Disconnected: Non-users of Information Communication Technologies

Growing concern about the impact of constant, mediated connection has often focused on the ways in which technologies contribute to a ubiquitous sense of presence and interaction, and the kind of invasion that this may represent to a sense of self and privacy. Discussion about information communication technologies (ICTs) is increasingly converging around the need for a deepened understanding of their effect on pace of life, methods of work, consumption and wellbeing. Counter-narratives to overwhelming hyper-connectivity have emerged as a result of these changes. Using qualitative interview data from respondents recruited from across the globe, we focus on the strategies and worldviews of those who explicitly reject the use of any ICTs. Our participants relate how, to varying degrees, they have elected to avoid forms of immediate connection, and what they identify as the deep advantages and therapeutic benefits of such ways of being. The article responds to rising social anxieties about being locked into ICT ecologies, and the difficulty of opting out of corporate information-exchange systems. These concerns, we argue, are generating increasing interest in how to manage ICTs more effectively, or to switch off altogether.

Keywords: internet; social media; connection; ICT; digital; social networks; mobile; e-government

Introduction

A substantial body of theory has formed around social fragmentation redefined by information communication technologies (ICTs). The literature engages with themes such as digital identity, communities and citizenship. Studies of interaction through ICTs are often concerned with questions of anonymity, quality of life (Bancroft and Scott, 2017) and the headlong pursuit of new connections with strangers (Hardey, 2002; Author, A.). Another strand of work has focused on the norms attached to ubiquitous digital mobility that may blur offline and online interactions (Green, 2002; Hand, 2012). Together these approaches have produced essential studies of ICTs in everyday life, and how networks may weaken but also generate new methods of contact and relationships. As we begin to explore what Dijck and others identify as ‘the culture of connectivity’

(2013: 18–19), we are interested in the multiplicity of behaviour that includes resistance to the transformative and commercial influence of ICTs – what we have observed as *disconnection*. The study involved data collection over five years, with 50 participants. The work aimed to unpack the meaning and significance of the disconnection sought and managed by these individuals and the methods that they use to maintain or create boundaries. The findings suggest that the ability to achieve a sense of balance and to disconnect occupies an increasingly significant place in the digital age. A critical reading of disconnection in this paper offers a more variegated account of connectivity than previous critiques, such as Turkle's work on the 'promise of technology' and concerns about youth who have 'grown up tethered to technology' (2011: 171). Indeed, how an individual develops a sense of their, potentially overloaded, connection, and thus their demand for social interaction, is not always straightforward. Accordingly, disconnection has emerging social value, embodies a different set of norms of social practices and is profoundly affected by the sense of relational obligation.

Disconnected: the shape of information politics

Unlike the short-term solutions and periodic moments of absence that characterise some strategies for managing mediated communications, we define disconnection as *to choose to experience social relations entirely away from technology*. This includes a range of social platforms and social media (such as Facebook and Twitter), and email, along with mobile devices and hardware. Discussing the fundamental shift in relationships, and known for her critique about the impact of social media, Turkle (2011) observes individuals living 'alone together'. The instability of relations as a result of contemporary digital saturation, experienced by the many, compared with a previous era of computational convenience, experienced by a few, remains a strong theme in the research literature. For example, the ubiquitous state of communication

technology has important possibilities for *being social*, but there are negative impacts on our health, including higher levels of depression, stress and anxiety (Harwood et al., 2014).

Here, there are two contextual themes to the changes in the way we connect. The first is the maintenance of relationships – for example, the techniques individuals deploy to support physical interactions and emotional ties (Haythornthwaite, 2005: 125). Ellison et al. (2011) observe, in their influential work on social network sites (SNSs), a reconfiguration of individuals' social behaviour in that young people are sensitive to the recording of events on social media. The concentration on connectivity has, the authors argue, potential to disrupt existing relationships, and to enable engagement with content. The classic work of Wellman and Hampton (1999) identifies community as a critical aspect of promoting an understanding of sociality through ICTs. In this context, the efforts of individuals to sustain connections are shaped by their connection to and involvement with technology.

This brings us to the second contextual theme: the merging new methods of consumption and other participatory practices in which the individual is expected to engage. Among the various uses of ICTs, the desirability of connection may explain the 'distinctiveness of "social media"' (Zajc, 2015: 28–29). For Elish and boyd[i], the new reality is that individuals are public by default and private by effort as lives form part of AI (artificial intelligence) data structures (2017). Moreover, in the twenty-first century, actions are often interpreted with the assumption that everyone has the same digital knowledge (van Deursen et al., 2017: 452). In particular, civic engagement has been transformed by the political turn and exploitation of social media, especially by young people (Vromen et al., 2015). The reshaping of policy and citizenship are important aspects of this reconfiguration. Other critics identify the 'Fifth Estate' of open-

government initiatives aimed at *enhancing* the 'democratic accountability' of citizen data (Dutton and Dubois, 2015: 51–52). However, the impacts of such practices are far from neutral and introduce countervailing forces designed to support a new wave of privacy incursions and invasive citizenship practices (boyd and Crawford, 2012: 662). A closer reading of Turkle's (2011) work shows how, for example, online games and SNSs lead the way in generating a sense of emotional attachment to technology, giving the illusion of companionship and, one might speculate, incentives to engage with methods of digital citizenship.

The construct of a critical counter-narrative to ICTs has most recently been accompanied by the shift in focus from technological *objects* to digital *immaterial content*. Of special interest are negative outcomes, such as connections seen to amplify and feed 'dark networks' and illegal and notorious websites, such as Silk Road, CP Sites, Red Rooms and Torture (Burcher and Whelan, 2017). Such critiques have generated concern about risky social behaviour, malicious content and exposure to predatory behaviour, including cyber-bullying (Whittaker and Kowalski, 2015). These anti-social effects raise important questions about the limits of state control and policing, and about the potential for counter-narratives in response to saturated forms of information connection, including the ability (or otherwise) to opt out of information databases, or to detach ourselves more fundamentally from our subjective relationship to technology. Here the epistemological and philosophical processes take on new significance for social and political systems, in a new 'politics of method' (Savage and Burrows, 2007: 885). For Beer the new metrics are indicative of new power, where agency and discretion are subverted or eroded by our attachment to technology and encoded rules by algorithms (2016: 111–112). Indeed, the increasing centrality of

information governance bears out Liste and Sørensen's (2015) concerns about the effect of reconfiguration of technologies on users – and, implicitly, non-users.

One strategy to counter these concerns is the 'Slow Tech' movement set up to address the burden of technology. Such strategies are known variously as 'calming technology', 'the slow web', 'conscious computing' or 'contemplative computing' (Burkeman, 2013). Related questions are raised by Nicholas Carr in his seminal (2008) essay, 'Is Google making us stupid?': 'My mind isn't going – so far as I can tell – but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to.' The increasing dominance of the negative construction of social media has fundamentally altered the social positioning of ICTs and disconnection. It is on the basis of these kinds of observations that we attempt to uncover the social impact and cultural workings of disconnection. In the next section we set out our methods.

Methodological approach

This article reports on the results from a longitudinal study that used a qualitative approach along with purposeful and snowball sampling methods. To initiate the research, two quarter-page advertisements were featured in the *London Review of Books* (LRB), seeking respondents who self-identified as 'disconnected' and wanted to 'live life outside the information age' (Figure 1). The method was designed to capture recurring data from individuals who, despite having the resources to do so, had chosen not to use ICTs. The targeting allowed us to contact a geographically dispersed group characterised by specific behaviours concerning modulating engagement with ICTs: while now available online, the LRB is noted for its bookish audience and presentation in text format with the minimum of embellishment. The LRB readership is chiefly ABC1, and the publication has the most extensive global circulation of any magazine of its kind.[ii] The concept of disconnection has significant purchase in the lives of our

respondents. The definition here refers to the desire and the actions taken to step outside techno-social practice, data and networks. While the sample is a narrow slice of the population, our intention was not to produce a generalisable dataset. Rather the primary goal was to enable access to the rich and value-laden interior world of the in-depth accounts of individuals engaged in disconnection practices. From this we aimed to generate more robust theoretical frameworks and ideas that could be pursued to develop a more adequate account of processes of social disconnection and information detachment.

Figure 1. The London Review of Books advertisements.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The study draws on 50 semi-structured interviews and correspondence over five years (2010–2015) with participants from 12 countries: Australia, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, the UK and the

USA. A longitudinal study in this area is justified for two reasons. First, it can help answer questions about implementing methods to disconnect. Second, a longitudinal analysis can help with understanding other people's reaction over time to disconnection.

Interviews were conducted in English using a range of techniques including telephone, letters and email, allowing participants to decide how to engage with the research. The first wave of interviews (n = 39) focused on methods of disconnection and technology practices, the second (n = 11) on the social and cultural impact of disconnection, questions about privacy and security, and how respondents compared their lives with those of others.

Our respondents were aged 19–68 (with an average age of 43). The snowball sampling allowed us to benefit from the networks of the initial sample. Of our interview sample, 18 were female, 32 male. A total of 47 were educated to graduate level or had a professional degree. One respondent was unemployed, four were retired, two were students, one was a stay-at-home father, and one declined to state their occupation; the rest were self-employed or held professional roles. All identifying information has been changed to protect respondents' identities.

One issue was the problem of maintaining connection with a digitally hard-to-reach group. Therefore, interviews were followed by periodic communication, mainly through telephone conversations, along with the exchange of letters and postcards as points of reflection and follow-up in the final year of the study (2015–2016). The length of the study and periodic points of reflection play an important role here, as they allowed the authors to capture multiple constructs of disconnection, identify themes about networked interaction and disconnection that persisted for the full period of the study, and gain insight into issues such as long-term adjustments made by the respondents and their wider networks. Alongside this valuable data, we had the

opportunity to allow respondents long pauses between interviews that grew into critical points of personal reflection. Finally, staying in touch with the participants over an extended period of time was also a way to respect their desire for a low level of engagement.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis was applied to the transcribed interviews and the other correspondence the researchers received in the forms of poems, and two CDs with original songs and lyric sheets. This additional material was treated as extended narratives and considered alongside the open-ended interviews in the formation of the themes. Engaging with these diverse narratives allowed us to be responsive to the processes of boundary-making and elective methods of communication particular to individuals seeking to disconnect. The additional material facilitated the exploration of personal context and the capturing of as much as possible about the personal world of the respondents.

What follows are our findings from the five-year period of interviews and the points of reflection in the final year of the study.

Findings

In-depth interviews probed the respondents motivations and expectations regarding 'being disconnected'. They were asked why they decided to get involved with the research, where they got the idea that their lives were disconnected and what they believed the outcomes would be of continuing not to use technology. Links between recurring topics, events and other mentions of disconnection were initially classified and then grouped into themes (Corbin and Strauss, 1990: 61–62). Social context was used to code each topic: for example, how often an issue came up, and how this was expressed (Dey, 2007). The classification revealed four main thematic frames:

I. **Sense of agency** – related to sense of self and participating in activity to protect personal identity;

II. **Reasoning** – related to discussion of consequences, justification of circumstances or media coverage;

III. **Morals and beliefs** – related to deep concern for protecting familial security and safety, doing good for the broader community, ideals of justness and fair treatment and democracy; and

IV. **Opposition** – portraying action as a cause or social movement specifying positive and negative outcomes.

To give a background to the personal techniques used to disconnect, each respondent discussed their previous use of technology, including social media (consisting mainly of an untouched profile on Facebook). Other platforms included Twitter, YouTube and one dormant MySpace account. A firm motivation to participate in the research came from respondents' observations about the increased use of ICTs as a risk to existing bonds and family life, and a sense of concern about media representations of the risk of technology. While these (often hyperbolically described) negative consequences provided discussion points, it did not follow that ICTs were considered harmful, and this has potentially substantial implications for policy and research, given the complexity and interconnectedness of motivations to be disconnected and practices to sustain this. The sense of purpose and value in disconnection was most frequently referred to in diagnostic terms, with respondents stating that they wanted to 'treat' (in the sense of a physical illness) the adverse effect of technology. It is to the analysis of these in-depth narratives of disconnection that we now turn.

Narratives of disconnection

Common to the discussions was the way in which personal distancing took shape over time. Often the discussion focused on who should have control over personal information and how to negotiate a point of transition from connection. All of our respondents were concerned about ownership of their data and identity (Couldry et al., 2014). In tandem with the influence of the diagnostic explanation for disconnection, there was often a concern about the marketisation of personal data and, related to this, the effect of imposed government policy on citizenship engagement (Bertot at al., 2014). Such concerns revealed more general anxieties about openness and privacy (Kitchin, 2014), and new methods of regulation and legislation (Moses, 2013). In the remainder of the paper, we analyse the participants' ideas about the longer-term impact of disconnection as narratives that fell under the four thematic frames.

Sense of agency

A much-discussed experience was the need to 'pull away' and to establish 'distance' from ICTs. These ideas brought to mind Bugeja's critique of the emptiness of sociality in the information economy (2005), with many of our respondents seeking to enrich personal space. One interviewee (retired lawyer, 68) elaborated on her dislike of friends who failed to live in the moment:

> SUE: I would speak to friends who've got plenty of time and find that they were distracted by their chirper [mobile phone] […] and I don't mean to sound self-righteous, but I really like to go out to top-class places like Scott's or up to Edinburgh and The Kitchen.[iii] I like to go to those kinds of places. Oh, and also you see those people who've got plenty of money and find out that they've not had a nice evening out as they've spent all that time chirping into their phone.

Several young respondents valued the novelty of disconnection. Interviewed by landline from Spain, Francesca noted:

> FRANCESCA: people are relating to one another and with information that I don't find entirely sympathetic. [For me] it is a principled choice of a sort – not wanting to be precious about it – I do think that it [technology] is organising peoples' relationships to text and script in ways that may be exciting and new, especially for young people.

Francesca and Sue felt that disconnection consolidated their relationships. Their attitudes run counter to the standard view that disconnection equates to social isolation, and paradoxically reflect a new coping strategy that facilitated a sense of togetherness (Mick and Fournier, 1998). During interviews, several respondents mentioned that they welcomed the opportunity to discuss – to 'self-evaluate', as one female interviewee noted – their experience of disconnection. For example, they talked about a positive state, as opposed to the more aggressive cultural meanings attached to ICTs. Anthony, who had chosen to live 'off-grid', talked about the importance of his sense of physical place:

> ANTHONY: I wanted a return to nature, to be receptive to what is going on around you. You see a fragmented world, people are detached because services are piped to you […] technology is a world of illusion [where people] can play with commitment. They are shy of the long-haul; like butterflies, they just pick up on things along the way and dip in and out, pick and choose.

Some respondents believed they could protect personal and physical space where others could 'too easily intrude'. Indeed, rather than ICTs creating new possibilities (Kiesler, 1997) or strengthening genuine relationships, technology added an unnecessary layer that lengthened chains of communication. Precisely because of this lengthening, Colin and Ben (a couple in their 30s living in Bristol) had narrowed their networks:

> COLIN: everything is trivialised […] I wouldn't say this connectedness is entirely bad, but it certainly isn't entirely good […] it started with email, now it involves everyone

> being rude and constantly being interrupted […] this is because there's a lack of willpower to disconnect.

Ben had explained his decisions apologetically to friends:

> BEN: I said 'sorry' to my friends when I closed down my Facebook account. I felt over-faced with the communication, and I decided that I did not want to manage with it anymore. Well, perhaps that's not strictly true. I think I did value some of what was there, but in the case of Facebook, I tended to come away feeling quite stressed […] I wanted to create a better way of connecting. I didn't like being over-faced. I prefer spending time with Colin. Real time.

Colin and Ben's stance recalls Miller and Mundey's (2015) work on SNSs and the individualised 'performance' of boundary work to limit the severity of harmful interactions. Colin and Ben took their equivalent boundary work one stage further, to eliminate undesirable and undesired intrusion. Performance is also important for Hogan, who introduces the notion of a 'lowest common denominator' social culture to describe how individuals engage in performativity, the way in which social activity is bound to online participation (2010: 377–378). It seems that such representation of identity is more than enough to provoke long-term disconnection. One of the most evocative descriptions came from Alice (a semi-retired journalist, living in Sweden). She explained how she felt about openness:

> ALICE: Here [in Sweden] the internet is heavily pushed by the Government, and we get many perks before other countries. In some ways, Sweden is the most open country in the world; we have open data and open security, for car ownership, tax security, citizen information and then twelve to fifteen other areas where it is all perfectly legal to find out information about people publically.

This political deployment of ICTs highlighted two related differentiations that directly concerned the methods used to disconnect and to sustain disconnection. First, there is a sense of moving with the times and of characterising new ICTs as distinct from 'old media' (Featherstone, 2009: 304–305). Gitelman makes a similar point about the context of the 'new', in the sense that media are 'always already new' and that, thus, inventing new contexts for new technologies ignores how ICTs already produce the conditions of their historicity (2006: 25–26). At the same time, the renegotiation of the understanding of connectivity inevitably means that the subjects of disconnection are themselves reconfigured. To give an example demonstrating both of these differentiations, part of Alice's explanation of her method of sustaining disconnection involved her reading of national and regional policy of Sweden; she regularly 'kept an eye' on ICT-related policies and directives in other countries. Alice's renegotiation taps in to the individualising or atomising potential of ICTs, and at the same time underscores the complexity of any attempt to distance oneself from connected resources.

Alice's experience is rooted in what she views as another revolutionary change in telecommunications technology: the emergence of 'levande informationen' ('living information') and 'Mobie social' ('mobile social'). This context is all the more important given that many citizens are more concerned than ever before about how they connect to public authorities (Rainie, 2015). Our initial exchange with Alice was revealing. Alice's disconnection denotes her attention not just to a set of behavioural practices, but also, in Bourdieu's terms, to new forms of habitus that affected her personal life, her work and politics. Nedelcu's (2012) work on transnationality reproduced through ICTs provides another way to think about the mechanisms of connectivity that facilitate a particular lifestyle. Nedelcu discusses how ICTs' 'new

ways of being together' are ritualised in socio-techno routines (2012: 1339). If being connected is important for Nedelcu's respondents, at the other end of the continuum, for our respondents, disconnection represents a similar set of rituals. The behaviour of our respondents echoes Webster's recent observations that the information society is modelled on the relations built from the 'extraordinary increase in the information in social circulation' (2014: 26). Here the respondents' renegotiation of personal space starts to form part of a new set of more controlled and self-aware technology interactivity. If meaning and interpretation occur across contexts for interaction and technology-intensive areas, for our respondents this also created space for fear as a more sensitive frame of reference. Such fear constituted a sense of instability, and out of this a related narrative formed that appeared to be used to justify the protection of personal space. It is to this form of justification that we now turn.

Reasoning

Chief among reasons to modify behaviour was a change to employment, business opportunity or responsibility at work. Relevant to this thematic frame was the increased distrust of corporate-run information-exchange systems. Living disconnected, Frederic (married, specialist and rare book-binder, London) described a new wave of business opportunities:

> FREDERIC: I must do my tax form online, for this (once a year) I borrow my father's PC and give my Accountant one hell of a headache! […] what I do is specialist, and I find I have very good business networks. Unlike my father (a banker), my income is stable and guarantees a good quality of life.

By his reasoning, Frederic is motivated by fear. Similarly, Gemma (a trained psychologist from the north of England) described her experience of being 'taken over

by the technology':

> GEMMA: there is a value in being connected, but the information doesn't stay inside the box does it? I saw in my work colleagues how they had an inability to switch off.

Being connected continues to be seen as part of state-of-the-art ICT development that flourishes through user adoption. By contrast, it was disconnection that took on a positive and valued role in our respondents' lives. Being connected was seen as potentially 'sinister', even 'threatening'. Rose spoke about the lengths her family had gone to, to opt out:

> ROSE: My eldest daughter puts herself on [what she calls] *Facebook fasts*. My son, and I am not making this up, has sold his Xbox for a violin. Now my family can take a breather […] We want to live a valued life, and I hope thats what we're doing, with a large chunk of self-discovery. I don't want to leave my career, but I wouldn't be without my priorities […] I didn't mean to make a statement by disconnecting, and it has not been a serious problem, but more of a distancing.

Formulated in this way, and perhaps predictably, the act of disconnection was seen to reflect a set of behaviours that stood for distancing – and that therefore forced family and friends to rethink their dimensions of social life by recognising the growing interdependencies between mediated and ICT manifestations that stood in for sociality. Sheila and her husband Graham live in New Zealand and the USA for six months each every year. They explained how disconnection had transformed their lifestyle, and that criticism of their behaviour 'was never far from any (extended) family conversation'. They told us how other people's fear about their way of life ('by living so remotely') had created a need to rethink their emphasis on the absence of technology and connection, as this was seen as neglecting family and friends. The lack of technology

seems to be an appealing way to introduce new ideas around how cultural capital changes concerning face-to-face proximity (Baldassar et al., 2017). That we allowed for the slow emergence of communication with our respondents was essential to supporting their new ideas around disconnection. What then transpired was the identification of morals and beliefs related to disconnection that, as the discussion reveals below, allowed them to change their lives for the better.

Morality and beliefs

The morals-and-beliefs frame refers to concern to protect the family, a desire to do good for the broader community or a sense of fairer treatment resulting from disengagement. The way in which respondents expressing such perspectives seek to sustain disconnection has come about through various social, family and professional responsibilities. Though it would be misleading to state that every participant had been successful in the methods they had adopted to maintain disconnection, we can identify a deeply felt commitment to disconnecting that had gradually become a significant social and cultural dimension in their lives. Over half of our respondents described how they had bought devices for themselves with the intention of coming out of their retreat from technology. However, everyone was able to identify the negative impact of connectedness and technology and spoke about a general unwillingness to be in front of screens. None of our respondents wanted to be constrained by 'screen time' – the demands of which echo Ben and Colin's earlier feelings of being 'over-faced'. The family of one female respondent had told her that (in their view) she was 'taking advantage', requiring everyone to organise events around her. Further difficulties were especially pronounced when disconnection was a series of moments, rather than one action. What is perhaps telling is the way in which one instance of disconnection for

these respondents developed into a commitment to staying disconnected. For example, Peter (one of the youngest participants at 26) talked about how he was originally inspired to disconnect, and from a diagnostic state committed to escape what he called the 'symptomatic misery' of connection:

> PETER: I find that I am more fulfilled and more focused. It was not until I first visited Jura [Scotland] with my family that for a period of about five-years I became a modern-day-hermit. From 2003, I was really strict with myself, absolutely no internet or technology […] And I felt ready for it. If I wanted anything, then I had to walk out, go and see friends. I never ever felt cut-off, but maybe because I made the effort to really feel at home in my own space.

Occasionally, the respondents were able to identify other diagnostic influences. Travel, in particular, entailed responding to social (and often government-controlled) forms of connection (Calenda and Meijer, 2011). In most cases, travel enabled the respondents to self-diagnose the more profound dimensions of connectedness and effect of technologies. David had started a self-help group after he felt he had 'lost what was important' and was under pressure from all the forms of information regulation that had influenced his everyday life:

> DAVID: If you want to go anywhere, you have to at least log on with an email address. That's if the airline calls or something like that […] I could, but I haven't added my Oyster card to an email address. Maybe other people fail to register too, perhaps some forget, my method is a statement.

David's narrative showed concern to be 're-setting the moral compass', and his struggle to identify and control the source that was causing harm. His success in diagnosing what was wrong had become symbolic of the way he wanted to live his life, and his reassertion of personal control ('my method is a statement') was part of seeking to provide an antidote to mass information for others.

Among all our respondents, there was a general sense of condemnation of the circumstances in which individuals were being pressurised to, as one female lawyer observed who had worked in London and New York, 'connect too much' – and thus disconnection was premised on notions of excess:

> STEPHEN: We become convinced that being connected is better, is expected and the harm rarely gets mentioned. Actually, connection is the imposition, more of an imposition than work! Specific aspects of sensual pleasures get misaligned, and we don't have any good way of stepping towards one another, unless (and this is the solution) this is literally taking a step towards one another.

Vince, a geography professor who had recently relocated, recounted:

> VINCE: It turns out now that I live outside of those regulatory rhythms that I am happier and have a much better perception of being connected. Disconnection has become my personal and professional protection.

Vince's participation emphasises salient points about the complex nature of disconnection and challenges for researchers in capturing these kinds of experiences. At first, Vince had declined to be interviewed, arguing: 'there's no reason at all why you couldn't add a disclaimer about the need to connect to take part [in the research]'. During a later telephone conversation, Vince went on to describe his lifestyle as 'in opposition of others wanting to connect and foster false daylight'. This last comment emphasises the way in which disconnection coheres with other moral, consumer and political themes, in particular the idea of protest, to which we now turn.

Opposition

One reason frequently put forward by respondents for maintaining a state of disconnection was the idea that this offered a provocative statement about how they wished to construct relationships around them without the use of technology. In broader

political and power-related terms, Laura (practising psychotherapist, New Zealand) described:

> LAURA: My personal way of telling Google to fuck off! But ultimately, the real reason to disconnect was to show a lot of my power. I found that I gained (not lost) favour among my friends, and my clients.

In other words, we observe an emerging trend in which the disappearance of contact or network interaction perpetuates the same properties involved in the construction of connection in the first instance. The method of disconnection of one male respondent (a professor from Iceland) had evolved from an organisational arrangement, through a diagnosis about the state of connectivity, and on to protest. He described how he had felt:

> LUDWIG: […] uncomfortable about how my information was being shared when I found via Google some family pictures that I had posted to Facebook. I had thought that these were private […] it had not really occurred to me that it might be healthier to hold back.

During a later interview, Ludwig described how he had been 'confronted' by his students and colleagues about appearing 'erratic':

> LUDWIG: I think that you have to go through that process of learning what's acceptable and what makes you happy. In the early days, there were a lot of things that just appeared and you didn't question this. Now we're detecting a preference for uninterrupted moments. You can no longer be naïve about the internet.

Laura's and Ludwig's actions had become a moral and political stance within complex social relations. This individualising aspect of power was given more prominence by one female respondent who described how she had set herself the task of freeing herself from the negative impact of technology and seeking 'true disconnection'. A male respondent described how he felt more 'at ease' and had a 'strong sense of

achievement', having stayed disconnected for close to a decade. Another male respondent spoke of the importance of protest: '[technology is] the face of a benign culture and breakdown of social and moral boundaries'. This protest stance shared much with Mila's point of view:

> MILA: I remember discovering chat-rooms when I was in my teens, and it was just being fun. [I] went from being into conversations online, to losing my personal time that didn't entail any proper concentration. It crossed over into my life in a very disturbing way.

Framed in this way, it is easy to perceive disconnection as what one female interviewee called a 'knee-jerk reaction'. Disconnection was often framed not only in such a way as to motivate others, but also as protest:

> DAVID: Of course disconnection is a statement […] In New York last year, there was a two-hour complete blackout that included the internet. People ran wild, broke into stores, and many were arrested. It shows how connection is completely hinged on technology.

In between moral and political statements, there was room for individuals to reflect upon and adapt their personal conduct, but there are anxieties around this. For example:

> GLEN: Because technology has solved some of our problems and it serves our needs, we're willing to just buy into it. Like it's easy to say that Facebook is to help me make friends, not that it's Facebook that's selling my data or to think about what's on the other side of the technology. Frankly, it's easier to deal with things properly when you're not connected.

Our respondents also spoke of supporting others to disconnect: organising community groups, and actively mobilising protests. David called this 'life in aeroplane mode'. Here there appear to be varying motivations for such inactivity. Certainly our respondents' prior experience of technology demonstrated a wide range of knowledge

about the regulation, legislation and impact of ICTs that then influenced their motivation to opt out. One UK female respondent had only one reason to disconnect: Facebook. She wrote to us originally in 2011 and then again in 2014 by email:

> BEVERLY: Reason # 1 I wanted to step back, especially from Facebook […] Because being on a social network ain't fun.
>
> In response to the new Facebook guidelines, I declared that my rights are attached to all my personal data, drawings, paintings, photos, texts etc. published on my profile since the day I opened my account! Here's what I wrote on my Facebook –
>
> *Those reading this text can copy it and paste it on their Facebook wall. This will allow them to place themselves under the protection of copyright.*
>
> *Facebook is now an open capital enemy.*

Facebook and other methods of engaging in social networking on-screen were an (albeit unsurprisingly) contentious subject for our respondents. Many spoke of Facebook's interactive elements as exploiting information and damaging friendships, and about feeling uncomfortable with the data and images on the site.

For Beverly, her protest was in reaction to 'secret laws' and the ability of sites such as Facebook to 'control anyone's information'. Many of the hidden aspects of ICTs were viewed negatively, leading to new ways of thinking about surveillance and personal safety. Such first-hand accounts are indicative of recent critiques about digital databases and social media in particular (e.g. Beer, 2016). In the past, disconnection was a symptom of a deficient economy, a lack of access or education. Now, it is increasingly a positive state that includes a higher and more cultured set of social expressions, such as those captured above. To return to the moral and development practices mentioned in the previous section, combined with ways of opposing forms of ICT-based co-presence, we get a sense of how disconnection might be used to capture and explore the diverse experiences people have of the intensification of technologies

and the new methods for self-protection. Disconnection raised essential questions about the renegotiation of social absence and presence, as well as about emerging support networks mediated by ICTs, particularly for globally mobile and ageing communities (Baldassar et al., 2017). To put it differently, information regulation was seen as offering a wholly inadequate and partial response, the result of which, for many of our participants, was a more emphatic launching into a state of concerted disconnection.

Discussion

A vital precondition for the digital age is the capacity of individuals to normalise a shifting set of incentives to connect. Such techniques are not only the modalities of disconnection but, in combination, they provide fertile empirical ground for ongoing discussions about ICTs and digital culture, as well as about the modification of social and professional relations and practices. In this article, we contribute to this debate through critical insight into the practices of hard-to-reach individuals due to their disengagement from ICTs who see disconnection as facilitating, not limiting, their engagement with real people in real time. While we would expect this group to be enthusiastic about maintaining distance from ICTs and digital networks, many also raised concerns about a lack of social criticism regarding the quality of shared content and information. They were also very critical of the default positions of many platforms which leave users open or available and the limitations of social media in particular as a form of productive and meaningful social communication. All of this suggests the emerging need to monitor the disconnected practices that are now providing a primary social and personal space (for some) alongside an empirical examination of how social media may generate forms of isolation. Leveraging the possibilities of disconnection, the respondents' adopted ways of being, thinking and doing encompassed multiple

subjective conditions reflected in the constraints of their emotional and professional relationships.

Whether disconnection affords the same opportunity for closer bonding with family and friends who are not proximate requires further investigation. However, our work suggests that there is no particular reason to see such relationships as more vulnerable because of, or damaged by processes of, disconnection. Disconnection comes in multiple forms and, like so many other elements in contemporary ICT discourse, aligns with different regulatory themes in the cultural and political landscape, including some resonance with the ideals of market exchange and freedoms associated with neoliberalism. Since this is an analysis of individuals who are notably private and difficult to pin down, our work offers a fresh perspective on ideas about contemporary social practices and modes of communication. By allowing respondents to sustain contact over an extended period, this study contributes to the growing body of research analysing 'Slow' movements, in particular, the flourishing literature investigating the impact of SNSs and digital databases generated by everyday life. Recent literature has considered the effect of the new social setting of SNSs and heightened engagement with technology, and especially the way this affects young people, who (it is often assumed) now regard digital information and database citizenship as a regular part of their extended selves. A new aspect underpinning connected lives might be how individuals respond to those who are tethered to, while remaining detached from, ICTs. As this was an ambitious study aiming to capture the experiences and opinions of individuals who recognised themselves as disconnected, further investigations might begin to offer more variegated insights into more subtle differences and motivations among those within this community.

Conclusion

One of the social results of a concern with contemporary information overload has been to stress the importance of managing connectivity. Interest in reappraising 'always-on' and immersive social media already appear to be generating commercialisation around the possibilities focused on disconnecting. The success of marketing narratives that purport to offer various cures and manuals to tackle the excesses and damaging effects of such technologies is increasingly evident. Away from these initiatives the people we spoke with are engaged in strenuous and deep efforts at opting-out or moving beyond the hyper-connectivity of the kinds of platforms that many now feel are a cumbersome but default need within contemporary sociality. In many ways it seems possible that this group represent what may appear as a potential panacea for the world's increasing infatuation with mobility and technology.

From the perspective of our respondents, it is clear that they share serious concerns about overload and time spent immersed in screens and that these anxieties are becoming increasingly mainstream worries in the social domain. These concerns generated active forms of resistance. Though our contact with the disconnected has been hard-won (often waiting for lengthy periods for replies) with fiercely private individuals, there is a reason to believe that their methods are being adopted by growing numbers to create new senses of intimacy and authenticity.

This study suggests that disconnection can create and enhance reciprocal social interaction. This is not just a flash-in-the-pan of lives off-screen, where disconnection serves merely as an aspirational message to facilitate stepping away from technology. Instead, our interviews and correspondence demonstrate that a combination of diagnostic and transformative actions enabled this group to take concrete steps of their own, while also attempting to reform the lives of those around them. As such, it seems

that the proliferation of ICTs, digital software and mobile social apps now motivates many individuals into related forms of periodic disconnection, either from a specific platform as in the idea of ‘Facebook detox’, or from specific devices like smartphones. Future research could help to record these strategies and practices in more detail to offer routes for more collective action to combat the stress, anxiety and the anti-social qualities associated with much ‘social’ media. In the meantime, it is clear that, far from experiencing an isolated or denuded social life, those who have chosen to disconnect enjoy considerably what for many people may appear to be an almost unimaginable condition.

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[i] Note the researcher danah boyd has legally changed her name to be written in the lowercase format.

[ii] At 67,529 in 2015 and 70,468 in 2016; figures taken from LRB website. Available at: www.lrb.co.uk/about (accessed 10 January 2018).

[iii] Scott's, London, and The Kitchen, Edinburgh, are Michelin-starred restaurants, often popular with celebrities.