Consuming Digital Disengagement: The High Cost of Opting Out

Introduction

Whilst the chapters in Part I explored the sheer (im)possibilities of opting out and the very 'problem' of being trapped within compulsory digitality, this chapter opens up a new and related investigation into some of the 'solutions' which society, institutions, organisations and businesses have offered to enable 'escape' from the digital – particularly those which have been commercialised and commodified. From luxury holidays promising digital detoxes to the mass celebrations of the National Day of Unplugging, the idea of digital disengagement has gained enough socio-cultural momentum to attract businesses sensing a marketable trend reflecting the zeitgeist of the digital age. Running concurrently with contemporary consumer narratives of 'mindfulness' (Bonifacic 2021; Marchant 2021; Tuchow 2021), digital disengagement is now part of consumer culture, a commodity that paradoxically relies on digital engagement and online participation as a prerequisite to disengagement (e.g., online registrations and courses, social media posts encouraging users' digital disengagement).

This sinister paradox is what traps consumers eternally into an internet-centric digital consumer culture: over-consumption of the digital leads to the consumption of digital disengagement, which contributes back into the digital sphere for more consumption and prosumption. Over the course of this chapter and the next, we explore the paradox of digital disengagement within the context of a neoliberalist consumer society where consumerism and labour become a means of double-binding the individual through digital engagement. In this chapter, we examine this paradox and process from the perspective of consumerism and commodification, whereas the following chapter will focus more on the sheer labour needed to perpetuate and maintain the cyclic digital

double-bind that ensnares the individual into further digital engagement. As such, in the following, we explore how, trapped in an eternal cycle of being a self-perpetuating digital labourer-consumer, opting out thus becomes not only a commodified product but the very mechanism that ensures the cycle keeps revolving without a circuit-breaking mechanism. Furthermore, we also critique the ways in which such a process of consuming digital disengagement is often highly racialised, involving social differentiation *and* distanciation from those Others upon whom Western digital disengagement relies.

Cyclic Digital Double-Bind

The paradox of digital disengagement in the context of a neoliberalist consumer society operates through a system whereby individuals are double-bound to a capitalist system that profiteers from *both* their digital engagement as labourers (production) *and* their digital disengagement as consumers (consumption). There are two main ways in which the individual is enforced into this dual commitment to maintaining, reinforcing and propagating compulsory digitality in the name of profit and capitalist expansion: the first involves the producer-consumer axis intersecting with work-leisure; the second involves a more nuanced and perhaps insidious process where the producer-consumer is engaged in an online process of prosumerism (Toffler 1980; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) that involves digital self-saturation and self-consumption within the online leisure sphere.

From Labourer to Consumer: The Digital Detox Holiday

Need a break from sensory overload? Want to detox your brain as well as your body? Break free of your devices and go on a digital detox holiday. Digital detox is the latest trend in Spa and Wellness travel. Nowadays we are more globally connected than ever before, but life in the digital age is far from ideal. Half of Brits admit to checking work e-mails while on holiday, while a third regret spending so much time on them. The negative psychological and social impact is apparent. We are connecting with technology and in turn disconnecting from human interaction.

Our ability to stay balanced in this time of exponential technological growth and create healthy relationships with our digital devices will determine the future of humanity. By switching off your digital gadgets it allows you to switch off from life completely which is the best way to de-stress and reconnect with yourself and those around you without any interference. It also gives you a chance to fully relax and enjoy the sights and scenery and to savour your well-earned break.

> At Healing Holidays we offer a wide range of spas, clinics and retreats
> which adhere to digital detox. Book your retreat today
> (Healing Holidays 2015).

From large corporations, to NGOs, to universities, we live in a world where
most institutions' social and financial success is tied to their ability to increase
engagement between its workers and its informational, technological and digi-
tal infrastructures. The intensification of compulsory digitality can result in the
increasing need to disengage from it. Many employers recognise how labourers'
individual and group productivity is affected by excessive digital engagement,
and furthermore, UK law makes it mandatory for employers to enforce and/
or encourage occasional breaks away from the screen to avoid unproductivity
and ill-health (Health and Safety Executive n.d.). Indeed, as the advert for a
company offering luxury digital detox holidays dramatically states above: 'our
ability to stay balanced in this time of exponential technological growth and
create healthy relationships with our digital devices will determine the future of
humanity' (Healing Holidays 2015). Coupled with the constant digital engage-
ment that is expected from many workers – especially those who rely solely
on digital engagement for their income, such as those undertaking precarious
work through the gig economy, as will be discussed in Chapter 5 – increased
digital engagement also feeds into a culture whereby individuals must put
additional work and effort into the responsible self-management of their work/
engagement and leisure/disengagement time.

For those wishing to escape compulsory and excessive digitality, digital dis-
engagement thus seems to be the perfect 'solution', and indeed, presents itself as
a strategic starting point from which to potentially destabilise the entire digital
economy through a conscious opting out that would provide a 'breaking point'
within the cyclic double-bind. But within the neoliberalist context of digital
dependence, digital excess has led to an individual and collective *need* for digi-
tal disengagement. Once such an (artificial) need is identified – even created –
through the very digital and capitalist structures that profiteer from the value
given, this need for digital disengagement can then be nurtured into a market-
able demand and supplied through its commodification and fetishisation. As
such, rather that presenting itself as a space for opting out, digital disengage-
ment has become conscripted to serving the economy by becoming a 'need' that
is commodified: the commodification of digital disengagement becomes part of
a perfect capitalist process that double-binds the individual to digitality as both
producer and resulting consumer (Jenkins 2006; Ritzer et al. 2012; Toffler 1980).

One of the most profitable ways in which digital disengagement has been
commodified is through the ever fashionable 'digital detox holiday'. Costing on
average between £350 to £600 per night, digital detox holidays are usually all-
inclusive luxury packages consisting of 'wellbeing' activities (e.g., yoga, spas,
massages), wholesome dietary offerings and Wi-Fi-less accommodation for

the traveller in remote destinations (e.g., Bali, Malawi, Chile and rural Italy) that promise self-reflection and inner peace away from the digital. A lucrative part of the holiday market, digital detox holidays often sympathetically bring to attention (paradoxically, online) the 'negative psychological and social impacts' of digital living in the twenty-first century: 'nowadays we are more globally connected than ever before, but life in the digital age is far from ideal […] we are connecting with technology and in turn disconnecting from human interaction' (Healing Holidays 2015). The solution provided here is not a digital one, and appears to counteract the digital by offering the exact opposite: disconnection and disengagement ('By switching off your digital gadgets it allows you to switch off from life completely which is the best way to de-stress and reconnect with yourself and those around you without any interference' (2015)). But is this a counteractive solution, or paradoxically, a further reinforcement of the digital that is complicit with the very system that produced the problem?

As suggested, digital detox narratives commodify and popularise digital disengagement in ways that encourage an artificial demand, one that necessitates the neoliberal consumer to make an 'empowered choice' by practicing the *consumption of* digital disengagement, rather than practicing digital disengagement. As such, the commodification of digital disengagement, idealised as a 'break away' from digital work to non-digital leisure, interpolates the labourer back into the same capitalist system. This time, the individual is not a labourer contributing time (a point which we will discuss in greater depth in relation to digital labour in Chapter 5). Instead, the individual is a consumer contributing their wages, their free user-generated content for websites (for example, by sharing photos of their digital detox), and their free consumer data and profile for monetisation within the digital economy (Cheney-Lippold 2017; van Dijck et al. 2018; Fuchs 2014; van Dijck and Nieborg 2009). This completes the loop: engagement not only encourages but *pays* for disengagement. In this sense, Healing Holiday's website is right, the digital detox is 'well-earned' but equally, it is also money well-spent. In addition, by referring to digital detox as 'a latest trend', such narratives attempt to create a disassociation between cause and effect: turning digital disengagement into a matter of lifestyle and an 'empowered' consumer choice conveniently hides the interdependent relationship between the individual's role as labourer and consumer that traps them eternally within a continuum of compulsory digitality.

In this sense digital engagement/disengagement pivots upon the producer/consumer axis: when workplace guidelines promote a healthy 'work-life balance', it is less about the dichotomous temporal relationship between work and life, and more about the individual's ability to embody the role of producer and consumer in interchangeable ways. As Light states, disconnection is indeed 'something that we do in conjunction with connection' where 'connection and disconnection are seen to be in play together' (Light 2014, 3–4); here, what we see is that this interplay is also defined by the interdependency between production of the digital and consumption of the non-digital.

But is this interplay so symmetrical? Can all workers have such an equal distribution between digital work produced and non-digital leisure consumed? We argue that the commodification of digital disengagement is, like the packaged holiday, both a racialised and classed luxury. Firstly, inasmuch as specialist holiday companies present digital detox as a 'new trend', these holidays stem from a long history of packaged holidays arising from the commodification of leisure at the turn of the twentieth century (Cormack 1998; Polat and Arslan 2019) which have always been both classed and racialised. The promotional narrative of digital detox holidays inevitably ties 'exotic' locations – 'exotic' to the usually middle-class Anglo-European consumer – to the idea of the non-digital: for example, the Healing Holidays advert discussed and quoted earlier includes an image of a highly stylised and magazine-ready white, tanned woman lying down in her swimsuit, overlooking a generic and expansive green landscape in the distance. As such, the relationship between 'Westernisation' and 'digitisation' are naturalised. By the same token, 'non-Westernised' locations – 'natural, simple and untouched' – become at once exoticised and commodified as a product for classed, raced and gendered consumption: the imagery and language used in such digital detox holiday promotions use representations of – and thus are predominantly aimed at – white, child-free, middle-class women. Digital detox holidays demonstrate the ways in which digital disengagement brings problematic narratives and processes of neoliberal consumerism, colonialism and capitalism together under the guise of wellbeing and care.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, digital disengagement comes at a (usually high) price, one that requires sufficient financial, social and cultural capital. Why pay for digital disengagement when one can take a walk in the park for free? Thus, the act of paying for digital detox is part of a conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1889/1994) as practiced by certain members of a classed society who have the financial, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) to consume digital disengagement; indeed, we argue that paying for digital detox holidays is a 'trend', something more to do with taste and lifestyle than it is to do with being a conscious activity. The commodification of digital disengagement is thus classed as it is racialised, gendered and ableist, and opt-out within this context is hierarchical, available to those who have the economic, socio-cultural capital to convert a practice into a matter of taste and 'trend'. As such, digital disengagement is more a consumer and social *status*, where the neoliberal worker not only enjoys but shows how they have been sufficiently 'rewarded' by the fruits of their own digital labour. In this sense, digital disengagement operates through a social hierarchy that hinges upon privilege (as shall be explored in the next chapter in relation to platform workers, and the financial and temporal costs of digital disengagement) but also, as an act of social differentiation: 'I am making 'good' consciously digital and consumer choices' enacts a performative social distancing from those Others who are 'failing' to opt out 'appropriately' as good citizens, labourers, consumers, educators, environmentalists and users engaged in digital disengagement.

Feeding Your Addiction: Self-Saturation
of the Digital Anti-Consumer

Running alongside commercialised digital detox holidays and other businesses offering digital disengagement as a consumer choice, there are also a growing number of online community-led, seemingly non-profit initiatives celebrating and encouraging conscious digital disengagement. For example, the National Day of Unplugging (NDU) is an online awareness campaign, where 'participation is open to anyone who wishes to elevate human connection over digital engagement' (National Day of Unplugging n.d.). To this end, the NDU website provides resources, tips and events to help individuals, organisations and educationalists with their conscious act of 'unplugging'. But, as with most online ventures and activities, this 'participation' in digital disengagement is not a solitary, or indeed, a non-digital one: it often includes digital and social engagement, from the now all-too-normal pop-ups inviting website visitors to subscribe to their mailing list; sharing buttons to all social media sites; organised online gatherings discussing digital disengagement; to a full promotional gallery of selfies, showing people holding downloadable placards that read 'I unplug to...'

Almost all aspects of the website inevitably lead to further engagement, rather than disengagement, with the digital; this paradox comes into force precisely because *public* and *digital* participation become prerequisites to digital disengagement. In other words, digital disengagement is staged and becomes a part of a participatory culture that *has to be* connective, networked and public (Jenkins 2006; Fuchs 2010; Varnelis 2008; Jenkins et al. 2016) by default.

> Tethered to technology, we are shaken when that world 'unplugged' does not signify, does not satisfy (Turkle 2011, 11).

As prophetic and literal as Turkle's words are, digital disengagement – being 'unplugged' – can only be signified, understood and satisfied through digital engagement. The NDU selfies of digital disengagers holding placards proclaiming 'I unplug to...' (downloadable from the NDU website), is an example of how digital disengagement on its own has become an empty sign, one that can only be satisfied and filled with the 'meaningful' act of actualising the digitally disengaged self *online*, at once performative, shared, aestheticised, branded and *digitised*. As Khamis et al (2016) argue, online media is 'an exceedingly consumer-centric space, because individuals actively and autonomously seek out the resources they are most interested in – and therein lies the 'need' for self-branding' (Khamis et al. 2016, 194). Collective initiatives like NDU, indeed, become consumer fodder for the self-feeding and self-consumption needed for online self-branding in the shape of selfies and hashtags, where digital disengagement becomes a (self)brand, a style, a form that is governed and structured by the very architecture, language and culture of social media, everyday technopractices and globalised platforms. Acts of digital disengagement

become reduced to just another online selfie, status, like and update incorporated into wider online narratives and practices; within this configuration, opt-out becomes a mere *simulacrum* (Baudrillard 1994) of disconnection, one which can only be materialised through the veneer of online artefacts.

Furthermore, digital disengagement becomes meaningful only when it is realised, shared and performed online with a globalised, affected and networked public. As NDU states, 'for over 10 years, we have been unplugging together as a global community': here, digital disengagement requires participation that is anchored into networked publics (boyd 2011; Varnelis 2008), which paradoxically, feeds into and intensifies the online connectedness that is being problematised in the first place. To participate online is to acknowledge and be acknowledged by others (boyd 2004; boyd and Marwick 2011), and only then does the self become 'real'. Similarly, acts of digital disengagement as encouraged by groups like NDU become part of an online sharing culture (Agger 2012; boyd 2014; boyd and Marwick 2011, 2014, 2018) that circulates meaning through its affective network of intimate publics (Berlant 1998, 2008; Carah et al. 2018). But such affective processes of digital disengagement not only normalises the sharing of the private (digitally disengaged) self through pictures, contact details, words and analytics, but also ensures the individual returns to a state of digitality. If digital disengagement can only be realised through a globalised social connection and performance online, opt-out becomes simply yet another mode of social and digital connectivity, constituting a pseudo-opt-out rather than an actual opt-out.

But what is perhaps even more disturbing about such paradoxes of consumer-driven digital disengagement arises from what Turkle describes as the 'anxieties of disconnection, a kind of panic' (2011, 16). Here, driven by disconnection anxieties (such as Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO)), the individual becomes responsible for producing more points of digital and social connectivity (e.g., posts, selfies, hashtags, apps) which ultimately feeds the individualised but global need to practice digital disengagement, in itself another site for digital consumption and production. As such, the social connectivity of opting out and the anxieties of opting out from the social become collapsed into one another, a self-feeding and self-perpetuating feedback mechanism with no escape. In other words, the digitally over-saturated individual is actually a *self*-saturated individual. As discussed earlier, the consumption and production of digital disengagement is one that hinges upon the work/leisure axis. But the need to escape from work-related digitality is perhaps more systematically enforced (i.e., a waged worker is duty-bound to email) than the need to escape from leisure-related digitality (i.e., the same waged worker connecting with friends via social media during their lunchbreak). The digital saturation resulting from the latter is in some ways more problematic because it is self-enforced and driven by a digital society and culture that creates 'disconnection anxieties'. In this context, any discussion of 'opt-out' becomes difficult: one may want to opt out from the digital and over-(self)saturation, but one may not want to

opt out from the social. As digital and social engagement have increasingly become intertwined, in this situation, opting out is what feeds the culture that has created disconnection anxiety.

As shall be discussed in Chapter 5, when digital disengagement falls within what is perceived as 'leisure', the labour of digital disengagement is usually affective, and therefore is often hidden. Just like the ways in which playbour (Kücklich 2005) exploits the blurring of 'play' and 'labour', work and leisure (De Kosnik 2013), consuming digital disengagement often requires similar processes of affective labour that similarly blur the lines between digital consumer and producer. As digital consumers are incorporated into production processes (through user generated content on sites like NDU), so too are digital disengagers who produce *and* consume anti-consumption, and ultimately, become responsible for the propagation (not to mention profitisation) of compulsory compulsive digitality. Without users' labour, digital engagement and user generated content, platforms are not financially sustainable; as such, even as a non-profit (as a grassroots, social movement for social good), organisations like NDU profit indirectly from digital disengagers' engagement with their site and system. This sinister paradox is what traps consumers eternally into a cyclic double-bind of the self-feeding self that is hooked into an 'internet-centric' (Morozov 2013), digital consumer culture: over-consumption of the digital leads to the consumption of digital disengagement, which contributes back into the digital sphere for more consumption and prosumption.

Consuming Digital Disengagement During Covid-19: Social Distancing and Contactless Connectivity

In the UK, shops which were deemed essential enough to be able stay open during the various lockdowns enforced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (groceries, pharmacists, garages) asked customers for 'contactless only' financial transactions. Whilst this is a literal request – to use contactless payment methods (involving a simple tap of a card, code or scan with no PIN entry required) rather than cash – it also serves as an appropriate metaphor for digital disengagement during lockdown: everything had to be contact-less (i.e., involve no physical sociality) and be subject to technological and digital mediation. In fact, these two forces seem to define the general transformation and impact of Covid-19 on consumer culture and consumer practices. On the one hand, social distancing and the need to 'stay home' meant a resulting rise in global unemployment by 33 million as businesses large and small shut down due to a lack of consumer activity (International Labour Organization 2021). On the other hand, because of enforced technological and digital mediation, most of the Anglo-European world saw soaring profits experienced by certain sectors of the market, most notably in the areas of home entertainment (Nintendo, Netflix); sportswear and sports equipment; home/DIY goods; delivery services; cleaning products; and health (Espiner 2020; Gompertz and Plummer

2020; Sillars 2021). These economic, socio-cultural and political impacts of lock-downs have indeed destabilised existing understandings of consumer culture and practices that now need careful theoretical recalibration. The consumption of digital disengagement is no different, raising new lines of critical enquiry that we shall briefly explore next: firstly, how has social distancing reconfigured previously commodified spaces for consuming digital disengagement?; and secondly, can 'real' and 'quality' sociality that so many seek through digital disengagement be achieved when digitality becomes the only means of connectivity?

'Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives'[1]

In the UK, social distancing – certainly at the onset of the pandemic in 2020 – was not only encouraged by the government and health authorities but also enforced (via the police and punitive fines) as a means to protect the health and wellbeing of individuals and society. This directly counteracted previous consumer narratives that equated health and wellbeing with social proximity achieved through digital disconnection. The very spatialised and (anti)social-ised nature of lockdowns meant that the very spaces and social practices that were previously commodified for the consumption of digital disengagement were shut down: indeed, digital detox holidays were cancelled, as were in-person NDU events and other such initiatives. Lockdowns meant that even pseudo-opt-out consumer choices presented through the commodification of digital disengagement were no longer available as individuals had to 'stay home' – unless they were key workers who were not afforded this option – and in most cases stay even more digitally engaged for survival (e.g., through online shopping, receiving news, conducting businesses, education, managing health). Where then can people consume digital disengagement?

   Pre-Covid-19, consumer-based digital disengagement narratives relied on presenting 'nature' as the antithesis of digitality (as we shall explore in Chapter 6 through our discussion of the environment), whereby being outside of heavily networked and connected smart homes and cities, and away from devices were seen as the answer. During the pandemic in the UK, being out in 'nature', or outside at all unless for 'responsible' reasons (i.e., exercise or necessities), meant either breaking governmental regulations, risking potential illness or death and/or being socially irresponsible. In this sense, previously racialised, gendered and classed Othered spaces of consuming digital disengagement, available to only those who could access and 'afford it', were temporarily destabilised. The Other held no titillating fear/exotic appeal, but instead became something to be feared (who could forget US President Donald Trump's constant reference

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1   In the UK, the government campaign and slogan during lockdown was 'stay home, protect the NHS, save lives' in reference to being collectively socially responsible to ease the pressure on the National Health Service. Once lockdown was eased, the slogan later changed to 'stay alert, control the virus, save lives'.

to Covid-19 as 'the China virus'?[2] (Hswen et al. 2021)). As discussed earlier, before Covid-19, only those who had financial and socio-cultural capital could afford to 'switch off' and buy their escape into physical spaces far removed from their daily and work lives; the rest had to stay socially and geographically immobile, static workers without the means to so easily 'switch off'. Covid-19 turned this on its head: now, 'staying home' – albeit connected – was a luxury, something key workers or otherwise vulnerable members of the population had little or no choice in. Must opt-out always be unequal, hierarchical and exclusive?

Finally, digital disengagement, along with all other usually external consumer practices thus had to become domesticated: digital disengagement needed to 'stay home'. What lockdown brought into sharp relief is the spatiality – and the access – of digital disengagement. Along with gym equipment and entertainment systems that people purchased en masse – with products going instantly out of stock – to replicate the outside world at home, digital disengagement was confined to the limited 'private' sphere of the home (Gompertz and Plummer 2020; Noor 2020). Divorced from its spatial capacities, disengagement became more reliant on *temporal* rather than spatial disconnection. The question then became less about 'where can I practice digital disengagement?' but more '*when* can I practice digital disengagement?': *when* can I have a break from the screen, *when* do I go out for my precious once-a-day-only exercise and/or restricted outdoor activities that take me away from my digital technologies back home? Such questions themselves are of course reserved for those who have the stability of family support, a home and jobs that can be carried out remotely.

From Failed Solitude to Enforced Solitude

One of the most common motivations behind people's desire for conscious digital disengagement, and the consumer advertising around businesses and initiatives like NDU, is the promise of disconnection from the virtual and re-connection with the 'real' and 'human' (off-line, face-to-face contact is seen as 'quality time') (Kuntsman and Miyake 2015, 2019). This is in contrast to what Turkle describes as our increasingly intimate reliance on yet, ironically, isolating relationship with, robots (Turkle 2011). Ironically, lockdown and the very nature of social distancing meant that 'real' and 'human' socialisation was no longer possible beyond those immediately within the same household. Here, the previously mentioned 'anxieties of disconnection, a kind of panic' (Turkle 2011, 16) experienced a perverse reversal and conversion of effects: anxieties of disconnection were now replaced but also became part of anxieties surround-

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[2] Donald Trump's Twitter account was permanently suspended on 8th January 2021 due to the 'risk of further incitement to violence' after the Capitol riots on 6th January 2021. No action was taken against his account following his tweets which referred to Covid-19 as 'the China Virus' (Twitter 2021).

ing the contracting of Covid-19. Communication *had* to be technologically and digitally mediated to be as immediately 'safe' as possible.

This double-anxiety changed people's relationship to both digitality *and* digital disengagement. The pandemic meant socio-digital connectivity was no longer a case of 'failed solitude' (Turkle 2011); rather, an enforced solitude was imposed, one which could only be remedied through the consumption of the digital as a way to fill the social void. From Zoom to Skype to other Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services, people turned to digitality in order to cling onto a sense of humanity – that which lay beyond the four walls of confinement. In this sense, the sociality of opting out discussed earlier was no longer about a collective and participatory performance of disengagement from the digital, but instead, the digital became a means of disengaging from the 'reality' of Covid-19 and lockdown solitude, where the digital represented 'quality time' with society. Within this configuration, the previously discussed relationship between intimate publics and the online, public performances of private acts of digital disengagement became less about the propagation of socio-digital normativities and more about the enforcement of digital governmentality (Badouard et al. 2016; Barry 2019): people had to re-engage (for example, rejoin social media) or remain digital to remain social, informed and disciplined citizens, where opt-out truly was not a legal, medical and social option. During lockdown periods, especially in the first months of the pandemic, making communal videos together (e.g., sing-a-longs posted on social media), joining group video calls, and other collective technopractices of everyday life became the *only* way to be together, the *only* way to experience sociality.

Furthermore, this state of physical confinement led to the monopolisation of platformisation and centralisation of power over synchronous sociality by a certain few online services and companies that capitalised on this digital necessity. From journalists/reporters, educators/learners, judges/jurors to friends and family, all synchronous socialisation – as close to 'live' and 'real life' communication as possible – became shaped by the sheer architecture of Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams in the same way that asynchronous communications have been shaped by the likes of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other major social media platforms (as explored in Chapter 3, in relation to social mediatisation, platform affordance and pedagogic communication). The design of these services aims to mimic 'real life' social contexts (e.g., 'breakout rooms', 'raise hand', 'end meeting for all' functionalities) but also presents a hybrid space that can only be digital (emoticons, muting audio-visuals). The fact that these same platforms/services were used for both personal *and* work-related communication meant that lockdown represented, for many, an oversaturation of not just digitality but very limited platformativity and the consequent performances afforded by them. Even the language, process and micro-practices of opting out from these necessary digital socialisations were governed by the architecture and design of these services (e.g., 'muting'; 'end the meeting for all'). During the pandemic, we became literally captive consumers in need of these major services for 'live', face-to-face virtual communication.

Conclusion: The Self-Fulfilling and Self-Consuming Prophecy of Opting Out

By exploring the various consumer-oriented 'solutions' offered to the 'problem' of digital excess and dependency, this chapter has explored not just the conflation between digital disengagement and the consumption of digital disengagement, but also the very cyclic nature of consuming digital disengagement – a point which we will return to in the next chapter. Firstly, we examined the paradox of digital disengagement within the context of a neoliberalist consumer society, where individuals are double-bound to a capitalist system that profiteers from both their digital engagement as labourers (production) and their digital disengagement as consumers (consumption). Trapped in an eternal cycle of being a self-perpetuating digital labourer-consumer, opting out thus becomes not only a commodified product but the very mechanism that ensures the cycle keeps revolving without a circuit-breaking mechanism. Here, we also critiqued the ways in which such a process of consuming digital disengagement is often highly racialised, involving social differentiation *and* distanciation from those Others upon whom Western digital disengagement relies.

Secondly, we examined another cyclic double-bind within the very process of consuming digital disengagement. An internet-centric logic has made most forms of practices in contemporary life (at least in the so-called 'West') – including the practice of digital disengagement – not only participatory and social in nature, but also one that involves online consumption as aligned to everyday tactics of self-branding and online identity. This consumer-driven neoliberal actualisation of the self inevitably leads to a self-enforced but socially structured over-consumption of the digital, which leads to the paradoxical need for the consumption of digital disengagement; this in turn, contributes back into the digital sphere for more consumption and prosumption. Hence the loop is complete – even opting out is a complicit, commodified digital process within the unbreakable circuit – where individuals are forever self-trapping themselves within cycles of digitality that provide both the problem and solution to one's own digital demise.

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