This is a repository copy of *Paradoxes of Digital dis/engagement: Final Report*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/114806/

Paradoxes of Digital dis/engagement:
a pilot study (concept exploration)

Seed project final report

Primary Investigator: Dr Adi Kuntsman, Manchester Metropolitan University,
a.kuntsman@mmu.ac.uk

Research associate: Dr Esperanza Miyake, Manchester Metropolitan University
e.miyake@mmu.ac.uk

Table of Contents

Executive summary

Today's digital economy ties citizen engagement to digital and mobile communication technologies, with efforts and funds directed into increasing access and digital inclusion. Individuals and communities that remain disconnected are perceived as being 'at risk' and 'left behind'. At the same time, a growing number of concerned parents, educators, and political and environmental activists are calling to reduce the use of such technologies, or refuse them altogether. This empirical, seed-funded study from the Communities and Culture Network+ investigates this paradox, focusing on digital *dis-engagement* as a proactive form of citizenship rather than as a failure or a hindrance. Based on qualitative analyses of initial findings drawn from online data and in-depth interviews of two digitally literate participants who identified themselves as being practitioners of digital disengagement, this study begins to map and develop the concept of digital disengagement. Ultimately, this project seeks to find innovative and fruitful ways to understanding social relations, wellbeing and digital footprints, and offers a new prism to look at the link between digital technologies and culture, citizenship, and society.

This study consisted of three components: surveying the emerging online social discourses of digital disengagement (news articles, magazines, blogs, business and organisational sites); carrying out an exploratory ethnography with two participants who actively volunteered to discuss their perceptions and lived experiences of disengagement; and finally, bringing the first and second components together and developing a conceptual map, a typology of disengagement. Overall, the study identifies different types of social groups and individuals who choose digital disengagement, common reasons and motivations behind digital disengagement, and how these acts of digital disengagement are practiced in everyday life with political, social, and economical consequences. These relate to concerns regarding social relations and privacy; finance and economy; health and well-being; ecology; and education.

This initial study already begins to contribute to scholarly knowledge and debates surrounding digital connectivity, citizenship and society. Because our findings indicate the need to consider a wide range of reasons, practices, and cultures surrounding digital disengagement, our study is of multidisciplinary relevance and suggests further exploration into the complexity of citizens' digital refusal.

Aims and Objectives

1. Background

Citizen engagement in today's digital economy is intrinsically tied to the use of digital and mobile communication technologies, with efforts and funds directed into increasing access and digital inclusion. Research in this area focuses on digital "exclusion", the "risks" of "disconnection" or the dangers of being "left behind" (Helsper 2009, Helsper and Galacz 2009, Olphert and Damodaran 2013, Ragnedda and Muschert 2013). Yet, at the same time, a growing number of concerned parents, educators, and political and environmental activists are calling to reduce the use of such technologies, or refuse them altogether. This pilot project investigates this paradox, focusing on digital *dis-engagement* as a proactive form of citizenship rather than as a failure or a hindrance, by turning to the digitally literate who seek to limit or eradicate digital and mobile technologies from their lives, and advocate for societal engagement through different paths.

The key task of this explorative study was to begin mapping and developing the concept of digital disengagement, as a new prism to look at the link between digital technologies and culture, citizenship, and society, by using those who refuse to engage with the digital (out of concerns for privacy, political freedom, over-consumerism, damage to personal relations or education) as an innovative and fruitful angle on understanding social relations, wellbeing and digital footprint in our present and future. The pilot study is the first stepping-stone in a larger research project, which will use a range of qualitative methods and conceptual approaches to determine the relations between community, culture and digital dis/engagement. It asks: What is digital disengagement? Who chooses to disengage from mobile and digital technologies, and why? How is disengagement practiced, negotiated and experienced? What are the potential consequences of this disengagement for our communities and the society as a whole?

2. Aims

1. To advance our understanding of digital disengagement on today's society, driven by digital economy and wide-spread use of smartphones, social media and the Internet
2. To develop a preliminary typology of motivations to disengage from digital technologies
3. To create a map of the continuum of disengagement between partial to full, setting up the conceptual framework for the broader study that would account for the variety of user practices that form digital disengagement
4. To test a range of qualitative methods for empirically investigating the ideas, choices and day-to-day practices of digital disengagement

3. Objectives

The pilot project consisted of three components: surveying the emerging social discourse of digital disengagement; carrying out an exploratory ethnography of the perceptions and lived experiences of disengagement; and developing a typology of disengagement.

1. Surveying an emerging discourse: what is disengagement? This component surveys and identifies the ways voluntary disengagement from digital technologies is depicted in mainstream media and Internet sources such as blogs, magazines, dedicated websites and news sites. A preliminary analysis of the emerging discourse will be used to shape the design of the larger study for which this pilot is preparing.
2. In-depth exploration: living the disengagement The second component is an ethnographic "taster": a close, in-depth interview with two people who are wilfully disengaging form digital

communication tools. The interviews focused on the interviewees' motivations to dis-engage, the link between disengagement and other social identities; the role of specific devices and platforms in digital disengagement; and the ways the interviewees navigate the digital world while refusing parts of it

3. <u>Developing a typology: who disengages, why, and how?</u> The third component is a conceptual map that brings together findings from the first two, in an attempt to map the relations between the emerging discourse of digital disengagement and its actual practices. Since the scope of this study is very limited, and the ethnographic component of the research is exploratory and in no way representative, the mapping is tentative. It will be further developed, adjusted and populated as we progress into a larger study.

4. Data collection

<u>Component 1: Surveying an emerging discourse</u>

In the first component of our study, we have surveyed 163 on-line resources, including news articles and editorials, magazines, blogs, business and organisational sites, and project websites. A small number of these were collected unsystematically, encountered in the process of conducting other research or teaching preparation, or during personal browsing. Most of the on-line data, however, was gathered during systematic web-search, which developed through a progressive, 'chain-reaction' approach. The 'chain' began with a group of key terms:

- Digital disconnection
- Unplugging
- Voluntary simplicity

These terms yielded discourses which often used similar language, and referred to common recurring terms and ideas. These recurring terms were then used as further search terms. These then led to the next batch of search terms, and so on to create a series of 'daily chains' as follows:

- Digital disconnection → digital life → disconnectionist
- Unplugging → digital detox → digital fasting → digital dieting
- Voluntary simplicity → Neo-Luddite → anti-technology

During the course of following such chains of terms, when a certain broad theme begin to emerge – such as 'health', 'finance' – these were also used as search terms alongside words such as 'digital', 'technology', 'internet', 'mobile phone', and 'Facebook'. Sometimes, if an item referred to a specific event, product or trend (e.g. National Unplugging Day), this would be specifically searched.

All the resources were captured, saved and tagged using Zotero (www.zotero.org). The tags assisted us in the initial classification of findings. Relevant tags are listed below, in the subsections of key findings.

<u>Component 2: In-depth exploration of digital disengagement</u>

In the second component of our project, we interviewed two people, both of whom came forward, eager to talk about their experiences of digital refusal, after they heard us mentioning the project on two different occasions. The original research plan was to combine open-ended interviews with observations of the interviewees in their everyday activities, which was abandoned due to the

interviewees' busy schedule and limited availability. As an alternative, we developed a self-diary, where the participants would note their use (or lack thereof) digital devices and platforms, and reflect on changes in use. In the pre-interview discussion with the first participant it became clear that the self-diary is cumbersome, for the person was eager to talk about their experiences rather than document them meticulously.

Following a discussion by the research team, and a conversation with the participants prior to the start of the interview, the methodology was changed to open-ended interviews only. These began with asking the interviewee to tell the story of their digital disengagement. The interviews were participant-led, with minimal intervention by the interviewer, to clarify or ask prop questions. Both interviews lasted just short of 1.5 hours. The interviews were transcribed and analysed, with key themes presented below.

Key Findings

1. The emerging discourse of digital disengagement

One of the key findings emerging from the online data is how digital disengagement – whether temporary and/or as a life-style choice – is motivated negatively, where individuals and communities who actively choose to practice it are doing so in order to improve their lives, with some businesses offering products and services to aid them in their digital disengagement. Digital disengagement is thus almost always triggered by anxiety, where technology is perceived as having a detrimental effect and impact upon a number of areas in everyday life. We identify these as being spheres of concern which encompass issues relating to: privacy; social relations; education; health and wellbeing; finance and economy; and ecology and environment.

1.1. Privacy
(tags: Surveillance, Privacy, Paranoia, Government, Biometrics, Citizens, Email, Facebook, Internet, Mobile Phone, Smartphone, Devices)

In the current post-Snowden climate, one of the popular and topical reasons behind digital disengagement is the concern over technology's monitoring capacities, especially in its all-pervasive and constant level of operation. Here, the discourse is usually politically motivated, where individuals, journalists, and collectives protest against the imposition of government and/or corporate -initiated and –intercepted measures of supposed security, technology and surveillance: whether it is the more obvious 'eye' of CCTV cameras, or the less obvious everyday uses of SNS. The fact that there are now anti-technology technologies (**see fig. 1**) available commercially to counter-act this perceived technological invasion on citizen's privacy demonstrates the paradoxical nature of digital disengagement: plug to unplug.

(Fig 1) Anti-technology technology. Source: https://plugunplug.net/

1.2. Social relations

(tags: Better life, Relations, Relationships, Connection, Email, Facebook, Internet, Mobile Phone, Smartphone, Devices)

Perhaps one of the most paradoxical aspects of digital disengagement to emerge from the online data is how individuals go online to express their need to disengage in order to engage with people, particularly in relation to SNS. There is a growing number of people for whom technology – especially and ironically SNSs like Facebook – has had an effect on the amount of time they spend ('quality time') with their friends and family. 'What if the next time I meet somebody new, instead of immediately looking them up on Facebook when I get home, I embrace the adventure and mystery of getting to know somebody new by actually spending time with them?' asks a blogger,[1] or another blogger promoting simple living through de-cluttering and engaging in acts of digital disengagement such as cutting back on emails states: 'you can spend your time pursuing your passions, hanging out with your friends and family, and doing the things that make you happy'.[2] A street photographer went as far as to document the 'inherent sadness' of the 'plugged-in bores' (**Fig 2**).[3] Such individual expressions are echoed in journalistic narratives, where columnist Tim Lott (*The Guardian*) urges that 'we need to switch off the screens and connect with each other again – a whole generation is losing its way'[4] whilst the *Daily Mail* reports, 'School orders pupils to spend a week on 'digital detox' without phones or iPads to teach them how to talk to people'.[5]

(Fig 2) "Together we must be strong and release ourselves from the shackles of smartphones and bring face-to-face chat back!" – Babycakes Romero
Source: http://www.boredpanda.com

[1] http://theradicallife.org/the-real-reason-to-quit-facebook-and-10-what-ifs
[2] http://justinjwright.com/blog/voluntary-simplicity-4036/
[3] http://www.boredpanda.com/the-death-of-conversation/
[4] http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/jan/09/an-electronic-apocalypse-is-coming-unless-we-act-now?CMP=fb_gu
[5] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2943699/School-orders-pupils-spend-week-digital-detox-without-phones-iPads-teach-talk-people.html

1.3. Education
(tags: attention, education, educational harm, learning experiences, learning process, parenting, children, screen time, Email, Facebook, Internet, Mobile Phone, Smartphone, Devices)

Against the rhetoric that promotes blended learning, interactive and digital education, and student engagement, there is an equally strong online counter-narrative, usually from concerned parents, educators and psychologists/clinicians. All three social groups are concerned predominantly with not only the physical, emotional and psychological effects of digital engagement (see next section iv on Health and Welbeing) on children (e.g. BBC refers to 'stress hormone cortisol' – see **Fig 3**)[6] but also the role of technology on their educational and learning experiences, whether

Education | School Report

Ban phones and tablets before school, parents urged

🕓 5 June 2015 | Education & Family

Screen use is said to raise the levels of stress hormone cortisol

(Fig 3) BBC's Education section. Source: http://www.bbc.co.uk

it is the dropping of grades[7] or security flaws in education software packages.[8]
Raising awareness of these issues are also blogs which promote a reduced or technology-free educational approach for children. For example, one site states: "We are also trying to teach the kids and for them the number one thing to guard against is TV! It brings in a view of skewed reality, a "multiple choice" mindset instead of a rich and varied world. It brainwashes them with ads for junk toys and junk food"[9]

1.4. Health and Wellbeing
(tags: addiction, attention, boredom, brain development, distraction, emotions, health/harm to health, obsession, Spirituality vs technology, wellbeing, Email, Facebook, Internet, Mobile Phone, Smartphone, Devices)

The concerns over technology's effect on health and wellbeing are perhaps the most wide-spread, moving across all sectors – health, education, business, lifestyle, economy – and across various media texts. The concerns over health form two main, interrelated sub-categories: physical health, and spiritual health. The former includes concern over the physical (hormonal, neuro/brain development, chemical), emotional and psychological effects of technology and the digital, with reports on depression, distraction, obsession, addiction, and boredom. The latter includes more
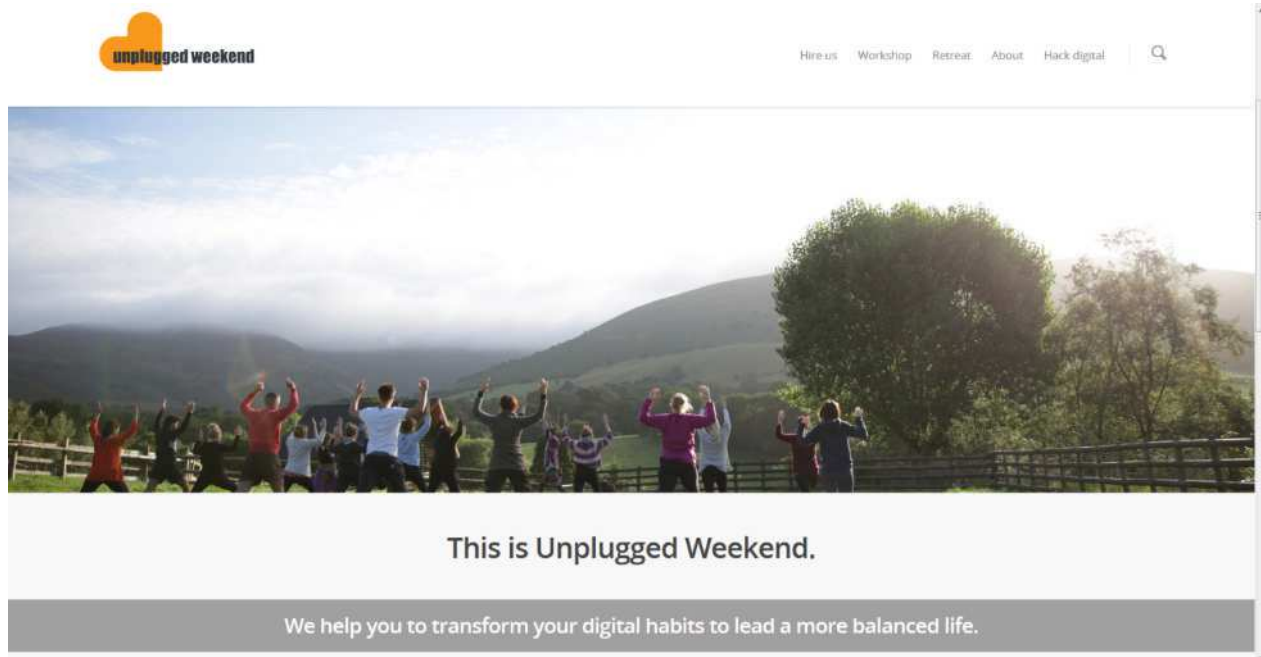
---

[6] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-33022500
[7] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/opinion/can-students-have-too-much-tech.html?_r=1
[8] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/09/technology/uncovering-security-flaws-in-digital-education-products-for-schoolchildren.html?emc=edit_tnt_20150208&nlid=40131980&tntemail0=y&_r=0
[9] http://www.sashasroots.com/simplicity.htm

spiritual and philosophical considerations, where the digital is perceived as having a negative effect on a person's spiritual balance, inner wellbeing, and the 'real self'. Both narratives lead to the same point, where the solution is digital disengagement by way of either reducing or trying to eradicating the body's contact with technology altogether: hence, fashionable terms like 'digital detox' and 'digital fasting'; organised events like 'National Unplugging Day'[10]; and even businesses which capitalise on this trend – 'cashing in on out smartphone addiction'[11] as David Gilbert for *International Business Times* states – offering holidays and nature retreats away from digital technology and communication (**Fig 4**).

(Fig 4). Businesses offer transformative digital-free experiences for a healthier life-style. Source: http://unpluggedweekend.com/

1.5. Finance and economy
(tags: Anti-tech, Digital labour, Neo-Luddism, Technophobia, Work-life balance, Email, Facebook, Internet, Mobile Phone, Smartphone, Devices)

Although less of a 'fashionable' motivation, one of the important concerns behind digital engagement relates to the financial costs of accumulating, updating and maintaining technologies. Some online discourses refer to this in terms of (over)consumption and materialism: here, those who resist technology are those who resist the idea of unnecessary consumption and a materialistic approach to life. For example, those advocating voluntary simplicity as a philosophical approach to living take a 'thoughtfully sceptical stance in relation to technology and science, rejecting those aspects which, all things considered, seem to cost more than they come to'. [12] There are also those who relate the over-consumption and materialism surrounding technology to capitalism, labour and politics. There is, for example, a large body of online material dedicated to promoting, reporting and the challenges/joys of being a Neo-Luddite:

---

[10] http://nationalunpluggingday.co.uk/
[11] http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/subbed-hold-video-digital-detox-cashing-our-smartphone-addiction-1488349
[12] http://simplicitycollective.com/start-here/what-is-voluntary-simplicity-2

Although I am a Millennial, I am a Neo-Luddite. The day I got my first cell phone was a day of embarrassment for me (a day I postponed as long as possible). Facebook is a necessary evil for promoting writing, an evil the worth of which I consider regularly. Ebooks and tablets are the devil incarnate and I would really love to break them all (T. Maloy).[13]

Running concurrently but from the other end of this anti-capitalist discourse on digital disengagement are concerns raised from businessmen and the 'capitalists' themselves: their concerns lie in the lack of productivity due to over-digital engagement, or the loss of business due to the lack of digital engagement (corporate Twitter).

1.6. Ecology and environment
(tags: Eco city, Eco house, Life style, Nature, Voluntary simplicity, Wildness, Digital footprint, Devices)

Eco-friendly houses and cities are better without smart technology

Happy, energy-efficient environments can be maintained without relying on smart meters, thermostats or electronic controls

What is a happy building? Our selection of 10 - in pictures

📷 The happiest homes are those that do not need constant energy regulation. Photograph: Hugh Nutt/Alamy

(Fig. 5) Counter-counter narrative of 'sustainable' eco-living? Source: http://www.theguardian.com

Digital disengagement seems to be a necessary part of discourses surrounding sustainability, ecology and environmentalism. Perhaps this is why there seems to be a correlation between digital detoxing and nature (see iv. Health and Wellbeing), nature is perceived as something that counteracts and is counter-intuitive to technology. In this manner, online discourse on digital disengagement is divided mainly into those concerned with: protecting nature from technology by avoiding clutter and over-consumption (see v. Finance and Economy); inhabiting nature and a 'natural' world to escape technology; and creating a sustainable environment, where technology and nature are not as oppositional but co-existent through compromise. Ironically, emerging from all this largely anti-technological discourse is an additional counter-counter discourse against those who consume and use technology to be environmentally conscious. For example, referring to the abundance of technology found in 'eco-homes' , *The Guardian* columnist Lloyd Alter states, 'Many people think that going green means putting in more insulation and more solar panels on the roof, more smart building controls and more ground source heat pumps. The aim is that we can be happy with uniform temperatures like we always had and save the planet too, all by throwing more green gizmos into our houses and buildings'.[14] Echoing similar sentiments, simple living blogger states, 'no matter how efficient or "green" [...] it will always create some waste, some expenditure of energy, some imprint left by extracting the resources needed to construct the product [...] no matter how green our technology,

---

[13] http://hellogiggles.com/a-neo-luddites-guide-to-surviving-the-21st-century
[14] http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/jun/10/eco-friendly-houses-and-cities-without-need-smart-technology

the human footprint on earth will inexorably expand. Better technology slows the pace at which this degradation occurs'.[15]

2. Living the disengagement

One of the key findings that emerged from the two interviews was that narratives of digital disengagement were selective and targeted specific devices (such as smartphones); or platforms (with negative attitude directed primarily towards Facebook, while accepting of even privileging other platforms). In the process, the designated functions and brand images of these devices and platforms were rejected. Digital disengagement is thus a selective process that is often partial and prompted by negative perceptions of technology and digital communication.

The other key finding was that instances and turning points in the experiences of digital disengagement were intertwined with, and shaped by other identities (as son/daughter/friend; as student or professional; as a single person without children, as gay/queer) and forms of connections and intimacies, suggesting that digital disengagement is a process, integrated into the fabric of social relations and life events.

And lastly, our interviews suggest that while digital disengagement is a conscious decision, it is far from being a one-directional, irreversible linear process. In fact, we found that both interviewees reversed their decision of digital disengagement – partially and fully – on multiple occasions depending on different times, spaces, devices and platforms. These decisions of reversal were often prompted by necessity and reveal that disengagement is a luxury. For example, both participants discussed the need to (re)connect for work purposes (job interview, job-related networking), or keeping in touch with relatives/friends who have moved away.

2.1. Rejecting the intended functions and branded images of devices and platforms

2.1.1. Facebook: the Un-social platform

Contrary to Facebook's self-branding as a platform designed to connect people (or in Mark Zukerberg's words, "to connect the world")[16], both our interviewees talked about Facebook as a source of stress, discomfort, or upset, as something that is opposed to social connection, rather than contributing to it. Luke[17], for example, described how the expectation to communicate via Facebook led to breaking down, rather than supporting or strengthening, personal relations and closeness with his boyfriend:

> He felt he had to communicate via Facebook and wanted me to interact with his friends on Facebook also. I didn't feel comfortable so I completely deactivated it […] I basically said to my boyfriend I'm not on Facebook, I deactivated it and that relationship ended because we didn't communicate as much because it had to be his way via technology and we couldn't speak on the phone it was like yeah, I'll message you on Facebook and oh you don't have Facebook and that kind of eroded away. I felt there wasn't enough communication…

Seeing the use of Facebook as a form of social pressure rather than a tool to "connect the world", Luke was also concerned about Facebook's invasion of privacy, or his lack of control over which information is shared and by whom. Similarly to Luke, Rachel objected to Facebook's control of her

---

[15] http://simplicitycollective.com/technology-and-simple-living
[16] http://www.businessinsider.com/mark-zuckerberg-to-connect-the-world-2013-9?IR=T
[17] All names have been changed

information, photographs and personal data. She had also expressed her distress with Facebook's culture of self-promotion, or the pressure it creates to communicate in a particular way. In the story of her two "Facebook lives" – one with her friends in the UK, another when she moved abroad, and connected to the local, non-English speaking community there – several themes emerge that capture Rachel's discomfort with Facebook. At the centre of this discomfort is the pressure to be social, and social in a particular, prescriptive way. She detests the "game" that needs to be placed, referring to popularity and" likes" which come to matter more than the actual content; criticises the culture of self-promotion, the destruction of real relations when they are replaced with stalking, and unwelcome insights into people's private lives, without real closeness. The most celebrated aspects of social networking – capturing and sharing meaningful moments of our life – are, in Rachel's view, a *fake* sociality, a communication that is destructive to true human connection:

> [y]ou know, the having to record everything you're doing on social networking and it having to be the thing that makes you look in the best light socially as possible. It feels totally fake to me and a problem, not just something which to me it's not just something that I can easily dismiss. I feel like it's creating values and attitudes which are destructive to human, genuine human connection and co-operation and what's important in life

Contrary to most current research on the *social* aspects of social media – the ways it connects people, shapes everyday interactions, social engagement and politics, our interviewees offer a different perspective, seeing Facebook as an un-social platform, one that is destructive to their social fabric, one that disconnects rather than connects them to other people and their own sense of humanity. In that respect, their disengagement from Facebook is akin to what Ben Light describes in *Disconnecting with Social Networking Sites* as "disconnective practice" (Light 2014). Further, their rejection of Facebook sociality, while acknowledging its dominance and the social pressure to engage with it, can be seen as a form of resistance, a "social media refusal" (Portwood-Stacer 2014) – or what Aristea Fotopoulou in her critique of "networked by default" describes as digital culture's "unwilling subjects" (Fotopoulou 2014; see Ahmed 2010 for the original concept of unwilling subjects).

2.1.2. Smartphone: the Un-locative media

Rachel's story was a story of two disengagements: a break up from Facebook which was instant and dramatic, and a change in her relations to her smartphone. Rachel gradually changed her use of smartphone from extensive (long conversations, watch and alarm clock, texting and social networking) to emails, short calls and GPS. Having been "sucked into a deal" by a mobile phone company, and hating the experience of having a touch screen and numerous apps, Rachel gradually shifted towards talking primarily on landline, using her phone for very short calls, and to "keep on top" of her study-related emails. Rachel's objection to smartphone revealed an opposition to the physical experience of talking on a smartphone which "caused burning in the ear", but most interestingly, showed how the *smart mobility* of the smartphone was the key cause of disengagement. She decided to keep the phone because of Google maps, which she needs when driving, because she didn't own, and objected to having, a satnav. The story of the digital quickly becomes the story of movement in space. For Rachel, satnavs "detract from your attention, your own sense of orientation", whereas Google maps are empowering and orienting: "I'd much rather look on Google maps before I drive somewhere, figure out what, visualise the route, make little notes, stick them to my dashboard".

What emerged from Rachel's comparison of satnav and Google maps is the role of mobile phones as locative media, both in the sense of identifying, or tracking one's location, but also more broadly, in the sense of how one's relation to the environment, and one's movement in space, is mediated by

digital devices. The recent body of scholarship on locative media and emplacement (Pink and Hjorth 2012, De Souza and Sheller 2014) points out to the ways in which mobile phones can heighten one's perception of the environment, one's attention to everyday sounds or sites. The can facilitate "emplaced visuality" and "geospatial sociality", to use Pink and Hjorth's words: "users are creating new forms of intimate publics whereby the importance of network pales into insignificance in comparison with the interweaving of socialities, materialities and the digital in providing ambient contexts" (2012: 153). Emplaced visuality, here, is about the merging of human and digital way of seeing, both aesthetically and physically, when the person sees and feels the world through the lens of their mobile camera. And mobile sociality with the smartphone in the palm of one's hand is often described as inhabiting two places – the material and the digital – simultaneously (and we would add, also inhabiting two sets of eyes), creating a hybrid space of integration and augmentation [add on Elisa and mobile Instagram].

Rachel's story, on the contrary, is a story of cognitive dis-placement and emotional detachment, caused by the locative technologies. Reflecting on what she sees as a misleading sense of ease, generated by satnav, Rachel notes that satnav is "detracting from your relationship with your spatial environment which is key when you're driving". She would still use her smartphone's GPS location service, if she is lost while driving, but only to re-position herself on the map, to "understand where I am, spatially". In that respect, Rachel's changing use of smartphone, and her rejection of its locative functions (while still using it is a map, but a static, not a mobile one), reconstitutes smartphones and satnavs as un-locative media, one that is destructive to the very "geospatial sociality" it aims to facilitate.

2.2. Digital disengagement and other identities

In both interviews, digital disengagement was intertwined with various social identities. Rachel, for example, talked about her desire to separate her work and her professional identity from her private life; contrary to the prevalent image of today's professional who can work from anywhere as long as there is an Internet connection, Rachel describes work-related Skype interview as "disastrous" : "I had a second interview with the Managing Director and I was one minute in my pyjamas, the next minute in a job interview, you know. I just put some clothes on to look professional but I was still in my bedroom." The blurring of work and leisure (or "playbour", Scholz 2013), often welcomed by many professionals and actively promoted by the digital industry, is seen by Rachel as an invasion into her life.

Personal circumstances, choices and life experiences were frequently discussed in relation to the decision to digitally disengage. Rachel talked about the unwanted, forced proximity to people's intimate lives, brought on by Facebook, and the pain it can sometimes cause – as for example, when a single, childless woman sees endless baby pictures of her friends. And for Luke, the disengagement from Facebook runs parallel with his coming out and integration into an LGBT community. Luke's digital disengagement occurs because of a double-edged fear of the digital public-isation of both himself as a private citizen against risk, surveillance, fraud and deception, and as a semi-closeted student 'having to hide stuff at the age of 18' from 'other family members who are quite homophobic and had different ideas'. He thereby begins to manage his use of social media 'more explicitly' and even disengages from Facebook altogether in order to come out to his parents:

> So yeah, I came out to my parents in my own time without the need for Facebook. A lot of my friends who were gay, came out on Facebook, made this big speech, made a lot of friends and whatever, but I felt that it weren't appropriate for me so yeah my Facebook journey ended there.

Now I don't communicate on Facebook at all.

Luke's story of digital disengagement, as it unfolded in the interview, was a story of queer resistance to normativity, whether it's the normativity of compulsory heterosexuality, or that of compulsory Facebooking (and the increasing expectation to use it to facilitate the social process of coming out within LGBT culture). In that respect, it challenges the normalised vision of digital technologies – the Internet, and more recently social media – as inherently and necessarily liberating, and even necessary, for LGBT people and communities (O'Riordan and Philiphs 2007). And Rachel's story challenges the notions of digital intimacy as always and necessarily positive and desirable (Raun 2012, Sirisena 2012). Continuing the theme of Facebook as an un-social media, what we see here are the ways digital disengagement is tied to specific identities - as a single or coupled person, as a professional, as LGBT – and intertwined with significant life course events.

2.3. When digital disengagement is an unattainable luxury

What emerged from both interviews is the non-linear character of digital disengagement – its degree was fluctuating according to circumstances. Rachel, for example, described that six month after leaving Facebook, she felt "out of touch" and joined Twitter, not to socially connect to others but to read news and stay up to date with the information that interested her. Luke, similarly, charts his fluctuating use of various platforms – Skype, Whatsapp, Twitter, email - as he moves out of his parents' home and goes to study, as he develops and breaks intimate relations, and as he starts working.

Crucially, both Rachel and Luke describe instances where the use of devices and platforms they would prefer to disengage from is forced on them, by the external demands to be constantly available and productive. Rachel, who almost ceased using her smartphone, cannot afford not being constantly digitally available: "I realise that now I'm doing a PhD, I need to be able to read my emails and keep on top and perhaps write a few while I'm out and about". Similarly, Luke, as a university student, could afford digital disengagement as a means to relieve boredom, but once he is employed as staff within the same institution, he quickly discovers that he must re-engage with technology and social networking for professional reasons:

> We kind of got encouraged to by our manager and project leader to be engaging with these technologies and they said we could use the company branded, the institution branded twitter. And you know if you find anything interesting please do get tweeting. And you know, any networks of you know, of any academics or anyone else please add them and try and get work.
> […]
> In my job role now in the university I've noticed amongst the staff people like to engage, especially students like to engage with people's twitter and use it as a communication tool […] It was so much so that I had one student say to me in front of the whole class "Why are you not on twitter?" and do I have to be on twitter, and no we'd like you to engage more and speak to you more. Well you know there is office hours. Here is my email address. And people were resistant of that kind of formal communication..

The forced re-engagements that both interviewees mention, and the overall sense of shifting *limits* to digital refusal, point to one crucial aspect of digital disengagement: its social, professional and economic cost. Whereas we may question whether one indeed *need* to be constantly able to check their emails, or use Twitter to engage clients and students (the institutional culture that perpetuates this "need" is complicated and challenged by Wajcman 2014; and the overall culture of "digital solutionism" is poignantly criticised by Morozov 2013), what is important to bear in mind is that

being digitally available is a core demand in contemporary digital economy. Opting out of the capitalist circle of digital availability is, as Trebor Scholz notes, a "rare privilege" which reminds us of the overall violence of digital participation where "the engagement of users is not entirely voluntary" (2013:8).
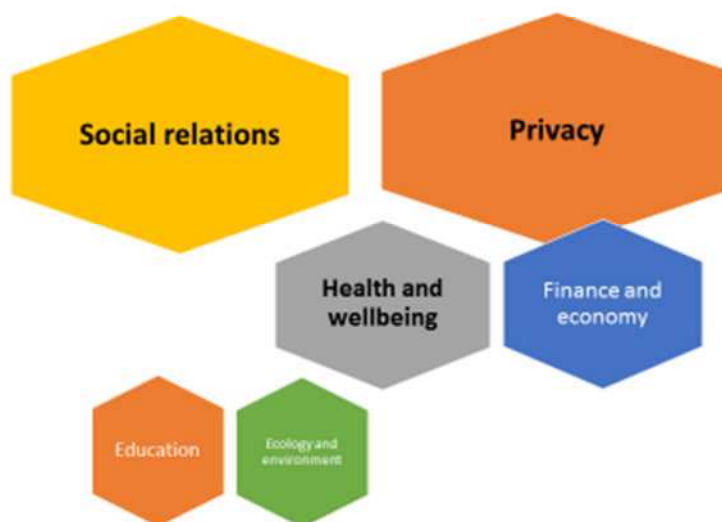
Key issues
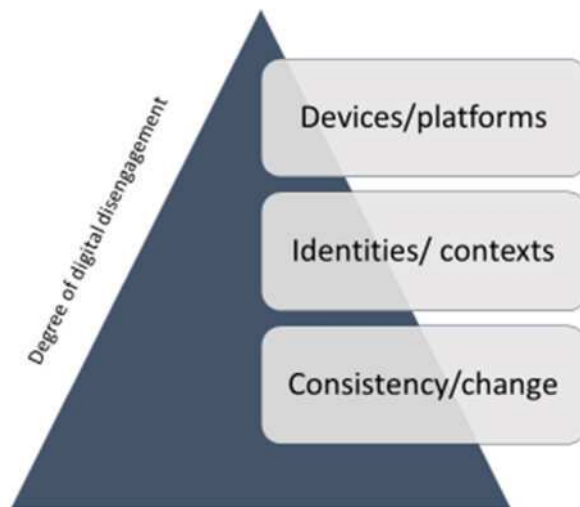
1. Digital disengagement: a preliminary typology

Our analysis of web-based materials revealed six main motivations/drives to disengage: privacy, social relations, education, heath and well-being, finance and economy, and ecology and environment. Only four of these figured in our interviews: social relations and privacy were pivotal to the decision to disengage, while and finance and economy, and health and well-being were mentioned in a few instances, but were not as central (see Figure 6).

Our analysis of web-based materials and interviews also pointed to different degrees of disengagement, both in terms of duration (disconnecting for a defined period of time, "unplugging" for one day, or leaving a platform or a device entirely), and in terms of intensity of use (from none at all, to a little, to occasional, to frequent). As the interviews reveal, the degree of disengagement depends on devices and platforms; identities and contexts; and is rarely consistent and linear, fluctuating according to circumstances and external demands (see Figure 7).

Further questions: How are other concerns (education, ecology, health) narrated and negotiated? What are *their* degrees, and what do such degrees depend on?

(Fig. 5) Six main motivations for digitally disengagement

(Fig. 7) Degrees of digital disengagement

2. Digital disengagement: the metaphors

Our analysis of web-based materials and interviews yielded several metaphors, as outlined below.

- Digital detox
- Refusal
- Retreat from the digital
- Switching off
- "Techno-fast"
- Unplugging
- Voluntary simplicity
- Withdrawal
- Emotional disengagement
- Disappearing off (Facebook)

Future questions: What can such metaphors of digital disengagement teach us about everyday relations with digital communication technologies and platforms? What can they tell us about current culture perceptions of disengagement? (as resistance, as healing, as self-imposed limitation, as relief?)

3. Digital disengagement as continuum and a paradox

Both the online data and the interviews suggest that digital disengagement is never solely a question of simply switching on and off in a permanent manner. From the paradoxical nature of bloggers who go online in order to write about their digital disengagement, to the two interviewees who

conflictingly disliked Facebook but felt Twitter was acceptable, our primary material instead reveal that digital disengagement happens across a continuum of time-space, devices and platforms. Individuals engage and disengage simultaneously, often in conflicting ways, which are either managed without effort or experienced as tensions in life: hence the countless of 'how to survive' guides for those who dislike technology but must use it, to both interviewees who gave us accounts of going on- and off- lines depending on their social, geographical, emotional and personal situation.

Herein lies the paradoxical nature and one of the central concerns of digital disengagement: disengagement involves the conscious decision to withdraw – physically, emotionally, socially and so on – from certain normative spaces and forms of sociality and behaviour, whilst also having the ability to negotiate one's connection to and through technology. And such ability is limited by social, economic and institutional forces.

Further questions: How are these paradoxes negotiated (or resolved) on the day-to-day basis? How are they managed institutionally? What are the possibilities of digital refusal and resistance, given that (a) the participation in the digital economy is not entirely voluntary (b) communicating such resistance often relies on the very tools and platforms that are being resisted

4. (Anti)Digital citizenship and everyday resistance

There is a strong connection between digital disengagement and the idea of everyday resistance, whether it is practiced in an organised and collectively conscious way – such as the environmentalists, refusniks, members of the voluntary simplicity movement as revealed from the online material – and/or in an individual way, as evidenced by the interviewees' accounts, or the countless of journalists and individual bloggers who advocate, offers tips and report on digital resistance. What is important to note is that these practices of digital disengagement occur in the everyday, and thus do not necessarily fit into modes of organised citizen protest. Rather, they challenge, from below, the very normative assumption of participatory citizen culture as networked, and the vision of the overall societal future as necessarily digital.

Nor is this resistance limited to the sphere of digital exploitation, "digital labour" and profetisation of social media and on-line communication –the main area where digital refusal is currently being discussed (Fotopoulou 2014, Portwood-Stacer 2014, Scholz 2013). Instead, the range of motivations mapped in this project, and the continuum of disengagement practices we began mapping, suggests the need to further explore the *multiple and intersecting* menaces of the digital as they are perceived by everyday users and ordinary citizens. Such exploration would enrich our understanding of the complexity of citizens' digital refusal – as a trendy life style choice, as a form of everyday resistance, as a limited privilege, or as a right.

Further questions: How does digital resistance vary according to motivation? Do some motivations lead to more individualised, everyday forms of resistance, versus organised protest and collective actions? What are the limits of citizens' resistance to the digital, and what are the ways to support it?

Next steps

The main next step is preparing the proposal for a large study of digital disengagement (one funding application is currently being finalised, and other funding possibilities are being explored), following the key issues and "further questions" outlined above.

The preparation for expanding our current findings works on two levels: first, to carry out a large-scale empirical study of digital disengagement, which would include a cultural analysis of policies around digital engagement; alternative discourses of engagement and disengagement; interviews with those who profess to digitally disengage; and ethnographies of disengagement events and groups. Secondly, to expand the study into a comparative, international dimension, by addressing the phenomenon as it occurs in different countries and contexts. In addition, venues for public engagement are also explored, in hope to create and sustain a network of researchers, practitioners, policy makers and community activists to re-evaluate the role of digital and mobile technologies, fostering and developing alternative forms of citizen engagement and community connection.

Impact

Since this project is a concept exploration, the impact at this stage is limited, and is likely to occur primarily as the outcome of the larger study, for which the seed project is preparing. The expected areas of impact include:

- contribution to scholarly knowledge and theoretical innovation
- engagement with the community to address issues of digital freedom and coercion and explore the possibilities of digital refusal; and to test and develop strategies for engagement in education, citizenship and community life, where the use of digital technology is a right and a choice, but not a necessity
- engagement with policy makers around the notion of "digital by default" and digital disengagement as citizen right

Dissemination

The main dissemination venue, at this stage, is the final report; a presentation at the "Citizen-D" CCNetwork+ annual event in September 2015; and a journal article in preparation for *New Media and Society.* An additional conference presentation will take place at the "Technology and Intimacy: Choice or coercion?" conference, Salford Media City, September 2016, with conference application scheduled for December 2016. Finally, two knowledge exchange and consultation events are planned for 2015-16, to discuss the initial findings with academics and community members. The first event will target academics and will take place at MMU, at its recently established "Digital Transformations" network, as part of the network's activities around digital citizenship. The second event, likely to take part in early-mid 2016, would target community members and non-academic participants.

Funding

The PI is currently preparing an application for the Leverhume Trust, to support a full-time three year study of digital disengagement by a team of several researchers and a postgraduate student. The current team is also in the process of establishing international connections, to facilitate a joint application for European and international funding, to expand the study into a comparative international investigation.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the two interviewees for their time and efforts, and for telling us their stories.

References

Ahmed, S. (2010) *The Promise of Happiness,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

De Souza, A. and Sheller, M. (2014) *Mobility and Locative Media: Mobile Communication in Hybrid Spaces,* New York and London: Routledge.

Fotopoulou, A. (2014) "Digital and networked by default? Women's organisations and the social imaginary of networked feminism", *New Media and Society,* 1-17

Helsper, E.J & Galacz, A. (2009) Understanding the links between digital engagement and social inclusion in Europe. In A.Cheong & G. Cardoso (Eds) *World Wide Internet: Changing Societies, Economies and Cultures*. Macao University Printing House: Taipa (Macau).

Helsper, E.J. (2009) *Digital disengagement by disabled people*. British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) research report.

Light, B. (2014) *Disconnecting with Social Networking Sites,* Palgrave: London.

Morozov, E. (2013) *To Save Everything, Click Here: Technology, Solutionism, and the Urge to Fix Problems that Don't Exist,* Penguin.

O'Riordan, K. and Phillips, D. (eds.)(2007) *Queers Online: Media technology and sexuality*, New York: Peter Lang.

Olphert W. and Damodaran L. (2013) Older people and digital disengagement: a fourth digital divide? *Gerontology*. 2013;59(6):564-70

Pink, S and Hjorth, L (2012) *"*Emplaced cartographies: reconceptualising camera phone practices in an age of locative media", *MIA (Media International Australia) Incorporating Culture and Policy: quarterly journal of media research and resources*, no. 145, pp. 145-155.

Portwood-Stacer, L. (2014) "Care Work and the Stakes of Social Media Refusal", *Critical Personas,* http://www.newcriticals.com/care-work-and-the-stakes-of-social-media-refusal/prin

Ragnedda, M. and G. W. Muschert (eds) (2013) *The Digital Divide: The Internet and Social Inequality in International Perspective*, Routledge

Raun, T. (2012) "DIY Therapy: Exploring Affective Self-representations in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube", in Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kuntsman (eds.), *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*, Basingsoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Scholz, T. (2013) "Introduction: Why Does Digital Labour Matter Now", in Scholz. T. (ed.), *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, Routledge: New York and London.

Sirisena, M. (2012) "Virtually Yours: Reflecting on the Place of Mobile Phones in Romantic Relationships", in Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kuntsman (eds.), *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*, Basingsoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Wajcman, J. (2014) *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.