



Discourses on disconnectivity and the right to disconnect

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Abstract

Taking the “right to disconnect” discussion as a starting point, this article considers how the im/possibility of “opting out” is ruminated in scholarly discourses on technology non-use, media resistance, and media disruption. I argue that while very different in scope, these discourses converge in that they all revolve around a structuring paradox. On one hand, this paradox is set in place by the paradox of dis/connectivity itself (no disconnectivity without connectivity). On the other hand, I argue, it is incited and reinforced by the use of scholarly methods that appear to be at odds with the gesture of disconnectivity itself, whether they be empirical, discursive, or technical (or legislative). This article stakes a claim for the importance looking at these discourses on dis/connectivity from the point of view of this structuring paradox, for it is here, I argue, that the limits of our current “culture of connectivity” are most forcefully negotiated.

Keywords

Connectivity, culture of connectivity, digital detox, disconnectivity, media disruption, media refusal, media resistance, paradox of dis/connectivity, right to disconnect, technology non-use

In March 2016, the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* published an article with the title “Anwesenheitswahn in der Arbeit—das muss aufhören” (“Availability Fixation at Work—It Must End”; Öchsner, 2016). The article is one of the many in an ongoing debate in Germany that was triggered by the labor council enforced decision to put a ban on the

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work-related use of communicative devices after working hours at both Volkswagen and BMW. This means that quite literally, from somewhere early 2012 (VW) and 2014 (BMW) onward, all mail that reaches these company's server after office hours is put on hold or deleted, and company phones go off-service from the end of day, until the beginning of the next. Setting aside for the moment any reservations or appraisals one might have about such a decision, what interests me about this debate is how it triangulates three key concerns in the discussion on digital media use that up until that point were rarely brought together, that is, first, the concern about digital labor, precarity, and the changing labor market under the conditions of neoliberalist reform; second, the unease with the ubiquitous presence of connective media devices in our everyday environments that are biased toward constant availability; and third, the desire, or even need, to disconnect. Although these concerns have each attracted considerable attention from scholars working in the fields of critical theory, media studies, and the social sciences, and are indeed intimately intertwined, their interconnectedness as such is surprisingly rarely addressed, even if its relevance often seems presupposed.¹

In this article, I will unpack some of the concerns raised in the "right to disconnect" discourse by considering how the (im)possibility of "opting out" in an "always on" culture is ruminated in the scholarly discussions on technology non-use, media resistance, and media disruption. My point in identifying these strands within the existing scholarly discourses on disconnectivity is not to separate them by force, nor to give one precedence over the others, but rather to draw attention to the structuring paradox that lies at the heart of these discourses on disconnectivity, whether they be empirical, discursive, or technical (or indeed legislative, or just popular).

On one hand, this paradox is set in place by the paradox of dis/connectivity itself (no disconnectivity without connectivity). On the other hand, I argue, it is incited and reinforced by the use of scholarly methods that appear to be at odds with the gesture of disconnecting itself, whether these are driven by data gathering, critical inquiry, or the use of techniques against technology.

Given the expanse of the current discourses, the notion of disconnectivity that I work with is necessarily an unstable one, and indeed, we can detect various shifts of meaning between, and even within, the various strands of research in which the notion recurs. Sometimes the same term is used to refer to different things, or different terms (or no terms at all) are used to refer to more or less the same phenomenon. This is part and parcel of the difficulty of defining disconnectivity in terms of a general problematic.² For the sake of clarity, however, I will distinguish between what I call the discourses on disconnectivity (whether they be scholarly or popular), and what, for better or for worse, I here have dubbed the *gesture* toward disconnectivity, which I loosely define as the tendency toward voluntary psychic, socio-economic, and/or political withdrawal from mediated forms of connectivity.

Technology non-use

One of the more dominant trends of the existing research on the gesture toward disconnectivity largely has its roots in the social sciences and consists mainly (though not exclusively) of empirical research, both quantitative and qualitative, into the uses and

non-use of technology focusing on individual (non)users. It is not my intention, then, to give a full overview of the work done in this direction (it is a rather extensive body of work), but mainly to highlight some of the key concerns and relevant transformations within these discussion, as well as some of their limitations, and only to the extent that they tie in with and contribute to our understanding of the current debate on digital dis-connectivity that seems to have permeated public discourse today.

The discussion on technology non-use first and foremost emerged out of the investigations into the *uses* of technology instigated by the advent of the digital in the 1990s. In these initial discussions, non-use was primarily looked at from the point of view of the then growing concern (among policy makers and scholars alike) about the risk of digital exclusion and the so-called digital divide. Non-use of media technology here is primarily framed as an issue of material or cognitive deficiency (lack of access, lack of means, and lack of skills, distinguishing the haves from the have-nots) and also of (belated) adaptation, instigated by technophobia (the want-nots), ideological refusal (the refuseniks), or simply non-acceptance (the so-called laggards of diffusion theory). Although relevant at the time, the main problem with many of these earliest accounts, Niall Selwyn (2003) argues, is that in making the distinction between use and non-use, these studies often take for granted, or at least presume, the beneficially and desirability of information and communication technology (ICT) use, thus positioning the non-use of technology as abnormality and deviation from the norm; a deficit to be overcome, a problem to be solved. The use of technology, Selwyn points out, requires human agency, which, in turn, “implies the ‘possibility of choosing to act otherwise’.” (Orlikowski quoted in Selwyn, 2003: 12).

The realization that non-use can be studied as more than a rest-category (i.e. the other of use), and as such can provide valuable insights into the social functioning and social milieu of technology, more or less coincided with the diffusion and arguable “domestication” of the digital technology itself. It resulted in a burgeoning body of research that not only challenges the pro-innovation bias of digital media (and arguably of media studies in general) but also departs from the fallacy of the user/non-user binary, thus opening up the way to conceptualize non-use in more nuanced terms. This, among others, has given rise to a number of alternate taxonomies of different types of non-use that seek to complement, refine, and oftentimes contest the aforementioned typologies of the digital inequality research.

To name just a few examples: Wyatt et al. (2002), in a well-known and oft-cited article with the seminar title “They Came, They Served, They Went Back to the Beach,” distinguish voluntary from involuntary non-use, and past use from never used, resulting in a typology of resisters and rejecters, the excluded and the expelled. Wyatt (2014) would later nuance this typology by further differentiating between forced, reluctant, partial, and selective use. In similar vein, Selwyn (2006) separates active users from lapsed users, rare users, and non-users, while Satchell and Dourish (2009) find evidence for auxiliary distinctions between lagging adopters and active resisters, between the (geographically and socio-economically) disenfranchised, and the disenchanting (i.e. those “for whom reluctant use is associated with nostalgic wistfulness for a world passing out of existence”), and finally between displacement use (elsewhere called use-by-proxy) and sheer disinterest. This typology, to name just one other likable example, was

then partly contested by the findings of Baumer et al. (2013), who argue that although their results show no empirical evidence for lagging adoption, it does bring to light an emerging phenomenon they call “lagging resistance,” which they define as “a sense of wanting to quit but not doing so just yet” (p. 8).

These studies further show that the motivations for, and practices of technology non-use on the level of individual agency vary greatly and are often complex and ambiguous, not in the least because some of the same social qualities may be at play in both people choice to use and not to use digital technology. Peer pressure, negative stigmatization, technology fatigue, the network scale effect, a sense of (dis)empowerment, the need for socio-economic security, or the distress over violating personal or professional relationships, for example, are seen to play a role in both people’s engagement with and disengagement from digital technologies. Complicating matters even further, people’s disengagement from technology is rarely total, but often situational, specific to the medium (e.g. one may opt out of using a cellphone but use a computer), to the time and place of (non)use (e.g. only during work, not during dinner or in the library) and to the purpose of one’s abstinence (e.g. privacy concerns may trigger different types of non-use than productivity concerns).

Important for our purpose here is the fact that despite the complexity and ambiguity of people’s motivations for, and practices of technology non-use, these studies nonetheless converge in that they all signal an emergent unease with the ubiquitous presence of connective media devices within our everyday lives and environments, and that judging by the significant increase in these publication over the past two decades, this unease is substantially growing. These studies are further illuminating in that they bring to light some of the limitations and challenges of studying the desire to disconnect in situ. Here one can not only think of the often self-identified problems of recruitment (how does one study [let alone find] people not doing something) and of communicative intent (how does one study the non-use that is not explicitly voiced but merely enacted or just wished for) but also of diction (do people mean the same thing when they say they want to opt out, disconnect, unplug, detox, abstain from, or simply not use a particular digital technology) and the ambiguity of cultural practice (a Facebook quitter might be a fanatic Twitter user, and temporally opting out may not be the same as total abstinence).³

The key constraint of this line of research, to me, however, is a different and less self-identified one—one that has much to do with the uneasy relation between the data-driven research methods used and the topic it seeks investigate, that is, the gesture toward disconnectivity. With its primary focus on the role of individual agency in the social construction of technology, along with the often descriptive and de-historicizing use of data-driven surveys and taxonomies, this strand of research in my view uncomfortably feeds into the paradigm of datafication from which the one who disconnects arguably precisely seeks to withdraw.

Although at times well motivated, and indeed historically well fought over, the shift from structure to agency, from criticism to empiricism, and dare I say it, from a neo-Marxist research paradigm to a neoliberal one, moreover, tragically coincides with a research climate in which the university—to quote Henry Giroux (2008)—is increasingly forced to “[narrate] itself in terms that are more instrumental, commercial and practical,” (pp. 2–3) which means that this kind of research not only tends to get relatively

well-published and well-funded but also seems to have somewhat lost its connection with the disconnect it seeks to investigate, both precisely because it fits the paradigm of big data and the neoliberal university so well. To the point, my aim here is not to discard all empirical research or disparage ethnographic methods as such, but merely to point out some of the limitations and risks of studying disconnectivity in this way. These risks are perhaps best summarized as the risk commodification, instrumentalization, and/or depolitization. To each (and all) an example.

There are many studies that explicitly take up a design perspective in their analysis of practices of non-use. In an oft-cited article commissioned by Intell entitled “Infrastructures and their Discontents,” Mainwaring et al. (2004), for instance, use experimental ethnographic methods to investigate the articulated discontents with technological infrastructures among communities of self-identified homeschoolers and gated communities, and what they call security seekers and “true disconnectors” (or voluntary simplicity advocates), so as to establish how these discontents challenge ubiquitous computing systems and, as such, offer opportunities for “future ubicomp research and design” (p. 2). Significantly, the rationale behind investigating practices of non-use and “living off the grid,” here, is first and foremost to advance the “grid” itself, that is, to develop stronger, more adaptive infrastructures that enable people to develop more sustainable relations with technology, thus putting the discourses on disconnectivity to a corporate use.

If these studies are nonetheless among my favorites within the technology non-use strand, despite their corporate interest, it is first and foremost because they are upfront about what they try to achieve, as opposed to, say, those studies that remain largely “descriptive” in their use of empirical methods, as if they were neutral, which—I would claim—they are not: their bias is in their form, that is, it is precisely the suggested objective neutrality that makes these studies liable to be instrumentally used, arguably against their own intent.

More disconcerting, in my view, then, are the studies that work from such a limited understanding of technology and behavioral response that their conclusions are necessarily wont to isolate any observation about the individual’s non/use of technology (here understood as specific device) from the context from which they both emerge. A case in point, here, for example, are Lee et al.’s (2014) “Supporting Temporary Non-Use of Smartphones” and Schoenebeck’s (2014) “Developing Healthy Habits with Social Media” whose pedagogic titles already reflect their moralizing undertone. These studies converge in that they both attribute people’s failure to diminish their technology use to loss aversion and lack of self-regulation, suggesting that of all the strategies one can adopt to disengage from such technologies, only mental effort, will power, and self-control prove to be efficient. What I find flustering about these accounts is how effortlessly they 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, and therewith for their time-waste and burnouts, as if these can be divorced from the newly emerged economy of attention and the technological milieu that sustains it; a milieu, we know, that is not only biased toward constant availability, lifelogging, and datafication but also thrives on the exploitation of our “free labor” (Terranova, 2000) in ways that are remarkably reminiscent of what anthropologist Natasha Schüll (2014) calls *Addiction by Design* in her seminal book on machine gambling.

Finally, in a number of more recent studies that blend over into the second strand, technology non-use has increasingly more often been framed as a form of empowerment or even resistance (e.g. Woodstock, 2014) that is habitually seen to tie in with other lifestyle choices. From the Amish and orthodox Jews, for whom technology non-use (somewhat unsurprisingly, perhaps) coincides with dedication to community and religion (Ems, 2015; Shahar, 2016), to the so-called green communities, the slow movement (Rauch, 2011), and other more individualized lifestyle attitudes (hipsters!), the negation of media technologies, here, is seen to articulate the resisters commitment to self-determination, real-life social relations, and more sustainable forms (simple) of living. These observations are then oftentimes loosely correlated to social variables such as class and education, suggesting that digital exclusion does not always, and not necessarily, imply social exclusion (a heritage, I believe, of the digital exclusion research), but in fact must be considered as an indicator of class, educational, and/or gender privilege: (as if) only the rich can disconnect and only intellectuals and leftist want to (Haywood, 1998). In a compelling variation on this research, media resistance is conceived to be gendered to the extent that women are identified as the gatekeepers of technology resistance in Amish and Jewish orthodox communities (Shahar, 2016) and as the care-workers who enable men's public refusal of social media use in everyday life (Portwood-Stacer, 2014). Without wanting to downgrade the relevance and validity of any of these observations, nor of people's perceived opposition to technology as such, it becomes problematic in my view when such opposition is uncritically framed in terms of resistance without paying heed to the quandary of political dissent under the conditions of neoliberalism, that is, the fact that every form of (consumer) activism tends to open up new market potential and new forms of governmentability, an issue to which I will return below.

Media resistance

This brings me to what I would like to identify as a second strand, or generation if you will, of the existing research on disconnectivity, which distinguishes itself from the studies of the first strand, first, in its broad scope and use of mixed method; second, in its critical historicism; and third, in its critical inquiry of media resistance.

In relation to the first. In part developed in response to some of the aforementioned challenges and limitations of the technology non-use research on which it nonetheless builds, these studies largely depart from the use of empirical methods and the exclusive focus on individual users and practices of non-use alone, to focus more on how the discomfort with, and disengagement from, technologically mediated forms of connectivity is discursively framed in public discourse over time. Using mixed methods, these studies often attend to a rich variety of recourses besides user data, including user comments, blogs, social media discussions and technologies, newspaper clippings, magazines, websites, advertisements, industry pamphlets, governmental brochures, memo's, industrial patents, as well as all kinds of apps, video essays, and events such as the Sabbath Manifesto, #facebookucks, Quit Facebook Day, the National Day for Unplugging, and the unremitting call for digital detoxification which seems to have permeated public discourse today.

Drawing on a comprehensive selection of such material, Kristin Foot (2014), for example, traces the simultaneous emergence of a range of critical “discourses about reducing or avoiding media use, altering media practices, and attempting to influence media policies” across a variety of social realms in the United States between 2009 and 2011. Foot uses the term *media pushback* to refer to such discourses, calling attention to the pervasiveness of the preoccupation that transpires in public discourse from the late 2010s onward with what Morrison and Gomez (2014), in line of Foot, have called the “evertime of constant online connectivity.” The import of Foot’s initial study for our purpose here lies in the realms of pushback she identifies beyond that of personal and social relations (where pushback manifests itself in the desire for downtime, face-to-face relations, and privacy), that is, that of work and organizational dynamics (where pushback recurs in concerns about time-waste, lack of attention, and productivity), and that of politics and the military (where media pushback resurfaces in concerns about data-abuse and security risks). It is in these social realms that the preoccupation with disconnectivity has indeed gained particular prominence since the early 2010s.

The studies of the second strand further distinguish themselves from those of the first in that many of them seek to situate the current gesture toward disconnectivity against the backdrop of its historical predecessors. Apart from the many references, albeit often in passing, to the likes of Henry Thoreau’s *Walden*, the 19th-century Luddites, and the anti-television movement of the 1980s (with which the digital detox discourses indeed share a remarkable number of semblances), this is reflected in the studies that explicitly take up a media-archeological perspective. In “Lines of Power,” David Banks (2015), for example, situates the current preoccupation with going “offline” against the backdrop of the fierce debates fought over the emergence of the railroad industry in the 1920s, to which the distinction between being on- and offline indeed can be etymologically traced back. His comparative analysis sheds light on how the notion of the “online” has always already been enmeshed—then, it seems, as much as it is now—with connotations of commodification (of everything that is on the line, including people as goods), and incorporation (literally, the making corporate of all areas affected by the line), and its corresponding structures of propriety. In another study, Ethan Plaut (2015) uses the pre-digital tool of the swear jar to reflect on today’s technologies of communication avoidance, such as the vastly popular self-monitoring or communication avoidance apps such as iSwear, ViceJar, and Unface. While these tools enable their users to unyoke from the echo chamber of the Internet and the “incessant ‘ding’” of their communicative devices, his study draws attention to how these technologies also play into the neoliberal project of privatizing solutions to what should perhaps be conceived of as social problems, whether it be noise pollution and communicative excess (in Plaut), or issues such as attention deficit and availability fixation, as in the case of the opening example. Significantly, Plaut calls attention to the remarkable “dissonance between language of technological control and open-air freedom” that, he claims, is “endemic to these technologies that promise empowerment through limitation.” It is by way of these dissonances, he argues, that these tools of communication avoidance place the burden of dealing with these issues on the individual.

This brings us to a third, and related, way in which the studies of the second strand complement those of the first, and that is in the way they further theorize and problematize

the idea of disconnectivity as a form of media resistance under the conditions of neoliberal reform. In one of the most persuasive commentaries on the empowerment discourse of media resistance, Laura Portwood-Stacer (2013) does so by framing what she—with an overt reference to Marcuse—calls *media refusal*, as a form of lifestyle politics, meandering between consumer activism and its troubling counterpart: the neoliberal credo of participatory culture. Productively transposing Veblen's late 19th-century *Theory of the Leisure Class* to the present-day context, Portwood-Stacer (2013) uses the term "conspicuous non-consumption" to refer to this kind of media refusal, suggesting that nowadays "to ostentatiously remark upon one's refusal is to implicitly align oneself with those socially privileged groups among whom non-use is not the norm" (pp. 1047, 1043).

The import of Portwood-Stacer's (2013) argument for our purpose here lies in the notable asymmetry, or "discursive mismatch," she discerns between, on one hand, the ways in which the conscious disavowal of (in her case: social) media is discursively framed by the refusers (that is, as a persuasive practice of social critique), and on the other hand, "the discursive frames through which such refusal is (mis)interpreted" (that is, as self-righteous elitism, a-sociality, or technophobia). So, again, the issue of cultural privilege is brought up. *Media refusal* is congruently defined as

a performative mode of resistance, which must be understood within the context of a neoliberal consumer culture, in which subjects are empowered to act through consumption choices—or in this case non-consumption choices—and through the public display of those choices. (p. 1041)

In similar vein, Ribak and Rosenthal (2015) call attention to "small scale preferences," or "micro-resistances," like "content filtering, screen-time limitation and social media rejection" through which, they claim, people nowadays negotiate their experience of mediatisation. Although they make a point of differentiating these micro-resistances from the (macro) refusal Portwood-Stacer addresses, the authors nonetheless suggest that these micro-resistances are also instrumental to the neoliberal capitalist discourse. Drawing on Sarah Banet-Weiser's work on brand culture, they propose the term *media ambivalence* to refer to such resistances, thus calling attention to the dialectical refraction they enable of, on one hand, "the utopic technological optimism that developers and advertisers promote," and on the other hand, people's "dystopian worries over addiction and nomophobia, unmitigated availability, surveillance, privacy violation, distraction and interference."

So, again, we see some of the same issues of depolitization, commodification and instrumentalization come up, but unlike in the studies of the first strand, here, these issues are self-reflexively addressed, part and parcel of the very topic of critical inquiry. This does not mean, however, that the studies of the second strand are not also fraught with some methodological challenges of their own. For here, too, there appears to be somewhat of a disconnect between the scholarly methods used and the object of inquiry, that is, the gesture of disconnectivity, albeit in a different way. Where the disconnect of the first strand largely revolved around the paradox of the datacentric bias of empirical research vis-à-vis the gesture toward disconnectivity, or the being out of data, in the second strand, I argue, it largely revolves around the logocentric bias of discourse analysis, in which the discourses on media resistance, refusal, ambivalence, avoidance, and pushback are necessarily implied, vis-à-vis a gesture that derives, at least in part, its

vigor from its attempt to escape, defy, and arguably demobilize the totalizing logic of logos, and its corresponding politics of demos; one of which Deleuze (1997) has aptly written, “Repressive forces don’t stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves” (p. 172).

In submitting the gesture toward disconnectivity—in its various guises, only some of which semantic—to a discursive analysis while adhering to a dialectical model of political action, then, I argue, there is always the risk of subjecting the gesture of disconnectivity to the primacy of logos, that is, words and language. It is as if what is said or written about disconnectivity is deemed of greater importance than the gesture itself, a term that is here understood with both Foucault (1975: 152) and performance theory (e.g. Benjamin, 1998; Butler, 2006) as the various forms of nonverbal or even nonphysical communication through which embodied structures of power are (re)produced and potentially disrupted, as well as with Berlant (2011) as “only a potential event, the initiation of something present that could accrue density, whether dramatic or not” (p. 199). It comes as no surprise then, to me, that—rather than embracing the “little gaps of solitude and silence” that Deleuze pines for and the gesture toward disconnectivity arguably allows—so many of these studies end up foregrounding the dissonances, asymmetries, and ambiguities of language, to which they then themselves curiously add in their accumulative jest. For such is the fate of scholars working within the neoliberal university (myself included), in which—with the need for quantifiable output and the jargon of “deliverables” and “impact factors”—the adage “publish or perish” has been pushed to yet another extreme.

As a model for political action, dialectics is both discursive and exceedingly dualistic. Founded on demonstration and interlocution, it aims at the inclusion and recognition of those who have no part within the discourses through which it operates; as such, it seems, it cannot but affirm the rift between those unaccounted for and those who count, us and them, part and whole, all or nothing—it needs the binary to sustain itself. (Lazzarato, 2014: 225–49) But what of those who do not seek to be included or accounted for? Indeed, what if what *matters* most in the gesture toward disconnectivity, however public, is not what is carried out in language, or any other representational form, but rather what transpires in (its subsequent) silence, in experiment and action, in different kinds of presence, and in the alternate ways of being with technology that the gesture toward disconnectivity affords, enables, or envisions—however singular, and however momentarily? By attributing disconnectivity’s politics mainly to the enunciation of resistance and ambivalence, moreover, there is always the risk of blackboxing the technology, and thus separating technology from politics, individuals from their devices, and human from non-human forms of agency. This becomes all the more pertinent once we realize that expressions of media resistance and refusal, to the extent that they are digitally mediated, on the level of (corporate) algorithms often cannot but affirm the paradigm of mass digital connectivity that the resister arguably refuses to accept. This brings me to the third strand within the scholarly discourses on disconnectivity.

Media disruption

The idea that in the absence of an outside the only disruptive disconnect possible may be the one effectuated from within the digital network itself has triggered what could be

identified as a third strand within the existing scholarly discourses on disconnectivity. In books with suggestive titles like *Off the Network* (Mejias, 2013), *Disconnect.Me* (Karppi 2014), and *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age* (Harcourt, 2015), to name but a few, the studies of the third strand explicitly bring the current discourses on disconnectivity to the critical debates on algorithmic connectivity, big data, mass surveillance, digital labor, and platform capitalism. Arriving at a turning point in the critical reception of digital media technologies, they significantly depart from the empowerment discourse of the 1990s and early 2000s in which digital networks were commended for their potential to emancipate, inform, and empower its users, instead placing emphasis on the rising concerns about the detrimental social, political, cultural-economic, and environmental implications of mass online connectivity. While different in scope, and coming from various backgrounds, these studies thus converge in their shared concerns about totalizing logic of connectivity and the unprecedented levels of (wage) inequality, monitoring, and control it has given rise to, as well as in their interest in how digital networks can be disrupted through digital means.

If the studies of first strand can be said to focus more on the micro-sociological level of disconnectivity, then the studies of the third take on a more macro-sociological perspective; or, if we were to phrase it in terms of the standing debate over the primacy of structure and agency, the studies of the first strand lean stronger toward foregrounding the role of individual agency in the use or non-use of technology, whereas the studies of the third strand tend to lean more toward foregrounding the (infra)structures underpinning today's digital networks and the distribution of power, money, and agency (and water! see Hogan, 2015) within them. The distinction, however, is not rigid. Like the technology non-use research ties people's motivations and practices to macro-sociological factors, network theorists often explicitly address the micro-sociological implications of networked connectivity, especially in their attempt to probe the pockets and possibilities for disruption it may provide, both for the individual and for the collective. In relation to the studies of the second strand, moreover, the studies of the third further expand on the topic of media resistance, this time by reframing it in technological rather than solely discursive terms. It is here that the notion of disconnectivity acquires yet another meaning.

While each of the studies of the third strand has its own take and way of explaining how media disruption as a form of disconnectivity might work, Mejias account of the potential "unmapping" of the network is illustrative here. Working from an understanding of the digital network as "a composite (or assemblage) of human and technological actors (or nodes) linked together by social and physical ties (the links) that allow for the transfer of information about some or all of these actors" (p. 11), Mejias scrutinizes the shift he observes from using the network as a way to describe society, to using it as a "template for organizing sociality," thus placing emphasis on the material, praxis, actors, and movements that make up the network's infrastructure.

Like the early technology non-use research, Mejias is concerned about the new forms of underdevelopment that the digital gives rise to. Unlike in the technology non-use and digital divide research, however, the underdevelopment he seeks to address here is not so much underdevelopment through *exclusion*, but rather, precisely, underdevelopment through *inclusion*. In a time and age in which inclusion has become the norm and

participation of the hallmark of sociality, Mejiias states, “the consensual acceptance of the terms of use,” invokes an illusory sense of empowerment and equality, as if everyone who participates in the network does so “on the same terms enjoyed by everyone else” (p. 8). This, obviously, is not the case, which, he asserts, has to do with the network’s strong nodocentric and monopsonic tendencies. Defining nodocentrism as the logic whereby the network renders everything invisible that is not a node, and monopsony as a market structure characterized by the existence of many sellers (us) of the same product (data) and only a few wholesale buyers (say Google, Facebook, or the NSA), Mejiias claims that within today’s nodocentric networks, increased participation is on a par with an increase in inequality, as stronger nodes tend to get stronger, while smaller nodes are deemed less and less relevant, if seen at all. In such a context, he argues, inclusion always come at a price. Here, he identifies three. First, by participating in digital networks, activities from outside the market are transposed into it in exchange for access of means (commodification and exploitation of free labor). Second, bit by bit, our social activities are converted into the private property of a few big corporations through acts of liking, clicking, and sharing (privatization of social life). Third, as a result of the trope of total inclusion everything that is not included—and thus cannot be subjected to the computational models prescribed by the network—is automatically considered as either outdated or a threat (condescension and surveillance of the disconnected) (pp. 3, 19–36).

Actualized nodes, however, Mejiias rightly points out, are but momentary objectivities (p. 88). As a system for organizing our knowledge about the world, nodocentrism thus first and foremost marks a crisis in the imagination “of how we [can see] ourselves as individuals in a community,” (p. 14) as it fixes identity, excludes otherness, and forecloses the open-endedness of being (as becoming, or, the virtual). This is so because, from the point of view of digital networks and computation, the only thing that can be processed, or captured, is that which already exists; this means it presupposes calculability. “Unmapping the network,” in this context, refers to the process of generating moments of dis-identification (in Mejiias) or disobedience (in Harcourt) from the network’s dominant nodes and links, so as to disrupt, unsettle, undermine, or unthink—that is, to unmap—the network itself.

A telling example of what such a disruptive disconnect might look like comes from Tero Karppi (2011), who, in his article “Digital Suicide and the Biopolitics of Leaving Facebook,” discusses two digital artworks from 2009, *Seppukoo.com* and *Web 2.0 Suicidemachine*, designed to enable Facebook users to commit a “virtual suicide” on the social media platform. The goal of these apps, Karppi observes, “is not simply to help users quit but to introduce different potential ways to exist in social networks.” Using Facebook’s own infrastructural logic and design, what these digital suicide services enable, Karppi claims, is the cutting loose of people’s online identity from its “attachments to the moulding ‘I’ of the offline identity.” Drawing on Galloway and Thacker’s (2007) earlier deliberations of the “tactics of nonexistence” (pp. 135–37), Karppi claims that what remains online after the digital suicide has taken place is “given a non-existence.” This nonexistence, however, is not empty, but full, “in the sense that it does not refer to any other subject than itself.” It is a faux presence, but a presence nonetheless, devoid of any representational identity, significant only in its a-signification. It is worth to quote Karppi at length here:

The identity that remains in *Facebook* after digital suicide becomes meaningless for the machinic subjectivation of capitalism: its data cannot be used for marketing, its consumption habits cease to exist. It is not representative for statistical analysis since it does not represent a population that exists. Simultaneously its actions cannot be anticipated and premediated since it does not have any. It remains in the network as passive and ascetic.

What Karppi brings to the fore, in other words, is an act of obfuscation, defined by Brunton and Nissenbaum (2011) as “the production of false, misleading, or ambiguous data to make data gathering less reliable.” Significantly, unlike in the aforementioned technology non-use and media resistance discourses, the disconnect envisioned and enacted here is not so much between man and technology, nor does it necessarily entail people’s *disengagement* from technology. Quite to the contrary, if anything, the disruption and disconnection conferred here first and foremost point to these critics’ liability, often in theory as well as in practice, to the (once) emancipatory promise of digital networks, which is where the potential of this kind of disruption, dis-identification, and disobedience resides. Mejias (2013) makes this clear from the start, where he writes that “this book will not be calling on anyone to stop using any kind of digital network,” or “embark on a journey to some remote corner of our contemporary life to find subjectivities or sites untouched by digital networks,” a tendency he accuses of “romanticizing some prenetworked state of being” (p. 12). Nor will it “be promoting a network Luddism,” for “no responsible person can afford to be a luddite” (sic!).

Where Karppi focuses on the systemic noise incited by what remains of people’s data-doubles after their untimely departure, Mejias—in line of his critique of nodocentrism—proposes to look at the paranodal as a site of resistance, and thus pays attention to what does not conform to and falls outside of the network’s dominant nodes and links (e.g. broken links and signal blockers, viruses, white spots and rogue nodes, pirate initiatives, and slow movements). In addition, he considers serious gaming as a playground for opening up the digital to the possibility of the virtual. Bernard Harcourt, whose book revolves more around issues of exposure, privacy, and security, in his turn broods over leaking, ludic corporatism, and the securization of private information as effective forms of (civil) disobedience. Galloway and Thacker name counter-protocols, good viruses, and spam among their more elucidatory examples.

The message is clear. Expanding on Hardt and Negri’s (2005) dictum “it takes a network to fight a network,” these studies profess the idea that digital forms of connectivity can only be contested from within and fought on their own terms, even if what these terms exactly are, arguably, remain yet to be decided and may differ depending on the purpose of one’s resistance, the actants involved, and the technologies used, or opposed to (p. 58). In the spirit of a hacker ethics, these studies look at instances where the black box of technology can be opened up and the solutionism of the engineers of online sociality is interrupted. They seek to explore and experiment with particular techniques, ethically, so as to free these techniques from the purportedly all-encompassing technological paradigm of which they partake (the so-called “media environment”), in an attempt to weaken the grip these technologies of mass connectivity have on us.

In experimenting with, and thinking through, the possibilities of technological disruption, nonetheless, there is always also the risk of playing into the very project these

strategies set out to disrupt. It is worth to briefly reiterate the aforementioned risks of commodification, instrumentalization, and depolitization, which here are equally in place, albeit perhaps more in practice than in theory. Here one can think of, for example, the exploitation of hacking and *modding* as a form of free labor (commodification); of the use of twitter bots, Internet trolls, fake news, and other forms obfuscation by oppressive regimes or in the more recent political campaigns in the west (instrumentalization); and finally, of the move from a *hacker ethics* to the recruitment of *ethical hackers* by universities, governments, corporations, and the industrial-military complex (depolitization). These risks and limitations are perhaps best summarized by Mejias's (2009) remark that "Any attempt to contest the tyranny of the nodes simply creates new peripheral and exotic sites to be indexed" and thus assimilated (p. 614).

In addition, though it would go too far to fault these authors of a tacit technological determinism and, therewith, of techno-centric bias, there nonetheless appears to be a certain finality to their claim that these networks of mediated connectivity are here to stay, however nuanced and well-informed their analysis may be. In this, especially the studies by Harcourt and to some extent also Mejias share quite some common ground with the Internet optimists and skeptics they so clearly seek to depart from. Moreover, one cannot fail to note that their studies remain largely conceptual throughout and tend to pay far more attention to sketching the staggering extend of our current "digital enclosure" (Andrejevic, 2009), to which most of their books is meritoriously dedicated (no doubt for good reason), than to the possibilities for disruption and disobedience at of which their respective titles speak.⁴

The main limitation of this strand of research within the present context, in my view, however, is a different one, one that has more to do with the fact that the strategies for disruption these studies propose—at least at first glance—may appear to be quite far removed from the more existential desire or need that both the gesture toward disconnectivity and the "right to disconnect" discussion tap into—especially for those for whom such strategies may not be as easily available as for the well-informed few: code literates, net activist. It is this more existential desire or need that holds my interest here. To the extent that we can speak of a structuring paradox in this context, then, it revolves around counterintuitive suggestion that to "opt out" in the present context, or to invoke or secure ones "right to disconnect," one (first) has to connect *more*, that is, spend *more* time, energy, and effort engaging with these connective technologies, even if they are the very thing, or paradigm, one wishes to opt out from.

The paradox of dis/connectivity

Using the "right to disconnect" discussion as a starting point, I have scrutinized the scholarly discourses on disconnectivity by calling attention to the structuring paradox that lies at the heart of the discussions on technology non-use, media resistance, and media disruption, as well as of the gesture toward disconnectivity as such. That this is still a topical debate becomes clear when we consider the amendments made to Article 55 of the controversial new French labor law that went into effect as of January 2017, in which the employee's *droit à la déconnexion* is now legally enshrined but arguably no longer lawfully defended.⁵ Again, a structuring paradox is in place, as the law is likely to effectuate precisely the opposite of what it tries to achieve. For, where the law commands employers and employees to

reach an agreement about the latter's "right to disconnect," this right appears to be neither mandatory nor binding. With the passing of this law, then, it would seem that the employee can no longer invoke this "right" under the traditional conditions of waged-labor, where it would be on a par with one's unpaid, or free, time. Instead of protecting the employee, then, the law runs the risk of turning *all* our available hours into the time of (unwaged) labor, thus feeding into the very problematic it tries to oppose, a problematic that characterizes our current "culture of connectivity," of which Van Dijk (2013) ironically writes: "Opting out of connective media is hardly an option. *The norm is stronger than the law*; if not, it would be too hard for any regime to control its citizens" (p. 174).⁶

What, then, can we learn from the paradox that structures the discussion on dis/connectivity? The paradox is instructive, I argue, in that it discloses the limit of our current culture of connectivity, to which the gesture toward disconnectivity in my view attests. Against the claim that there is "no outside" to our current "culture of connectivity," I argue, these discourses posit a significant counterclaim. But this entails two provisos. First, these discourses show that resistance *to* technology is not necessarily *about* technology in the narrow sense of the word (as specific techniques, devices, or practice), but rather more often pertains to a more general loss of ways of livelihood made unavailable to us through the logics of datafication and automation enabled and reinforced by mass-mediated forms of networked connectivity. The paradox of dis/connectivity, in this sense, can be said to wield a stricter interpretation of a more general problem with regard to contemporary human-technical life (or *technics* to use Bernard Stiegler's (1998) term). From this point of view, the gesture toward disconnectivity is not so much about the refusal or dislike of "technology," but rather "operates as an affirmative force that holds the capacity for transformation" (Rossiter, 2004: 21). The gesture, in other words, is already enfolded in the technological paradigm of connectivity, thus affirming its paradoxality. Therefore, as Ned Rossiter has argued in a slightly different context before me (writing on creative industries), these discourses make clear, second, that any political theory of our present-day network culture needs to take into account its "constitutive outside," that is, the material, symbolic, and strategical forces that in the words of Chantal Mouffe "cannot be reduced to a dialectical negation," as they are at once "incommensurable with the inside, and at the same time, the condition of emergence of the latter" (here quoted in Rossiter, 2004: 31). The paradox of dis/connectivity, I argue, constitutes such an outside. This also explains why the gesture toward disconnectivity does not take on a single form, why the discourses are not univocal, and why it is so important to consider them together, in their very equivocality, for it is only then, I argue, that we can begin to see the limit of our present-day "culture of connectivity." The paradox of dis/connectivity here figures not so much as a "special condition" of some inspired individuals, but rather can be seen to play a crucial part in renegotiating the "social contract" we live by, in part, by imagining forms of life beyond its limit, so that the hold that the logic of mass-mediated connectivity has on us can be weakened.

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1. I thank Sam Hind, Yasco Horsman, and the anonymous reviewers at *NMS* for their constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this article.
2. An issue that I do not address here for reasons of space and focus, but that nonetheless is of pivotal importance to the discussion on disconnectivity is the topic of “passive” technical or forced forms of disconnection (see, for example, Sprenger, 2015: 100–103), which also brings to light different genealogies of the paradox of dis/connectivity that can be arguably traced back to the history of ideas on communication and electricity, as, for example, addressed in Chang (1996) and Peters (2001).
3. In listing these limitations, I draw on Plaut (2015) and Portwood-Stacer (2013).
4. Mejias and Harcourt both devote about 30 of their respective books of 190 and 360 pages to disruption and disobedience.
5. *LOI no. 2016-1088 du 8 août 2016*, available at: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexteArticle.do;jsessionid=0BC9982B940B860C43882B2558DCD12A.tpdila19v_1?idArticle=JORFARTI000032984268&cidTexte=JORFTEXT000032983213&dateTexte=29990101&categorieLien=id
6. (emphasis added) That I attribute a certain irony to this remark rather than cynicism, has to do with the fact that Van Dijck, in the all but five pages she devotes to the (im)possibility of “opting out,” on one hand, suggests that opting out is significantly hampered by, among others, social impediment like peer pressure, while, on the other hand, in the acknowledgements to her book, she “pledge[s] allegiance to the academic peer review system” (173; viii)—a “system,” we may well do to remember that, as a “system” of measured numbers, impact factors, and output quota, has become one of the hallmarks of the neoliberal university.

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