The Labour of Digital Disengagement: Time and the Luxury of Opting Out

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we discussed the double-bind of digital disengagement, which necessarily relies on and enforces a cyclic interdependence between being a digital labourer and consumer. We explored this loop from the perspective of consumer culture, and the (self)consumption and (self)commodification of digital disengagement, within which questions of opting out in itself comes at a financial and social cost. Here, as soon as the digital labourer decides to disengage from the digital, they are faced with a consumer choice of readily available and commodified digital disengagement products from apps to digital detox holidays. This neoliberal and capitalist structure that supports digital disengagement paradoxically ensures that the feedback mechanism acts as a continuous loop that traps both the labourer and consumer in an unbreakable circuit that provides the illusion of opting out. Continuing on from this point, in this chapter we explore a further paradox that exists within this paradox, that focuses more on aspects of labour: not only are we trapped forever in the labourer-consumer praxis, but we must engage in further digital labour in order to switch between being a digital labourer and a consumer of digital disengagement. In this chapter, we examine the actual labour required during processes of digital disengagement – whether through a digital detox app or holiday – investigating 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.

As discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the eternal self-feeding digital labourer-consumer double bind, compulsory digitality has contributed to an ever-increasing need for tools – *digital* tools – to help manage over-digitality

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and enable digital disengagement. This in turn creates more digital labour consequently feeding into digital exhaustion (and the need for disengagement). This paradoxical loop must be understood in relation to questions of digital labour in the context of neoliberal digitality: on the one hand, digital disengagement 'frees' and 'empowers' the individual through disconnection and greater control over their time and life, albeit temporarily; but on the other hand, the digital labour required to participate in digital disengagement in itself reincorporates the individual back into the continuous plateau of compulsory digitality, thus creating a digital labourer who must continually manage their digital workload. But the story does not end there. There is also an additional workload the digital disengager must shoulder whilst engaged in digital disengagement: the processes of *re*-engaging back into what are the normalised and naturalised structures of digitality, whether these are work or social platforms that digital disengagers must ultimately 'return back to'.

Finally, we also argue that such a paradox must also be understood as one arising from a point of privilege, where one has to have the necessary economic *and* temporal capital to spend on organising one's disengagement practices, digital or not. Whilst digital exhaustion might be an increasingly 'universal' condition in Western societies that leads to what is perceived as the 'need' for technologies of digital disengagement (such as apps), the unequal distribution of digital-temporal capital means that digital disengagement itself – and the apps – is a luxury that not all digital labourers can afford. This chapter thus also considers the various ways in which 'digital labour' – from the office worker wanting 'time out', to precarious workers, to affective labourers organising family life – and the (im)possibility of opting out is situated at different intersections of digital disengagement. The following presents a critical analysis of various apps that aid digital disengagement. This chapter theorises the impossible but necessary relationship between digital labour and digital disengagement, bringing into sharp focus the inseparability of time, labour and digitality.

Moment Family: Digital and Affective Labour

> In so many ways, your phone makes your life better—and profoundly easier […] But more and more, your phone works against you […] It pulls you away from what matters most—your family, your friends, your passions. Even yourself. Simply put, *your phone steals your time*. Moment *gives you back that time* (Moment Health Inc. 2014: emphasis added).

As explored in Chapter 4, promotional consumer narratives surrounding digital disengagement often pose the 'problem' of contemporary living and the increasing dependence on the digital, with a (paradoxically) technological and/or digital tool being promoted as supposedly providing the perfect 'answer': the

convenient, technological and digital solution. Within such narratives, one of the key ways in which digital disengagement is qualified is through the notion of time, as demonstrated by the above quote from the 'Moment' app – a name in itself promoting a spatio-temporal necessity for the consumption of digital disengagement – paradoxically, the very device that 'steals your time' is also needed to 'give you back that time'. Here, it is not the actual connection with 'your family, your friends, your passion' that is being valued, but it is the time-space needed to enjoy these. Within this configuration, time becomes the value product; the app then acts as a mindful and vigilant Robin Hood, equalising the gap between the 'time-rich' and 'time-poor' (Wajcman 2015).

The words of Bittman et al., writing more than a decade ago, still ring true – if not are even more pronounced: 'if mobile phone use is responsible for eliminating 'dead time', then it might be expected that making frequent use of the phone (whether for work or leisure) might contribute to a sense of increased time pressure' (2009, 275). What is particularly alarming here is not just the idea of having to fill 'dead time' – increasingly equated as time not spent doing something digitally productive – reclaiming time from the very thing that stole it in the first place, but that the time-thief-reclaimer is also the very cause of needing time. Are our phones our time thieves or our time reclaimers? Who are the time-rich and who are the time-poor? As with all the other paradoxes explored throughout this book, the bartering of time becomes necessarily digital and technologically mediated; the management of time is part of a culture of self-tracking, self-monitoring ('easy-to-understand screen time tracking') that generates more digital data that, ironically, one needs to manage, where this invisible digital labour is simply naturalised as part of a neoliberal project of self-discipline and improvement. Downloading an app may be a solution, but one that generates even more data and even more *labour*.

One could argue that the management of time has always been part of the self as a reflexive project (Giddens 1991) – and labour itself of course. However, what we are witnessing through these apps is not only the management of the temporal self through technology, but the additional labour of also having to manage the technology in order to then manage the self, not to mention the management of personal data generated through such a process. This is essentially a triple labour – juggling the self, the technology and the data – which is needed to find that time-space for a digitalised digital disengagement. Not only do digital disengagement apps lure and then trap the user into the previously discussed cyclic labourer-consumer double-bind, but as if to add salt to the wound, the user must *work* for this process to happen in their own (non-paid) time. In other words, regardless of whether such apps are free (and they mostly are 'free'), the user 'pays', not just through personal data that is collected, but through the actual labour required to manage digitally-mediated digital disengagement.

The triple labour caused by the technologically-mediated regulation of time – the self, the technology and the data – is further intensified by apps like 'Moment Family', a related app produced by the same company which enables

a designated individual to 'manage your entire family's screen time' through 'the comfort of your own phone' (Moment Health Inc. 2016). As wholesome as domesticating digital disengagement might seem, hidden beneath the existing and already invisible affective domestic labour involved in managing everyday family life, there is the additional digital labour of managing the device and other people's data. Who will provide the affective labour for the individual family member responsible for the 'entire family's screen time'? Creating a hierarchy for the regulation of time – whilst presented as a 'caring' aspect of domestic wellbeing – paradoxically forces an individual to not only be further ensnared into the digital (app) and technological (smartphone/screen), but it also creates an unequal distribution of time capital within that family: the rest of the family become more 'time-rich' at the cost of the designated family app-manager's screen time increasing, and their becoming more 'time-poor' as a result.

Furthermore, and as referred to earlier, the very apps that people use to help them with digital disengagement in turn leads to a process where 'real life' time is found only by adjusting digital time – where the digital is the default and starting point – rather than adjusting digital time based on real life time. For example, we set and regulate screen time through apps like 'Moment' *first* in order to 'reclaim real time' that is non-digital: why not the other way round? This digi-centric logic means that our perception of time and our temporal organisation of everyday life is structured by the very architecture of the platforms used, as discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to educational e-tools that shape our practices, interactions and the space-time of our working and everyday lives. For example, examining how an app like Moment is designed reveals that beyond issues of capitalising on the increasing thirst for digital disengagement, there are also more sinister factors at play that equally intersect with questions of 'invisible' labour: the free labour we provide to app companies by way of our personal and usage data. Moment tracks not just the total amount of an individual's screen time, but also breaks this down to how much time is spent on individual apps. It shares this information with third parties – including social media sites such as Facebook (stating 'the social network or third party may also automatically collect information') – for 'obtaining insights into usage patterns of the Services' (Moment Health Inc. 2018a).

Beyond the immediate issue of corporate surveillance, data mining and digital profiling – commonplace in the ways apps are embedded into our personal devices designed to data mine, track and digitally profile their users, as discussed extensively in relation to health apps in Chapter 1 – what is equally problematic is how the triple labour needed to manage time, devices and data ultimately becomes part of the free labour users provide for major corporations like Apple, Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Facebook. Because the 'Big Five' provide the platform ecology for the operation of disengagement apps, any digitally-managed digital disengagement will necessarily involve free data

and free labour engagement with these companies: the apps are free, as is our digital labour.

Similarly, Moment also compares your personal statistics (i.e., screen time) to that of others, a gamified structure that supposedly encourages motivation through competition and social interaction. In reality, such a 'platform ready' feature that clearly operates through a social media logic, means social media sites are justified in the mass collection of such data. In fact, one of the features Moment boasts about openly – almost blind to the irony – is that upon downloading the app, it enables the user to 'create and join groups of friends or family members to keep each other actionable & receive coaching in tandem' (Moment Health Inc. 2018b). This is exactly the same paradox we witnessed with initiatives like the National Day of Unplugging, explored in the previous chapter, where digital disengagement is almost always digitally social and practiced.

But in terms of labour, similar to the critiques raised in discussions surrounding playbour (Kücklich 2005; Scholz 2013) – the increasing blurring of 'play' and 'labour' – the fodder for marketing analytics we provide to apps like Moment unknowingly in itself raises further questions of exploitation: Moment even openly promotes the fact that it 'runs in the background to automatically track your phone use – no need to open the app' (Moment Health Inc. 2018b). In this sense, the gamification of such an app – from creating leader boards necessitating social interaction or seemingly making digital disengagement 'fun' and thus obscuring the labour needed – ensures the mass production of free data and free labour. Playbour usually involves the problematic exploitation of the breakdown between leisure and labour. In the case of the labour needed to digitally manage our lives – the labour of digital disengagement – the process is also part of a neoliberal trajectory which naturalises the self-responsible labour needed to become more productive through the effective and affective management of our own time: a similar app, Freedom, actively promotes itself as enabling users to 'reclaim focus and productivity' (Freedom 2014).

In other words, digital disengagement – even if it is related to consumerism and leisure –becomes not even about reclaiming our time for the 'important things in life' (like spending time with family and enjoying our hobbies), but about the ultimate goal of being *productive* as labourers: we return again to the cyclic double-bind of the digital-consumer trapped forever in their digital hamster wheel. In this sense, the question of 'exploitation' becomes obscured and thus more problematic: after all, we are only trying to improve our lives, right? In the words of the Freedom app, 'social media, shopping, videos, games [...] these apps and websites are scientifically engineered to keep you hooked and coming back. The cost to your productivity, ability to focus, and general well-being can be staggering' (Freedom 2014). Indeed, the 'cost' of regaining our productivity is paid for not only by our leisure time, but also by our expending time on the digital labour needed to use the Freedom app. As such, we may be opting out of digitality as a means of self-care, but ultimately, we

are still opting into (if not co-opted into) the overall capitalist and neoliberalist regime of having to be efficient and self-sufficient labourers through the ironical (digital) work needed to opt out.

The Labour of Digital Re-Engagement

> Anyway, you can use the Big Red Stop to schedule a repeating time that all of the ping, pang notifications from your phone get silenced and all of your friends who make contact get a personalised message saying when you plan to be back. Once your time is expired your phone automatically reverts to normal, you can get back to Facebooking like crazy, and of course all your messages are there (The Big Red Stop 2015).

Whether it is searching for a suitable digital disengagement app, downloading the app, setting up accounts (Facebook sign-in anyone?) to enable the app to work, synching devices, managing the app once installed, the sheer amount of time spent digitally managing devices in an attempt to disengage is, in itself, a paradox, as already explored. But, as we have discussed throughout this book, opt-out times, spaces and practices are almost always never permanent; possibilities of opt-out shrink and expand according to the spatio-temporal, social and economic capital afforded at a given moment. Sooner or later, when the opt-out space begins to close again – or where one must close it due to social, family and/or work commitments – there is a reversal of processes in re-engaging with the digital that requires equal if not more amounts of digital labour.

Consider another digital disengagement app, The Big Red Stop. Although no longer available, it is one of many to have initially started a trend back in 2015 when digital disengagement apps began to emerge to prominence; many of these original start-up apps have given way to more corporate apps such as Screen Time for iOS or Digital Wellbeing for Android phones. The app allowed the potential digital disengager to 'just hit the big red button and anyone who messages you receives a text or Twitter message letting them know you are taking a #bigredstop and when you will be back' (The Big Red Stop 2015). In effect, the 'big red button' represents opt-out, the moment where one is practicing digital disengagement. However, as the excerpt clearly states, there is an inbuilt expectation that 'you will be back' and things will 'revert back to normal'. The terms 'back' and 'revert' point to the 'return' to a 'normal' starting point, a starting point that is digitally defined. This is precisely what we have critiqued and problematised throughout this book: digitality has become so naturalised and normalised as the starting point that a move away from it must be temporary, beyond which digital-, techno- and social media-logic dictates it as being an aberration. Digital disengagers are expected to indeed 'be back' to the 'normality' of digitality.

What is equally problematic is how the processes of 'reverting back to normal', of *re*-engaging back into what has become the normalised and naturalised structures of digitality, requires equal if not greater digital labour. Not only do those who have attempted to disengage have to reverse whatever settings and processes they may have put in place in an app – whether this is manually done or 'automatically reverts' as is the case of Big Red Stop – or if they have been on a digital detox holiday, then, in the very process of 'turning the phone back on', they also have to attend to the digital accumulation of when they 'get back to Facebooking like crazy, and of course all your messages are there'. The last point the Big Red Stop makes here inadvertently is, indeed, 'all your messages are there'. This is because the digital forms not just the 'normal' but *the collective*, as enforced through the global structures of the digital ecosystems within which institutions and individuals have built their compulsory but utterly naturalised presence. As such, opt-out is individualised and personalised, existing upon a very specific time-space of digital disengagement; the digital 'baseline' is unwavering, and moving temporarily away from this digital baseline – by setting autoreplies and away messages as our digital place holders – does not stop the flow of data traffic, indeed, the regulation and monitoring continues despite our absence.

When digital disengagers 'return back to normal', the space and time for engagement might be 'normal' but the temporarily paused digital accumulation must now be compressed into a compact space-time that must be attended to immediately, whether these come in the shape of notifications, emails, social media messages and interactions and so on. In other words, re-engagement is never just about 'picking up from where one left off' but involves a considerable amount of 'catching up' that is ultimately the 'cost' of opting out, even temporarily. Digitality is constant. As such, opt-out cannot be constant if we are to be part of a society that collectively conforms, perpetuates and is complicit in maintaining a 'starting point' that is necessarily digital.

The Luxury of Opting Out: Who Has the Time?

The question of exploitation and the obfuscating of labour, and even the 'reverting back to normal' of digitality becomes even more acute when we begin to consider questions of agency and structure i.e., the individual's agency and ability to viably choose to opt out from the digital structure of labour. Who has the time? Who has the right? Whether exploited by the 'Big Five' or not, apps like Moment or Freedom seem to be targeting those who can 'afford' to occasionally take time off: those who have some spatio-temporal and financial resources to make such a supposed 'empowered choice' (even tied to consumer choice, given these apps are commodified). However, for those whose entire livelihood is governed by apps through necessity, or because they have few other options available to them – for example, precarious workers engaged in the platform

economy – digital structures of labour allow little or no agency in 'real life' economic terms; the choice to opt out has a direct impact on their livelihood, leading to loss of resources, networks and ability to survive. In the next section, we want to explore a different aspect of labour in terms of those whose livelihoods depend on digital labour, where the question of opt-out cannot easily be bought by money or time.

For most workers across various sectors, the digital usually takes on the role of an 'assistant', subservient to the human worker. Terms like 'e-tools' and 'digital support systems' point toward a concept where the pragmatic purpose of the 'robotic companion' (Turkle 2011) is to serve the labourer, helping to somehow 'relieve' or at least 'streamline' the existing workload (in some cases, the digital has even replaced the labourer, as many companies turn to automated and AI systems in order to cut labour costs out altogether). The prevalence of e-tools is particularly needed in agile working practices that are increasingly becoming part of corporate and other institutionalised settings: agility and homeworking certainly requires the digitisation of labour to 'enable' and 'assist' the worker to make their time flexible and more malleable according to their own individual needs, which ultimately becomes about maximising efficiency and productivity to address the employer's needs. However, for the precarious gig worker, the digitisation of labour is less about the flexibility or malleability of time-space, instead it is about stretching out labour in as many ways and directions as possible for maximum profit, just to survive financially (precarious workers are notoriously badly paid with very little or no employment rights and support (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy 2018)). By the same token the digital is less about assistance and more about subsistence, where it is a necessity in order to survive, let alone succeed, rather than a necessity to make life easier. Consider the Uber driver who relies on their apps, sometimes on multiple devices (in themselves another outgoing expense) and accounts, just to cast a wider net in order to increase the chances of work – and thus increase their time engaged in the labour of finding labour – within a given time span. Is the role of the digital in managing their time equivalent to that of, for example, an employee with a stable and permanent income who has been granted flexible working hours and can work from home? For precarious workers engaging in digital labour for survival, smartphones are not robotic companions, the precarious workers *are* the subservient human robots themselves, not hierarchically above the devices – as in the case with, for example, office workers on a permanent contract – but on a par with the devices: both subservient to the office worker who needs an Uber ride, or food delivered to the office.

What is problematically paradoxical are the ways in which the gig economy and platform work specifically interpellate the precarious worker as an entrepreneurial individual with the concept of choice: the choice to supposedly work for yourself, in your own time and to your own working patterns, as if promoting agile working practices akin to the office worker on a permanent contract,

working from home to suit their personal needs. 'These Apps Are an Uber Driver's Co-Pilot', ran the title of a *New York Times* (Weed 2019) piece on Uber drivers, complete with an image of a driver's dashboard showing the use of both Uber and Lyft apps in order to maximise profits. The article quotes Ryan Green, Chief Executive of Gridwise, a mobile app that provides important data for drivers stating, 'we want to equip them to make the best decisions.' These platforms promote the idea of choice, supposedly helping 'empowered' precarious workers to make the 'best decisions', unfettered by corporate structures that would otherwise quash sparks of individualism and freedom: a theme that runs consistently through all chapters in this book.

But clearly, from reports that have emerged of precarious workers sleeping in tents or being subject to abuse (Lusher 2017), this 'choice' is an illusion, and a dangerous one in the case of these workers who have little legal, social, civil and spatio-temporal protection. The reality is that precarious workers cannot financially afford not to work constantly so whilst opt-out is a technical option, it is not a viable one. But perhaps most sinisterly, opt-out is not even a technical option in that the apps themselves are designed to not 'let go' of those who choose to disengage. Much in the same way that social media users find it notoriously difficult to technically dislodge themselves from social media platforms long after deactivation (e.g., because of endless notifications, suggestions, reminders to lure the user back), precarious workers are also subjected to aggressive, automated nudges, and penalties for daring to disengage (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). Similarly, digital engagement is rewarded: the 'algorithmic boss' ultimately encourages its 'employees' to technopractice self-discipline in ways that make digital engagement a technology of the supposedly profiteering self (Bishop 2020). Ultimately, opting out involves additional invisible labour of self-management, in itself a strain on already scant resources of time available to precarious workers.

Prassl argues that part of the result of the invisibility of labour within gig economy platforms is how 'stories of uneven rights, compensation and safety are not aberrations, but rather constitutive of the roles and ideologies of high-technology work' (2018, 6). The gig economy relies on the malleability of digital time-space (work whenever, however), and paradoxically, operates precisely because the (im)possibility of opt-out is not dichotomous and flexible: inasmuch as it can open and close, it can remain closed almost permanently for some who have no means to create pockets of digital freedom. Indeed, the reason why the 'stories of uneven rights, compensation and safety' are part of the gig economy is because digital disengagement is something that requires labour, time, space and resources that are not available to all. Only *some* have the privilege to access opt-out, to increase its space and time – as we have seen with apps such as Moment and digital detox initiatives – because for the rest, there is no time-space left to engage in the labour of digital disengagement.

Opting out for precarious workers is thus in itself situated at the intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality, ability and other inequalities that mean it is not

only labour that becomes invisible, but the notion of privilege too (Apostolidis 2019; Gray and Suri 2019). It is a privilege to be able to opt out, where the space, costs and time needed to open up such a choice is based upon an unequal distribution of digital and temporal capital: who has enough 'time-wealth' to manage their supposed 'time-poverty'? There is a difference between individuals who are able to manage their 'time-wealth' by shifting the balance between various different time-accounts – helped by apps like Moment – and individuals from vulnerable groups in society who do not even have that temporal (not to mention literal) bank account in the first place; the 'normal' kinship and network structures that entitle them to state, community and/or familial protection and support; or have limited access, skills and ability to seek support other than through the digital.

As such, being in a position to have to contend with the triple labour of managing an app like Moment or Freedom, as discussed earlier, in itself becomes a privileged and expanded space for opt-out – which does of course incur its own costs as discussed – when considered alongside the limited space for opt-out for a precarious worker in the gig economy. The labour of digital disengagement is problematic in its invisibility and in its placing of digitality as a normative starting point that people must work to get out of, and equally, work to return back to. A further critical point here is that this labour of digital disengagement in itself is also a privilege, one that is not accessible to all and relies on a further unequal distribution of digital and temporal capital.

Covid-19: The Visibility of Privilege

As we have been exploring throughout this book, one of the major transformations that Covid-19 imposed on different societies across the globe is not just the increase and meaning of digitality in our lives, but the shift in boundaries of labour and social inequality that digitally demarcate across intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality and ability. As most developed countries' economies relied on the mobilisation of a digitalised workforce[1] – Chapter 3 explored the various consequences of digitalising labour within Higher Education, for example – new inequalities began to emerge as a consequence of platformising work life as people 'worked from home': from gendered inequalities arising from women having increased workloads due to home-schooling and/or increased care responsibilities (UN Women 2020), to classed inequalities relating to technological access, seen for example in the shortage of laptops per household according to socio-economic status (Vilbert 2020). This is not to say that these inequalities did not exist before, they simply became more noticeable – or perhaps, as people realised the things they had been taking for granted,

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[1] Developing countries did not necessarily have the appropriate infrastructure to support the mass digitalisation of the workforce. See United Nations 2021.

that *privileges* because more visible; in the words of Chan (2020) discussing distal futures and labour within the context of the pandemic:

> The race towards digital productivity during the pandemic was buoyed by new and existing structures of labour inequality [...] virtual workplaces and the capitalist futures they make possible are accessible unevenly to those whose privilege affords them the means to participate in these emergent spheres of digital life (Chan 2020, 13.5).

The irony being that it took a pandemic to force more people into experiencing work in the way precarious workers have already been subjected to for some years: constantly and relentlessly controlled, regulated and monitored by the digital. More crucially, it is only when institutions experienced some of these pandemic-imposed inequalities at a systemic level – that enforced shrinkage of the space to opt out – that such inequalities were declared important enough to be widely considered and wide-reaching attempts were made to address them. For example, within the context of the UK, the Government's furlough scheme to help businesses (mostly in the hospitality sector which could not, by nature, digitalise its operations) in some ways protected a certain portion of the labour force that were more vulnerable (such as low-wage workers), albeit excluding others, such as those on maternity leave or job seekers. Similarly, the Government introduced a scheme whereby low-income households could apply for laptops and tablets for children to use for educational purposes during school closures (GOV.UK 2020). Such schemes may certainly address *some* inequalities – although certainly not all, and may even create new ones – but these still obfuscate the privilege of the digital itself; or rather, the exercising of that privilege through the digital, the privilege that enables 'white-collar workers [to] migrate their labour online' and 'low-wage "essential workers" risk their health for wages in ways that the labour market does not adequately compensate for' (Chan 2020, 13.5).

   If we return back to the question of the space, time and cost of 'opting out', what the pandemic has thrown into sharp relief is not only how the scale and flexibility of digital disengagement depends on the size of a given individual's expendable spatio-temporal income, but also its quality, its modality, its type: in the world of lockdown where the outside remains unsafe, privilege rests only with those who can afford *not* to operate synchronously – as must the deliverer of goods, hospital workers, carers and so on – and instead, lies with those who can afford the digitality needed for asynchronicity. And if working synchronously from home (e.g., a business Zoom meeting), then the privilege lies with the cost and space needed for such a buyout in the form of a safe indoor working environment (space), with a secure internet connection and the technologies to access it (cost). As such, this is not just about time-wealth, but it is also about the transaction value, the rate of currency that this time can buy the individual out of.

   But here, if we return to the precarious workers and those whose lives depend on the platform economy and labour – the Uber drivers, the Deliveroo

couriers – there is yet another layer of privilege to peel back. Because of lock-down restrictions, many precarious workers became unemployed and were in effect forcibly opted out of digital labour (Matilla-Santander et al. 2021; Ravenelle et al. 2021). As neither 'white-collar workers migrating labour online', nor the 'essential workers' who, whilst risking their health, were nonetheless earning some kind of income, precarious and migrant workers faced a double inequality of being digitally dependent but without the temporal capital of syn-chronicity to gain any profit. When social distancing is an issue, even the spatial ability – or the lack of it – to conduct one's job becomes part of the privilege to which precarious workers are not necessarily privy.

Conclusion: The Hamster Work-Wheel of Digital Disengagement

The abundance of apps like Moment, or digital detoxes and collective initiatives like the National Day of Unplugging discussed in the previous chapter, make it clear that society is becoming increasingly preoccupied and conscious of how excessive digital labour can lead to a need for (the consumption) of digital dis-engagement: hence the digital labourer-consumer double-bind discussed over the course of these last two chapters. However, what is less clear and some-times invisible – and thus problematic – is how digital disengagement in itself requires *more* labour. Identifying and solving 'the problem' of digital excess through the digital is a paradox, and the labour needed to self-perpetuate this paradox – that is, eternally turning the digital labourer-consumer wheel – is the problem of this paradox.

The labour of digital disengagement thus raises critical issues. Firstly, digital disengagement through apps like 'Moment' supposedly 'empowers' the indi-vidual through disconnection, but the digital labour required to operate and maintain such apps in itself reincorporates the individual back into the con-tinuous plateau of compulsory digitality. Secondly, the digital labour of digital disengagement in itself is a multi-pronged and multi-tasked operation that is ultimately defined by and further naturalises the digital: from the management of digital devices, the management of the app itself, and the management of the personal data generated, various forms of self-management are required in order to manage one's actual space and time of digital disengagement. Thirdly, there is an additional workload the digital disengager must shoulder when re-engaging back into what are the normalised and naturalised structures of digitality; here, the expectation that one must 'return back to normal' makes opt-out a temporary relief that requires responsibility, rather than opt-out being a right and default.

Finally, the labour of digital disengagement must also be understood as one arising from a point of privilege, where one has to have the necessary economic and temporal capital to spend on organising one's disengagement practices. As the case of platform labourers discussed in this chapter demonstrates, this

unequal distribution of digital-temporal capital means that digital disengagement itself – and associated apps – is a luxury that not all digital labourers can afford, one which Covid-19 has increasingly made more visible. In all these cases – whether it is the office worker or Uber driver – opt-out thus remains something that must be 'worked for' and remains not as a point of departure and return, but as a point of transit: this is why the cyclic double-bind of the digital labourer-consumer turns and turns, giving the illusion of opting out whilst forever staying trapped in digitality.

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