering solutions to remedy ‘flawed’ human conditions from obesity, to environmental issues, to fitness, Morozov argues that integral to the idea and ideological state of ‘internet-centrism’ is an underlying core belief that the internet is ‘the ultimate *technology* and ultimate *network*’ (2013, 23: emphasis added). Hence, ‘solutionists’ can find even more ways to ‘solve problems’ enabled by the internet through technological and networked mediation.

Throughout this book, we will show the pervasive nature of what we call *digital* solutionism, to paraphrase and expand on Morozov’s formulation. We evoke here Morozov’s inspiring statement on ‘internet-centrism’ to address a general problematic trend within academic and popular discourses concerning ‘the digital’. Scholarship of digital media and society has long focused on various forms of *engagement* with digital communication technologies,

devices and platforms. It has described how we engage as patients, citizens, educators and learners, consumers, workers and activists. It has analysed the ways we use and interact with digital platforms and communication devices in public, semi-public and private spaces. It has documented the ways we live with ‘smart’ technologies that are near, on, or inside our bodies. The possibility of disconnection, refusal or non-use, on the one hand, has only been viewed as an afterthought, an addition, or an exception. *Dis*-engagement from the digital, on the other hand, is rarely considered as anything but an aberration, whether spatio-temporal, demographic, or ideological – but always on the margins, as an oddity that reflects and reaffirms the norm. When looking at a new platform, device or any other techno-social arrangement, most work in digital, internet and social media studies rarely pauses to challenge the digital itself and ask: are these technologies desirable? Can they be escaped? In other words, where is the opt-out button?

Answering these questions is the driving force behind our book. We are writing at a crucial point in time, when the rapid spread of platforms, apps, algorithms and AI are raising fundamental questions regarding datafication, digital rights, individual and collective freedoms, and planetary degradation. In the world of digital saturation – and now that the Covid-19 pandemic has both exacerbated and complicated these points even further – we are situating our book within the emerging field of opting out, refusal, disconnection and voluntary non-use. Scholars in this field have recently begun exploring different ways in which those who are already involved and integrated into the digital world – as opposed to those deliberately neglected and excluded – seek to reduce or even cease their use of devices and communication platforms, usually within a particular context, and with a particular aim (Light 2014; Kitchin and Fraser 2020; Brennen 2019).

While insightful and rapidly developing, current scholarship on the topic as it stands today still has three main limitations, which we will explore in further detail in the following sections of this chapter. Firstly, disconnection is mostly conceptualised in relation to social media, with a heavy focus on Facebook. Secondly, most research to date has focused excessively on user practices and experiences of disconnection, rather than on the technical, economic and political infrastructures that shape the (im)possibilities of opting out. Finally, while addressing a broad range of examples of disconnection, non-use and refusal, what is rarely considered in relation to opting out is the power and agency of the technologies themselves, which inhabit heavily regulated, networked ecosystems of digitality and platform synchronicity.

To address these gaps and offer a paradigmatic framework for the complexity of disconnection, we propose the concept of ‘digital disengagement’. Digital disengagement as we coin it here is a term that simultaneously unravels the assumption that social engagement is always necessarily digital *and* challenges the forced incorporation – engagement – of livelihoods, experiences, relations,

services, economies and freedoms into compulsory digitality and connectivity (Hesselberth 2018; van Dijck 2013). This book positions digital disengagement as *simultaneously* a matter of political economy, cultural formations, materiality, technology, legal frameworks and everyday actions. We focus on these formations as they take shape within a Western-centred, capitalist and neoliberal context of digital communication – the politics of disconnection can and does look different elsewhere and requires a separate discussion, beyond the scope of this book.

In our discussion, the emphasis on Western neoliberalism, capitalism and the global digital economy (Chen 2016; Fuchs 2015; Qiu 2016) is crucial for understanding the conditions in which digitality is normalised and enforced. Digital economy, for example, profits not only from the exploitative production of digital devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets, computers), or the ever-growing communication infrastructures (e.g., Wi-Fi, broadband, mobile data) and services (e.g., platforms, apps, the Cloud). Most crucially, we are seeing the rise of ‘digital labour’ within highly digitised societies: the generation of profit from digital content, subscription services, and, most critically, from data monetisation in what Zuboff (2019) has aptly coined ‘surveillance capitalism’.

At the same time, the neoliberal capitalist culture of life and work in a digital economy often invisibilises both the labour itself and the architecture of exploitation, be it through the practices of ‘playbour’ (Kücklich 2005; Scholz 2013) or the rise of the ‘gig economy’ (Woodcock 2017) that traffic in hopes of flexible employment while brutally degrading working conditions and evading both tax and employment laws. In this context, digital engagement (and disengagement!) become necessarily tied to corporate regimes that regulate and control global capitalist economies through an internet-centric logic that capitalises on data aggregation. This in turn, requires constant participation and dependency on digital technologies, while their exploitative nature is often skilfully hidden. For example, digital capitalism becomes translated into individualised technopractices of entrepreneurialism; the economy of compulsory connectivity presents as self-care aided by digital technologies; and data monetisation and profitable surveillance disappear from view when endless ‘agreements’ and ‘acceptance of terms’ render datafication as users’ own responsibility.

Our book is thus informed by, and moves beyond, the extensive, and growing, body of scholarship on the digital economy, digital capitalism and digital labour. Throughout all the chapters, we demonstrate that while opportunities to disconnect and opt out are generally shrinking, the impact of compulsory digitality is not the same on everyone. Digital society, we argue, always classes, races and genders digital architectures and technopractices of digital engagement *and* refusal. Understanding the deep interrelatedness of enforced digitality and social marginality is key here – as Gangadharan poignantly notes, the impact of ‘digital coercion’ (Gangadharan 2020a, 125–126) is always uneven and tends to reproduce and intensify existing marginalisation and injustice.

Our analysis is therefore not just about questioning how and why digitality is normalised. Rather, our work is also, first and foremost, justice oriented. We ask: who does normalised digitality serve? Who is its captive audience, its unpaid labourer, its depleted resource, its dependent, its victim? Who has the freedom to disengage from the digital, and at what cost?

Our approach here goes beyond individual rights (including those defined by various legal frameworks), placing *digital justice* at the centre of digital disengagement. While remaining attentive to the importance of the *right* to disconnect and opt out, we argue that *individual* digital rights alone can offer only a partial and flawed framework in the era of large-scale datafication and automated decision-making. A *collective digital justice* is imperative when compulsory digitisation segments groups and populations and targets marginalised individuals and communities for surveillance and policing; when it punishes and rewards based on big data analytics; and when it traffics in the collective, accumulated value of digital labour, be it from content production, engagement data or other forms of behavioural profitisation.

Beyond its ability to describe the range and degrees of rights, disconnections, contexts, and spatio-temporal formations, digital disengagement thus offers a *new critical theoretical paradigm* to be used in critical digital and social media studies to denaturalise and destabilise the digital. By searching for our theoretical opt-out button, we centre digital *dis*-engagement, conceptualising it not as an aberration, but as a starting point in thinking about sociality, agency, justice and everyday life.

Digital Disengagement Beyond Social Refusals

The last decade has seen a steady growth of academic interest in digital refusal or withdrawal of those living digitally saturated lives; ‘Disconnection Studies’ is a fast-growing area of research. With only a few publications focusing specifically on devices such as tablets and smartphones (Emek 2014; Maxwell and Miller 2020; Mowlabocus 2016), most research to date attends to digital disengagement in relation to online communication, with a heavy emphasis on social media, especially Facebook (Baumer et al. 2013; Gershon 2011; John and Dvir-Gvirzman 2015; Karppi 2011, 2014; Kaun and Schwartzenegger 2014; Light 2014; Light and Cassidy 2014; Portwood-Stacer 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2013, 2014). This is true not only for the body of published work, but for the overall academic discourse – tellingly, whenever we discuss our research on digital disengagement with other researchers or students, the conversation always moves to social media, with someone always declaring that they have just deleted their Facebook account.

A conflation of the ‘digital’ with ‘social media’/social networking services (SNS) reflects on the pervasive nature of social networking, beyond the widespread use of actual platforms and its consequent theoretical understanding.

This is true for academic research but also, as Mejjias (2013) argues, is part of the pervasive conflation of ‘networks’ with sociality more broadly. The increasing normalisation of the digital, coupled with the simultaneous *social mediafication* of all areas in our lives, has two implications for academic research that we wish to challenge in this book. Firstly, we argue that we need to question the ways digital disengagement has become inseparable with the idea of *social disengagement*. Within such a formulation, the digital and the social collapse into a singular, interchangeable concept leading to what Light’s (2014) seminal work described as ‘disconnective practice’ which involves ‘potential modes of disengagement with the connective affordances of SNSs in relationship to a particular site, between and amongst different sites and in relation to the physical world’ (2014, 17). In other words, digital connectivity and engagement *are defined and naturalised through the concept of social practice*. In this context, withdrawal – the practice of digital disengagement – becomes concerned with the resulting issues and consequences upon users’ social relationships (friends, partners, family and work). We argue that digital disengagement can refer to ‘disconnective practices’ from social media, but also that the concept of the digital itself must first be divorced – denaturalised – from the question of social engagement and social media. Digital disengagement is not always about disengagement from sociality; and social disengagement, in turn, is not always a digital one. Such a separation will open up new ways of thinking about digitality and the ways digital disengagement might have other, broader, social and political implications.

Secondly, and relatedly, an additional conflation resulting from the naturalised link between digitality and sociality which we wish to challenge is the dominance of Facebook as *the* social media site for digital disengagement. With the exception of a small number of studies such as that of Sasaki, Kawai and Kitamura’s (2016) examination of ‘unfriending’ and processes of digital disengagement on Twitter, very few scholars to date discuss digital disengagement on other social media platforms. Even in Light’s (2014) work, which explores the migration of disconnective practices played out across various social media platforms, both the results and discussion indicate that Facebook is almost always the starting and comparative reference point: Facebook is presented as the dominant standard for all social media platforms. Empirically, this may be because for many, Facebook has become an environment which ruins and damages, rather than fosters and supports social connections. Conceptually, however, the result is that digital disengagement becomes tied to not only *social disengagement*, but also to *Facebook disengagement*. Within this context, digital disengagement can only be understood if the concept of the digital is aligned to sociality and networked connectivity and, by the same token, sociality is tied to Facebook as a prime communication platform. What does digital disengagement look like on other platforms? Can Facebook ever be the secondary or even tertiary social media site people migrate *to* rather than *from* having

disengaged elsewhere? And more importantly, what are other forms of digital disengagement, beyond social media?

Digital Disengagement Beyond Motivations and Practices

Another characteristic that unites the majority of recent scholarship on disconnection and refusal is the fixation on motivations and practices. Why do individuals leave or opt out, and how do they do it? In *Opting Out of Digital Media*, Brennen (2019) discusses why people choose to reject some technologies while embracing others. Several years earlier, Portwood-Stacer (2012a, 2012b, 2012c) documented a range of media discourses, which explain reasons and motivations for media refusal. Our own work on the topic began with documenting the variety of reasons for disconnection and disengagement (Kuntsman and Miyake 2015; Kuntsman et al. 2019). Other researchers, similarly, played close attention to the extremely diverse nature of motivations for opting out; while some are individualised and self-centred, others are driven by collective, social and political concerns (Andersson 2016; Casemajor et al. 2015; Hesselberth 2018; Portwood-Stacer 2014).

In addition to motivations, scholarship in the field points to a diverse range of experiences and practices that are involved in disengaging. For example, in their discussion of mediated political action, Casemajor et al. distinguish between passive non-participation (the inability to use technology due to incidental or imposed reasons) and active non-participation as ‘politically wilful engagement in a platform in order to disrupt it’ (refusing to provide platforms with personal data or using platforms against their original aims) (2015, 856). Here, active non-participation, and especially deliberate departure, equates to resistance and refusal – akin to Facebook suicide as a form of protest (Karppi 2011). At the same time, deliberate disconnection can be seen as something positive that ‘adds value to our engagement with SNS’ (Light 2014, 20–21). Furthermore, many instances of disengagement are *both* ‘active’ and ‘passive’, transgressive and reaffirming. Or rather, they are multi-dimensional because they might involve the conscious decision to withdraw – physically, emotionally, socially and so on – from certain normative spaces and forms of sociality and behaviour, whilst also having the ability to negotiate one’s connection to and through technology.

The multi-directionality of digital disengagement occurs across time and space, responding to changing pressures of digital use. Light’s (2014) aforementioned ‘disconnective practice’ is particularly interesting here as he discussed the ‘personal level of disconnection’ and disconnection at work or in public space outside of home and work. The multiplicity of disengagement practices indeed needs to be understood as dynamic and situational, as for example is seen in Light’s pioneering work (2014, 17). Similarly, other scholars have noted

the temporality of disconnective practices, which are rarely irreversible and unidirectional. With the exception of dramatic and one-time events such as ‘Facebook suicides’, digital disengagement as described in current research is seldom about a one-off moment. Nor is it necessarily about steadily moving further and further away from the digital. Baumer et al. (2013), for example, note ‘resisting, leaving, relapsing, and limiting’ as the four main practices of not engaging with Facebook, where ‘relapsing’ refers to returning after a period of non-use. Such a return can occur due to changing one’s decision because of personal reasons, peer pressure or professional demands; or perhaps because the disconnection itself was time-specific. Similarly, others describe practices of temporary or relational withdrawal: ‘unfriending’ some people on Facebook (Gershon 2011; John and Dvir-Gvirsman 2015); or reducing the use of devices whilst on a holiday (Mowlabocus 2016).

Despite the empirical richness of studies on motivations, reasons and practices of digital disengagement and the contexts in which they occur, they contain a number of critical weaknesses. Firstly, the focus on practices, while ethnographically insightful, shifts the conversation away from the question of rights – the right to disconnect, the right to not be engaged, and the right to sociality that is not digital. Secondly, and relatedly, discussions focusing mainly on practices and motivations, are in danger of prioritising individual agency at the expense of a structural analysis of political and economic forces, both those that shape collective digital cultures and societies more broadly, and those that specifically constitute possibilities and (im)possibilities of opting out. As Hesselberth (2018) notes in her critical overview of research on technology non-use, scholarship that focuses on motivations for, and practices of, non-use ‘lend themselves to a narrative of personal responsibility and the neoliberalist model of governmentality it taps into, in which individuals are unapologetically held accountable for their own (mis)use of technology’ (2018, 1998). In light of these shortcomings, our book takes on Gangadharan’s (2020a, 2020b) powerful reminder that any discussions of disengagement and refusal need to consider the corporate and political forces that shape both the global digital economy and our everyday digitalities.

Following Gangadharan, we will demonstrate throughout this book that the multi-directionality and ambiguity of digital disengagement is technological, structural and political where any act of disengagement reinforces the very digitality one attempts to escape. For example, as Karppi noted a decade ago in his discussion of Facebook suicide (2011), disconnection from the platform is never fully possible, not only because leaving itself is premediated and controlled by Facebook, but also because the data left behind continues to be used by the platform. Karppi’s early note of caution regarding the power of platform and data aggregation, and the limitations of human resistance, is further developed in his recent book (2018), which focuses on the technological and affective bonds used by Facebook precisely to keep its users from disconnecting. Shifting the focus from experiences and practices to the *difficulty and the impossibility*

of disconnections is acutely relevant today when algorithms and data mining infringe powerfully and persistently on individual and collective freedoms. As such, whether it is the socio-cultural structure of demands of connectivity that create a pressure to return (van Dijck 2013); the economic system within which such a return might be enforced at any time after disengagement, by an individual employer and the labour market more broadly (Hesselberth 2018); the structure of a platform (Karppi 2018); or the legal demands imposed by states and institutions, digital disengagement is a complex socio-technical trap. To unravel it, we must pay attention not only to the social institutions that may govern technologies and their users, but also to the technologies themselves.

Networked Technologies and the Material (Im)possibilities of Disconnection

When ‘Cyber’ Studies first rose to Euro-American academic prominence during the 1990s to the early 2000s (Bell and Kennedy 2007; Featherstone and Burrows 1996), one of the key concerns was how ‘the digital’ was forcing us to re-conceptualise issues surrounding (de)materialisation. Increasing importance was placed on coding, data and software – to the extent that ‘consumption of commodity occurs through coding’ (Mackenzie 2005, 86) – where material technologies were becoming obsolete. A decade or so later and ‘the digital’ has not only overtaken technological materiality but seems to have now passed into ‘the algorithmic’.

The recent body of work within Digital Studies has been advancing steadily towards the move from ‘the digital’ to ‘the algorithmic’ (Noble 2018), where digital economies, politics, culture and societies are increasingly tied to deterministic and predictive flows and the movement of ‘lively data’ (Lupton 2015). But inasmuch as scholars (Berry 2011; Kitchin and Dodge 2011; Manovich 2013) have focused on codes, algorithms and online data, there is a return to questioning the role of technology, especially with the everyday proliferation of ‘smart’ devices. In a digital neoliberal era obsessed with metrics and tracking – the self, others, space/time, productivity and engagement – contemporary life is becoming technocentric again. As Elwell argues, ‘computing is folding the material world itself’ (Elwell 2014, 233) into an Internet of Things that ‘merges physical and computational infrastructures into an integrated habitat’ (Weiser 1998, 41–2). Our need for smart technologies that rely on integrated and sensed material systems means that technological materiality – or a New Materialism (Lupton 2016) – is once again at the forefront of academic debate (Greengard 2015; Bunz and Meikle 2018).

In other words, it is not just us humans that are living with and *in* media – as argued by Deuze (2012) – but it is also technological ‘things’ that live with and in media. Such a theoretical standpoint begins with the idea that people have become entangled in assemblages of objects, described by Lupton as a

‘human-body-device-sensor-software-data configuration’ (2016, 33). If such integrated systems organise our personal, work and social lives, is it even possible to practice digital disengagement? What does non-digitality mean? How can we divorce digitality from technology? Or does digital disengagement merely sustain the dominance of the mediated and the technological:

The illusion that we can comprehensively control our media (for example by pulling the plug, pressing the off switch on a remote control, by becoming *mediawise* and developing sophisticated media literacies) in fact preserves media as the primary definer of our reality (Deuze 2012, xiii).

Deuze’s (2012) statement resonates with Morozov’s (2013) ideas on technological solutionism and internet-centrism as outlined earlier. By being ‘mediawise’ – which inevitably involves more media – in order to ‘escape’ digitality, we simply keep preserving digital technologies and operating systems as, indeed, an internet-centric, ‘primary definer of our reality’. Instances of unintentional technological preservation can be seen everywhere: from the ‘Moment’ app which helps users manage screen-time to an anti-surveillance device called ‘Cyborg Unplug’, which ‘detects and disconnects selected devices known to pose a risk to personal privacy’ (Cyborg UNPLUG n.d.). Within a similar techno-logic, we witness smart houses that involve tasking technology to limit or disconnect another technology.

In effect, our day-to-day living environments are increasingly designed to delegate human agency – including the practice of digital disengagement – onto digital technologies. We are fast becoming agents simply acting as communication vessels between devices, executioners of an all-encompassing digital and technological solutionist world. In other words, as ‘smart’ technologies become ‘smarter’ and rely on networking communities through networked devices, it is imperative we do not to similarly conceptualise the digital in ways that normalise the connection between ontological materiality, human agency and technological determinism. In an era when multiple devices are communicating with each other, where the Internet of Things which is ‘not just about networked sensors being fitted to things but how these things gain new skills that are expressed in new forms of communication’ (Bunz and Meikle 2018, 1), can disconnection from one piece of technology really equate to digital disconnection as a whole?

An Elastic Continuum of Connection and Disconnection

The growing scale and interconnectedness of platforms, data and other non-human actors involved in digital preservatism and digital solutionism demands that we consider a different way of thinking about engagement and disengagement which may be structured around, but is not fully determined by, the technological. Therefore, we also believe that digital disengagement rests upon

a paradox – or more precisely, paradoxes – which complicate any simplistic dichotomy such as on- or off-line; connected or disconnected. For example, legal attempts to create a more transparent and accountable use of algorithmic decisions paradoxically cements the use of algorithms in decision-making processes to begin with. Efforts to reduce or control the flow of information with the help of everyday digital tools traps the user in their reliance on even more digital technologies. Endless online discussions decrying the dangers of digital communication and displaying unplugging pledges operate as invaluable content generators that support the very digital economy users are trying to criticise. Digital devices and platforms used to admire, monitor and protect the environment – including from too much digitisation – contribute to the growth of carbon emissions and to landfills of e-waste.

Paradoxes of digital disengagement, as we will show throughout the book, are multi-dimensional because each instance of digital disengagement is located at various points of the spatio-temporal, legal, political and material continuum. As such, they impact both our theorising of agency, and our legal and political horizons of rights and freedoms with regards to the digital. Thinking about digital disengagement as a set of paradoxes is an invitation to imagine new possibilities of relations between the concept and practice of opting out; technologies and freedoms; engagement and digitality; power and powerlessness; resistance, privilege and co-optation. In order to understand these issues, we thus introduce the concept of digital disengagement as an elastic continuum. We use the notion of elasticity here to account not only for the persistent nature of digital sociality, which prevails despite growing concerns regarding the negative impact of digital technologies on mental health, well-being, social relations and the environment. Rather, we argue that the elasticity of digital disengagement needs to be understood and examined in the context of power and privilege, where opt-out is located at various spatio-temporal, legal, political and material sites of possibility. Our notion of the elastic is inspired by Weizman's concept of elastic geographies (Weizman 2004; 2017). Conceived in the context of his analysis of the architecture and geometry of military colonial occupation, Weizman proposes the idea of elastic frontiers. He conceptualises questions of power and territory in relation to the elasticity of spaces that continuously shrink and expand, against a simplistic understanding of borders, 'freedom of movement', or binaries such as 'inside-outside'. Although used in a very different context, Weizman's terminology is extremely useful when we consider the simultaneous shrinking and expanding spaces of digital disengagement, where one can be inundated by invites to take part in a digital detox, or install a screen time management app, all the while being unable to withdraw one's data from an app or a governmental registry, access public services by using only pen and paper, or make oneself invisible to racial profiling of digitally enhanced policing. We demonstrate throughout this book that spaces, times and practices of opt-out, and the possibilities of digital disengagement, open and close based on an unequal distribution of economic, socio-cultural and digital capital.

Conceptualising the elastic continuum in this way makes digital disengagement a paradigmatic framework that does not merely denaturalise the digital but also places justice at the core of refusal and opt-out. As such, we also hope that our formulation of digital disengagement will shift the academic field of Disconnection Studies from focusing on *choices of the privileged* – detox, declutter, etc. – into justice-driven digital refusal, resistance and abolition (Benjamin 2019; Gangadharan 2020a; Qiu 2016). Centring the marginalised, the oppressed, the punished and the depleted, digital disengagement as we envision it is committed to dismantling the classist, ableist, racist and environmental violence of enforced digitality.

The Road Ahead

In this book, we offer a set of interdisciplinary interventions that explore the concept of digital disengagement – and its paradoxical nature – across a range of topics and sites: health, citizenship, education, consumption, labour and the environment. **Part I** of this book, **Where is the Opt-Out?** asks how and when do the legal, social and technical spaces of digital disengagement and opting out shrink, becoming impossible or severely limited.

- Is it possible to opt out of datafication of health? **Chapter 1, Digital Health: Data Traps at Our Fingertips**, explores this question by documenting the process of health digitisation and appisation, where opting out of data mining and analytics is squeezed between conflicting legal and economic frameworks, and contradictory logics of ‘care’, ‘public health’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘choice’. The chapter demonstrates that even in contexts of formally defined data rights and clearly communicated policies, the depth and complexity of datafication operates far beyond the comprehension of most users.
- Is it possible to escape the clutches of state violence when it is becoming ‘digital by default’? **Chapter 2, Automated Governance: Digital Citizenship in the Age of Algorithmic Cruelty**, addresses this question by looking at public services, policing and border control, where many aspects of citizen life are increasingly subjected to algorithmic governance that is often discriminatory by design. The chapter shows that government services increasingly deploy the vernacular language of social media engagement, where everyone is depicted as a client, an audience and a friend, while concealing the racism, xenophobia and the war on the poor within an obscure logic of ‘computer says no’.
- Is it possible to refuse disciplinary metricisation in the name of increasing pedagogical engagement? **Chapter 3, Education in the Age of ‘Corporate YouTube’: Big Data Analytics Meets Instafamous** focuses on the increasing implementation of certain educational tools in Higher Education in the UK and critiques some disturbing key issues relating to the corporatisation

and platformisation of education. We explore the ways in which both learners and educators are turned into (un)willing digital subjects within a neoliberal context, to be self-responsible for monitoring, assessing, analysing and managing the quantified and performative educational self, captured within institutionalised digital systems of regulation.

Part II of this book, **Digital Disengagement between Co-optation and Resistance**, turns to the many forms of disconnection and disengagement, which are so often co-opted into the capitalist loop of never-ending digitality and digital solutionism. We show that when efforts to opt out are trapped in a perpetual return to more digital technologies to solve existing digital woes, they fail to offer any transformative challenge to the world of compulsory digitality, and instead, support and sustain it.

- What happens when digital disengagement becomes a commodified part of consumer culture? From luxury holidays promising digital detoxes to mass celebrations of national unplugging days, **Chapter 4, Consuming Digital Disengagement: The High Cost of Opting Out** explores the neoliberal, capitalist appropriation of digital disengagement as a commodity that paradoxically relies on digital engagement and online participation as a prerequisite to disengagement, trapping consumers eternally within an ‘internet-centric’ digital consumer culture.
- How hard must we work for digital disengagement? **Chapter 5, The Labour of Digital Disengagement: Time and the Luxury of Opting Out**, investigates the paradoxical nature of digital disengagement as ‘hidden’ digital and technological labour in everyday digital life, related closely to the question of spatio-temporal regulation. We show that in the neoliberal economy of digital productivity, labour is required both to dis-engage from and to re-engage into the digital world. Furthermore, we also explore how such a paradox must also be understood as one arising from a point of privilege, where one must have the necessary temporal capital to spend on organising one’s disengagement practices.
- How can digital disengagement bring about environmental change? **Chapter 6, Digital Disengagement and the Environment: Solutionism, Greenwashing and Partial Opt-Outs**, addresses this question by navigating the tensions between digital solutionism and climate hopes. The chapter reveals that many calls to move away from technology by turning to nature are an empty gesture, trapped in an appropriative logic of nature as commodity, and unable to challenge both the tourist and the digital economy that damage both human and non-human life. The chapter also shows that calls for an environmentally conscious use of digital technologies mostly adopt partial refusals, which prioritise small changes and stability over radical transformation and abolition.

In the **Conclusion**, we return to the key themes of the book and revisit our conceptual propositions in light of the latest developments since the Covid-19 pandemic. We also look at alternative imaginaries and practices of living and working in a digital society, and ask, what kind of opt-out vision might we put forward? What kind of opt-out buttons might we need? Moving beyond the focus on disconnective practices into challenging the compulsory digitality on an economic, cultural, social and technical level, this book, ultimately, proposes a radical move towards a politics of digital refusal.

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