Mindfully Scrolling: Rethinking Facebook After Time Deactivated

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Abstract
Many people express concern that Facebook’s users are overly connected. This article examines responses to survey questions asked after a large random sample of American Facebook users had been paid to deactivate Facebook. We find a recurring discourse of mind including, for example, references to mindfulness. Using iterative qualitative coding, we ask what meanings and practices are invoked in this discourse. Furthermore, we critically assess the potential of what respondents describe to address the problems of overconnection. We find explicit awareness of the automaticity of use, the value and content of Facebook, and how it makes users feel. We find that users came to practice disconnection at many nested levels of vernacular affordances. Ultimately, we argue that Facebook has become a landscape trap, altering daily life such that individual practices, such as mindful scrolling, cannot overcome the overconnection problems it may create. Mindfulness in this discourse may be power, but it is power to avoid elements of Facebook, not power to transform it.

Keywords
Facebook, mindfulness, techlash

The Problem of Overconnection
Scholars, critics, and lay people alike voice concern that people are too connected to digital media. A “techlash,” led in part by founders of technology companies, has many inside and outside Silicon Valley questioning technology’s impact on wellness and instituting screen limits for their children (e.g., Homayoun, 2018). The hunger for help managing the demands of connective platforms, apps, and devices can be seen in books with titles like Mindful Tech: How to Bring Balance to Our Digital Lives (Levy, 2016), How to Break Up With Your Phone (Price, 2018), and The Power of Off: The Mindful Way to Stay Sane in a Virtual World (Colier, 2016). There are built-in apps, such as the iPhone’s “Bedtime” and “Screen Time” modes, and downloadable apps (with names like Disconnect, ShutApp, and Screen-Free). There are t-shirts, mugs, and countless other objects extolling the value of disconnection available for purchase (Jorge, 2019). In a sign of the fashionability of these concerns, a prominent American drug store now sells nail polish in colors named “wire-less is more,” “press pause,” and “gadget-free.”

This article presents data collected through an experiment in which a large nearly-representative sample of American Facebook users were paid to deactivate for either two 24-hr periods or one 4-week period (Allcott et al., 2020). We focus on participants’ descriptions of how time away from Facebook affected their understandings and use of the platform if and when they returned. We identify an emergent discourse of the mind, which we analyze for its potential and limitations in solving the problem of overconnection. Awareness, we show, may bring power, but it is power to avoid, not to transform. The problem of overconnection exceeds any one device or platform, but, given its dominance, Facebook is “the social media platform often referred to when issues of disconnection arise in media and popular culture” (Karppi, 2018, p. 19). We might be wary of generalizing findings about Facebook to other platforms (Kuru et al., 2017), yet with nearly a third of people on the planet logging into Facebook at least once a month (Cooper, 2018),
even on its own terms, the problem of perceived overconnection to Facebook matters.

Previous research demonstrates that the consequences of social network sites for any given individual depend on how they are used (Burke & Kraut, 2016). Research on Facebook shows users appreciate and sometimes rely on Facebook’s continuous provision of social connection, shared identities, photographs, information, social investigation, entertainment, social network surfing, status updating, and group communication for work, school, and social life (Baumer et al., 2013; Joinson, 2008; Kuru et al., 2017). Nonetheless, Facebook takes a toll. Levy (2016) points to “the constant play of low-level emotions—such as anxiety, frustration, and anger that arise as we check email or Facebook” (p. 34). Baym (2018) describes social media use as dialectical since people must work continuously to find balance within platforms designed to push always toward more engagement. To find this balance, people may seek to disconnect, either by leaving platforms entirely or through a range of disconnection practices (Light, 2014).

Most studies of disconnection collect data from people who have already chosen to leave a platform or who are using it as they normally do. Some look at what people experience when their connection is disrupted through force of course assignment or research study (e.g., Kaun & Schwarzenegger, 2014; Roberts & Koliska, 2014). The people in Allcott et al.’s experiment left not for the leaving, but for the money, perhaps offering a clearer window into what Facebook—and leaving it—mean for the majority of American Facebook users who, despite whatever complaints they may have, keep using it. Indeed, most, though not all participants in this study, returned to Facebook when the study ended. Although Americans represent only one slice of the world’s Facebook users, participants in this study are also unusual in studies of disconnection in that they are demographically representative of any slice.

Allcott and his collaborators forced disconnection to assess how leaving Facebook affected subjective well-being, online and offline activity, news knowledge, and political polarization. They found that those who spent 4 weeks without Facebook reported reduced online activity, more offline activities such as solitary television viewing and socializing, reduced factual news knowledge and political polarization, higher subjective well-being, and they were more likely to report using Facebook less after the experiment. In collaboration with Allcott et al., we helped shape open-ended questions in their final survey. We were also able to review their open-ended data and conduct follow-up interviews with some participants.

As we will discuss below, study participants often invoked a discourse of the mind. Forced disruption makes visible what has been taken for granted in an ambient media environment (Kaun & Schwarzenegger, 2014). In this case, what was made visible was often framed negatively. This comment was typical:

Now I realize how much time I spend on it and how much time is not spent productively but rather wastefully. I catch myself mindlessly clicking on the icon on my phone even after I just got out of it. I am trying to be more mindful of how much time I spend using it. (Participant 23355)

Participants’ unprompted discourse of mindless, wasteful Facebook use in contrast to mindful Facebook use (or non-use) that fosters productivity resonates with the de-spiritualized version of Buddhist mindfulness that has diffused into Western life, and with its specific application to technology (e.g., Gregg, 2018; Rauch, 2018). Its appearance in these responses shows how this discourse has made its way from books, apps, workshops, and training modules into at least some Americans’ popular consciousness. Our primary goals in this article are (1) to discursively investigate what meanings and practices people invoke when they use this language of mind and (2) to critically assess the potential of the practices they describe to solve the problems of overconnection.

Mindful Disconnection

The Western rise of a discourse of mind and attention, tools for “mindfulness,” and mindful or intentional technology use are responses to perceived negative consequences of automaticity. Bayer et al. (2016) define automaticity as behavior that is habitual, impulsive, inattentive, unaware, and out of control. Sometimes digital automaticity is understood as preconscious, and thus requiring behavioral retraining, other times it is seen as a matter of conscious, voluntary digital disconnection (Guyard & Kaun, 2018). In both cases, automaticity is cast as a problem individuals must learn to manage. Automatic behavior is often triggered by situational and mood cues, such as waiting or boredom (Oulasvirta et al., 2012). The tactile comfort of touching and scrolling a mobile phone makes them particularly prone to automatic usage (Oulasvirta et al., 2012). Oulasvirta et al. (2012) found that Facebook was one of the strongest of mobile phone habits, describing the platform as a “reward-based application” that provides constant stimulants in the forms of new notifications, content, likes, and comments (see also Rauch, 2018). As technological processes of liking, commenting, and retweeting have become mechanistically embodied in buttons (see Burgess & Baym, 2020), they have become even more habitual, producing ways of acting which are both voluntary and involuntary, conscious and unconscious (Karp, 2018).

The interrelated but distinct approaches to technology use that use words such as “mindful,” “conscious,” or “slow,” share several common ideas. Everyone makes “moment-to-moment microdecisions” about “what to pay attention to, what to ignore, and how to manage the thoughts and feelings, the bodily movements, postures, and breathing that inevitably accompany these decisions” (Levy, 2016, pp. 21–22). These microdecisions “weave the fabric of our days” (Levy,
Mindfulness may originate from Buddhism, but, as Rauch (2018) and Gregg (2018) trace, it has lost much of its spiritual dimension in its journey West. The Buddhist context that emphasizes transcendence and renunciation of worldly pleasures has become “a secular one where people seek practical insight, therapeutic benefit, and pleasurable engagement” (Rauch, 2018, p. 97). American mindfulness has nonetheless retained its moral loading. The practice may no longer aspire to Buddhist ideals of self-erasure, but to Protestant ideals of individual productivity as the route to salvation (see Lim, 2020).

Mindful technology use is often associated with disconnecting from the devices and social media that have become “a dominating nuisance interfering in our lives” (Karppi, 2018, p. 4). Disconnection can mean quitting a platform. In studies, most who quit Facebook do not stay away. Baumer et al. (2013) found that the people they studied had left Facebook because of concerns about addiction, privacy, data handling, banality, and distraction from productivity, yet fewer than a third left permanently. Disconnection can also take the form of a temporary break. Levy (2016) finds in his workshops that those who temporarily unplug from social media report experiencing increased productivity, better time use, more relaxation, and less stress.

Disconnection can also be seen in everyday “disconnective practices” that make and remake relational boundaries (Light, 2014). Among the many disconnective practices cited in existing work are unfriending, single-purpose use, having someone else change your password, using browser add-ons, changing settings, anonymizing a profile or deleting an app from a phone (sometimes not realizing this was not the same as deleting an account from a platform), hiding devices, consuming content, and mindfully noticing triggers and pausing (Baumer et al., 2013; Brubaker et al., 2014; Levy, 2016; Light, 2014).

In each of these cases, users rely on the affordances (unfriending, limiting engagement, passwords, add-ons, settings, deletion, etc.) of platforms, apps, devices, and beyond to limit their engagement. To disconnect is thus to exploit “the connective affordances” of the very platforms from which people wish to distance themselves (Light, 2014, p. 17). Although often discussed as design features, affordances are also perceptual, resulting from a combination of those material qualities and the particular possibilities people understand them to offer (Gibson, 1977). McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) use the term “vernacular affordances” to describe how people speak about affordances. They find that “affordances are made sense of in and through practice,” that they are seen “as nested layers at different levels of scale [that are experienced] in relation to a complex ecology of other tools with other affordances,” and that “sometimes affordances are invoked strategically as ‘choices’ and other times as ‘constraints’” (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015).

For individuals, disconnective practices are essential to well-being and sometimes to safety. But from the perspective of a platform, disconnection poses an existential threat (Karppi, 2018). Should everyone disconnect, no business remains. The threat of disconnection is therefore integral to “the politics of the platform and the attempts to maintain and manage the bonds it constantly creates and renews” (Karppi, 2018, p. 104). Anticipating user disconnection, “savvy” designers “take advantage of compulsion loops that make it hard for people to stop using media” (Rauch, 2018, p. 81), creating notifications, likes, and so on in addition to algorithmically privileging more “engaging” content. Facebook also gives users “social lubricants” such as muting and unfriending that make it easier to stay on Facebook. Disconnective practices can thus become ways of using the platform as intended rather than strategies of resistance (Light & Cassidy, 2014).

Facebook also fights disconnection with ubiquity, reaching well beyond the borders of its app and URL (Karppi, 2018). Its business model is predicated on becoming “thoroughly integrated into the fabric or everyday life for as many people as possible, to the extent that they cannot imagine life without it and thus do not think to question its presence in their lives” (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 1047). Its login is essential to accessing many other sites, services, and platforms. Its like and share buttons drive a “like economy” throughout the web (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Brick and mortar restaurants and stores urge customers to like their Facebook pages to receive coupons and discounts. Paradoxically, the more people engage in disconnective practices, the harder the platforms work to insert themselves into their routines (Karppi, 2018).

Methods

Allcott et al. (2020) conducted their research during the 2018 US midterm elections. Using ads on Facebook, they recruited US residents born between 1900 and 2000 who self-reported using Facebook for more than 15 minutes a day. A total of 2,684 people completed the entire experiment. This sample reflects the demographics of the US Facebook population (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age, education level, political ideology), although it skews slightly young, well-educated, and politically left. A control group of approximately 80% (N=2,104) were paid US$15 to deactivate Facebook twice for 24 hr and complete survey questionnaires. The remaining 20% (N=580), the treatment group, were paid US$102, in
addition to the US$15 received by all participants, to deactivate Facebook for 4 weeks. Deactivation was verified through an automated script that periodically checked to see if participants' Facebook profiles were available (they are not when deactivated).

Twenty-six days after the end of the deactivation period, a final survey asked questions such as “how has the way you use Facebook changed, if at all, since participating in this study?” and “in the periods in which your Facebook account was deactivated, you had extra time on your hands. How did you spend that extra time?” We analyze these responses. We also interviewed 21 people who had completed the experiment. Interviews did not raise dynamics beyond those identified in the survey responses, so we focus on the survey responses in what follows.

Our initial research question was how the experience of time away affected participants’ understandings and use of Facebook. We began by creating a dataset with equal numbers in treatment and control groups by matching each person in the treatment group with a demographically similar person in the control group. This left us with 1160 respondents. To identify preliminary themes, we ran a natural language processing analysis of the free-text responses of those 1160 respondents. In general, those in the treatment group wrote longer text responses about both positive and negative impacts of Facebook, suggesting that the time away gave them more insight into the platform whether they mentioned it explicitly or not. For all responses, we stemmed words (e.g., “changed,” “changes,” “changing” all become “chang”), filtered out stop words (such as “the,” “or,” “a”), then constructed all sub- phrases, or n-grams, of the responses that were one, two, three, or four words long. For each sub-phrase, we calculated how many times it appeared in each response.

This surfaced three common themes. Approximately 25% ($N=287$) said they were using Facebook less. Approximately 15% ($N=174$) said their use had not changed. As Allcott et al. (2020) found in the full sample, those who had spent 4 weeks away were more likely to say they used it less, while those in who had left for 24-hr periods were more likely to say their use had not changed. In addition, and not addressed by Allcott et al. (2020), approximately 18% ($N=211$) of our sample used words involving the mind to describe their time away from and return to Facebook. The sample for this study was anyone in the subsample of 1,160 who used mind words in their open-ended replies (e.g., “conscious,” “realize,” “aware,” and “mind”—a complete list of terms is in online Appendix I). Of those who used mind words, many were among those who said they now used Facebook less, but others said their use had not changed.

In the analysis we present below, we explicate this language of mind. While we selected participants for this study based on their use of a discourse of consciousness, what they reveal through that discourse is likely not limited to them. Many of the themes echo those in responses from those who did not explicitly use mind words. For instance, while one person may have said “I realized that the newsfeed makes me sad so I go straight to groups,” landing them in our subsample, another may have said “I go straight to groups,” leaving them out of our sample.

Demographically, these 211 people are nearly identical to that of both the 2,684 person sample in the experiment, and to American Facebook users, with the exceptions that both experimental samples were more likely to be under 30 and college educated. Approximately 40% of the 211 people using the language of mind had a household income below US$50,000, 52% had college education, 58% identified as female, 73% as White, 55% were under 30 years old, 13% identified as Republican and 45% as Democrat.

We coded the survey responses iteratively. First each of us read through the survey responses to identify phenomena repeated there. We then met to compare lists and derive an initial coding scheme. We then separated and tested how well the scheme was able to capture the distinctions between and repetition across replies. After several iterations, we coded responses into two categories: what they said they had gained awareness of (divided into seven subcategories) and how they said their practices had changed (broken into four subcategories corresponding to different levels of vernacular affordances). Most responses demonstrated multiple categories. These categories were checked against interviews to ensure we had not missed any further points.

**Awareness and Change**

Regardless of how long they had left Facebook, participants were considerably more likely to describe their time away as increasing their awareness than changing their practices. People who had left Facebook for brief periods were more likely to describe gaining new awareness than those who had been off for 4 weeks, while those who had left for 4 weeks were more likely to describe concrete ways their Facebook use had changed. This suggests that a brief time away may cause new ways of seeing things, but not create change, perhaps more so when the cause of disconnection is externally rather than internally motivated. Across the board, women in the sample were more likely to mention both awareness and practices than were men. Although one might expect that the language of the mind would vary demographically, aside from women’s general tendency to invoke it more, the discourse was otherwise similar across participants. Given this, we refer to the participants we quote with the ID number Allcott et al. assigned them. A table of their demographic information is in online Appendix II.

**Greater Awareness**

Nearly half ($n=96$) of the people who used language of mind described new awareness of the automaticity of their use. People in the control group were more likely to mention this than those in the treatment group. Just under a third ($n=63$)
described becoming more aware of Facebook’s value, both positive and negative. Other topics of awareness were far less common. Twenty mentioned their affective responses to Facebook. A few reported becoming more aware of their self-concept, either as affected by Facebook or as they viewed others and recognized how their own actions appeared (n = 5). Four described realizing that they depended on their Facebook login to use other sites. Tellingly, only one person explicitly mentioned gaining awareness of the content they themselves post.

**Automaticity**

When people described themselves as gaining new awareness of the automaticity of their behavior, they were usually negative. Looking at Facebook, especially scrolling through the newsfeed, was often described as “mindless.” “I notice more often when I’m mindlessly scrolling through my newsfeed,” Participant 869 wrote. “I realized how mindless it is and felt more positive when I wasn’t just checking it out of habit,” wrote Participant 1340. “It made me realize how addictive it is in my everyday life,” read one typical response (Participant 13966). As we will return to in our discussion of practices below, users sometimes realized that the sense of “addiction” they felt extended beyond Facebook. “I realized Instagram was my gateway drug to Facebook,” wrote Participant 674, “I would post on Instagram, connect it to Facebook, and like and respond to comments there. Omg it’s like I had a multi addiction to both . . .”

People often described realizing the time they spent automatically on Facebook was “wasted.” “I realize now how often I find myself endlessly scrolling and wasting time more than I had realized before the deactivation period,” wrote Participant 11631. Time away “makes me realize I waste a lot of time on it,” said Participant 1432. Some described realizing their phone was the problem: “Increased awareness of wasting time on phone. Overall, I’m spending less time and thinking about overall time on phone in general (mostly use Washington Post and NYTimes apps)” (Participant 539). Gregg (2018) writes that “one’s relationship to time is a primary means by which power is experienced” (p. 7). By labeling some of their practices as mindless wastes of time, people can both increase their sense of power in the face of Facebook and justify the ways they continue to use media as time well-used.

**Facebook’s Value**

Taking a break from social media has been associated with coming “to appreciate the benefits of both being offline and online” (Jorge, 2019). Participants in this experiment likewise spoke of becoming aware of Facebook’s value. Sometimes this was negative. People might say they “realized” “that there was nothing really missing if I did not use Facebook” (Participant 1123) or “that I actually don’t need Facebook and its benefit to me is negligible” (Participant 1201). A very few described something specific that turned out to have less value than they had thought. “Seeing updates on FB gave the illusion of being ‘friends’ with people, connecting with them and knowing what was going on,” wrote Participant 2459, “being deactivated made me realize how surface that is and not a lot of depth to it.”

Others, however, became more aware of what they gain from using the platform, sometimes pointing to pleasure, but more often pointing to engaging their communities, schools, and work. One respondent “realized how much I missed looking for events during the deactivation period” (Participant 18286). Another, Participant 10332, “realized how much Facebook is important to me academically. I follow many of my school’s programs’ Facebook pages through Facebook.” “I don’t miss spending more time on it,” said Participant 699, “but I am glad to once again have access to the parts that are useful in a practical sense (events sales group meetings etc.).”

Since Facebook simultaneously allows experiences both valued and disliked, it is not surprising that some people reported conflicted experiences of its value, mentioning in particular connections to friends and family. “I feel it’s sad technology has taken over people’s lives,” wrote Participant 2203, “however I do enjoy seeing people I know post updates about their lives. There are many people I probably would otherwise not be in touch with if I didn’t have Facebook.”

Shared photos were also mentioned as a reason to stay. “I have pictures stored on there that my family and others who were tagged in the pictures are not able to access since I’m still deactivated. If not for that I’m not sure I would even reactivate it. I miss keeping in touch with some people like medically fragile families I often pray for, but other than that I don’t miss much about it,” said Participant 2459. “I realize I can live without it,” said Participant 2067, “but the benefits are there. Digital photos for everyone and endless events for my kids.”

One person (Participant 18972), a Northern Californian who experienced both a mass shooting and a wildfire evacuation of her town during the deactivation period, found it difficult to be without Facebook during these crises. She put it like this:

I have been thinking about what lessons might be learned from my circumstance in this study, I was able to experience how Facebook can be used to connect others and share love and support during natural disasters and mass shootings. Facebook can promote depression and anxiety when one sees their “friends” posting all positive, happy, exciting stuff all the time. We know that a lot of that is a chain effect and people are doing it in response to seeing others. Bullying and shaming can happen on Facebook and cause anxiety and fear and depression. It too can be used to unite others. Like many things, Facebook can damage or enhance one’s wellbeing. It’s important that each person be aware of how Facebook affects him/her, what good he/she gets out of it, and what bad he/she gets out of it.
**Feelings, Emotions, Bodily Responses.** Observing one’s affective responses is essential to the practice of mindfulness; they are understood as signals that can be used to strategically guide behavior. For all the language of mind in these responses, relatively few described new awareness of their feelings. Those who did might mention “how little emotional/mental gain I get from the use of Facebook and how my use is primarily out of habit” (Participant 24062) or becoming “more aware of how it affects my moods and perception of the world around me and my life” (Participant 2322). “My attitude has changed regarding Facebook,” said Participant 2755, who came to understand that the platform made her feel worse when she already felt bad (noting, however, the transactional value Facebook continues to provide):

I realize I need to take time away occasionally especially when I feel sad or depressed. I do not need to know what my friends are doing at all times and I shouldn’t be comparing my life to theirs. I do appreciate the convenience of Marketplace to sell & buy things.

No one in our sample described new awareness of positive feelings.

**Content.** Few people mentioned becoming aware of what they see on Facebook, perhaps because they already knew it well. Given the study’s focus on politics, as well as its deployment during an important election, it is not surprising that those who did mention content tended to focus on politics. “I have noticed the political partisanship that Facebook has shown in our society, whether through friends or news pages,” wrote Participant 2164. Sometimes heightened awareness of content made people more critical of people they love. Participant 2628 spoke of “the realization that so many people I love are so unwilling to hear and comprehend real heartbreak from people who don’t think like them, and how nasty people can be when discussing politics.” However, becoming aware of content was not necessarily seen as bad. “I have become more aware of the echo chamber that I have created to reinforce my own beliefs (even if those beliefs are usually those backed by science and logical analysis),” wrote Participant 16041, who did not feel inclined to change behavior as a result (although he did add that “even though I didn’t feel I ‘wasted’ large amounts of time on Facebook, this activity has decreased further since the study”).

A handful of people mentioned becoming aware of other things. Five described seeing how it influenced their self-concepts. Facebook “can make you compare yourself to others” (Participant 14039). One decried “all the stuff I see that seems so positive and makes life look perfect that I might compare myself or my family to” (Participant 2459). Jorge (2019) describes an Instagram user who posted that during time offline they had discovered that “when you put your phone away you realize how much time everyone else is on theirs” which came up in our responses as well. Spending time off Facebook “staring at other people using their phones” led Participant 2203 to realize with some disdain “just how much everyone around me in my daily life uses their phone and Facebook” and how she must look to others when she does as well. Four people mentioned what one described as becoming “conscious of how Facebook has permeated my web use. I use it way too often to register for various sites and I’ve since stopped doing that” (Participant 1554). Finally, one person (Participant 12777) raised their own sharing practices, writing “I am a little more aware of what I share with others.” The infrequency of this response suggests the gap between realizing Facebook’s shortcomings and feeling empowered to change that through one’s own contributions.

**Practicing Consciousness**

Moving from awareness of disliked behavior to new behavior is not automatic. Describing changed practice was far less common than describing changed awareness. People who had been off Facebook for 4 weeks were more likely than those who disconnected briefly to describe specific ways their practices had changed. Disconnection requires perceiving affordances for boundary management. When people in this experiment discussed their conscious reconnection practices, they invoked affordances at multiple levels. We draw on McVeigh-Schultz and Baym’s (2015) analysis of vernacular affor- dances to frame the disconnection affordances participants described. McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) identify affordances at different levels of abstraction, including infrastructural components like WiFi and cell phone reception, devices like laptops and mobile phones, operating systems, platform classes, specific platforms and their mobile app components, system-wide features of an app, selectable features within an app (some of which existed across multiple platforms and others that were apps specific), and finally specific interaction modalities such as swipe, hold, or buzz that get taken up by particular modules or features within an app.

At decreasing levels of granularity, people returning to Facebook in this study described disconnecting through selectable features within the platform (n=20), system-wide features of the platform (n=23), and devices (n=6). They also discussed elements of their offline lives in much the same way they discussed media outside Facebook, so we collapse this into a category of “media/life ecology” (n=22). Very few report changing their own sharing practices.

**Facebook’s Selectable Features.** People (n=17) in this study described using Facebook’s affordances to consume content they like while avoiding content they do not like. They described going “in to check what I need” (Participant 182)
rather than scrolling. “I also am more selective about checking updates,” said Participant 699, “instead of just scrolling through to see who’s posted, if I have some free time I will check specific people by name and not waste my time on things that I don’t care much about.” Some went straight to people, others to pages, groups, and the like. One person might choose to “ignore news posts” (Participant 953), while another may: “change settings to remove spam and questionably sourced news from my feed. I have unfollowed people in order to make the feed more specific to my friends and family, and tried to eliminate lots of junk” (Participant 12460). Others do not filter their content, but use their affect as a check on when it is time to log off, writing “I get off as soon as I realize it’s stressing/aggravating/upsetting me” (Participant 11071) or “If I read something negative, I am judging that it is toxic and I close my Facebook app and do something else” (Participant 23074).

Only three described using Facebook’s affordances to change their own contributions, and these too focused on avoidance. “I am also less likely to feel compelled to ‘like’ everyone’s statuses,” said Participant 699. I have “been taking time to think when I see negative rhetoric to realize I should move along and not incite or continue a heated debate,” said Participant 2451. “I don’t use it to vent my problems,” said Participant 16954 before listing a variety of ways she avoids exposing herself to upsetting things on Facebook:

I realized how much less stressed I was without it. Now I avoid groups and have removed myself from groups or pages that bring me stress, and I have blocked/unfollowed people and pages I don’t like anymore. I saw how much more relaxed I felt without seeing different things in my face, and I am more willing to just cut people out of social media if they don’t add to my life.

**Facebook’s System-Wide Features.** People described changing their practices using Facebook’s system-wide features \((n = 23)\) to limit how often they accessed the platform \((n = 11)\) and how long they spent when they did \((n = 12)\). Some reported deleting the Facebook app from their phone. “I spend a lot less time on it now. I still haven’t put the app back on my phone,” wrote Participant 699, who included parenthetically that she “did re-add it to my iPad.” “I deleted the Facebook app and Instagram app on my phone and only keep Messenger,” said Participant 92188, since I manage a couple of Facebook pages I still have to check on it from time to time but on my laptop […] I pay attention more to how much time I use Facebook/social media each day.

The two other system-wide access-reduction strategies were to “log out without saving my password, so that it is a more conscious effort when I log in” (Participant 12460) and to turn off notifications “so I’m only inclined to go to Facebook when I think about it and not when my phone tells me to” (Participant 59796). “I only look at it when I choose to,” wrote Participant 526, “instead of being constantly bombarded with notifications of things I don’t care about.” Finally, people described setting limits on how long they exposed themselves to Facebook when they did log on, indicating they now checked only once or twice a day, or making a point of logging out rapidly when they did check in (e.g., “If I happen to log on to Facebook out of boredom, I usually close within 30 seconds because it’s not worthwhile” said Participant 539).

**Device.** In many of the responses we have seen already, people mention their phones—and their concerns about too much phone use—as part and parcel of their Facebook use. Devices affect people above and beyond the platforms they access through them, such that mobile Facebook use lends itself to becoming habitual and immersive (Kuru et al., 2017). Respondents wrote about using built in features of their devices such as “the Screen Time stats on my iPhone” (Participant 1191) to limit usage. In some cases, consciously limiting Facebook use involved not just staying away from the platform, but from the phone. As Participant 11691 put it, initially I did not access it as much as I had before the survey, but slowly my use increased though it did make it so that Facebook is not always the first app I open on my phone whereas before it was always the first app I opened. I am more aware of when I find myself uselessly scrolling through my Facebook feed and when I realize this, I close it and put my phone down.

Participant 67 reported that she and her husband had discussed the study and her “perception of its goals,” with the result that she now has “a ‘curfew’ in the evening after which I put away my smart phone.”

**Media and Life Ecology.** Finally, people reported changing their Facebook practices by drawing on other resources in their online and offline environments \((n = 22)\). This included actively substituting other activities for Facebook time \((n = 17)\), supplementing the news they see on Facebook with other sources \((n = 2)\) and, for some who had become aware of needing their Facebook login on other sites, separating their Facebook account from other social media accounts \((n = 3)\).

One way in which people reported changing their Facebook use was by using other social media instead, usually Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit. One participant described making sure to check email first and often opting to read rather than use Facebook. One described turning to Instagram and Snapchat and shifting from earning money through Facebook surveys to making money on Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participant 680 wrote,

I think I use it less or just don’t care as much. I did however start using Instagram and Pinterest more. I kinda like those platforms more because they’re visual and not so political. I didn’t realize how much of my information was coming from Facebook and how that was affecting my perceptions of the world and politics.
The thread of seeking news elsewhere recurred in the responses. “I haven’t spent as much time on Facebook,” said Participant 15770, “and I try to read articles on source websites. I realized that I have access to New York Times through the LA Public library so I choose to read articles that way.” “I’ve stopped completely!” enthused Participant 763, “It’s great. I waste so much less time. I have found ways to get my news and stay informed through Apple News.” This person continued, mentioning “I text people and use Facebook Messenger.” The common references to Instagram and Facebook ended up taking up a hobby so I do that more these days and I can go a whole day without getting on Facebook,” said Participant 108. During their time away from Facebook, several people reported spending more time with their children, partners, and pets. Others mentioned “productive” or “useful” activities like cleaning and studying.

People sometimes described substituting offline practices for Facebook time. Reading has already been mentioned. “I ended up taking up a hobby sewing so I do that more these days and I can go a whole day without getting on Facebook,” said Participant 108. During their time away from Facebook, several people reported spending more time with their children, partners, and pets. Others mentioned “productive” or “useful” activities like cleaning and studying.

In other cases, people began supplementing Facebook with other practices. “The way I use it has not changed,” wrote Participant 12527, however, I have since found several other sources for local news, police blotter/neighborhood activities, and I have realized nothing I read on Facebook is all that great in the first place; it’s just nice to have it all in one newsfeed, I guess.

The Mindful Trap

The idea behind mindfulness and other approaches to mind-based self-regulation is that awareness is power. We do see some of the participants in this study transforming their awareness into change that they feel better their lives. However, to the extent knowing your mind emerges as a form of power in this study, it is power to avoid. People spoke of avoiding bad feelings. They wrote about limiting their exposure to unpleasantness by culling friends, groups, and message types. They talked about avoiding the platform, spending less time with it, and even avoiding their phones. Barely anyone wrote about what they post, what they share, or how they contribute to the content of others’ experiences of Facebook through what they share or how they respond to what others post. We do not see any indications that the few changes enacted could change the experience of Facebook for others, let alone change Facebook itself.

Consciousness, even transformed into the kinds of practices described here, cannot aggregate into structural change. Individual minds cannot solve the technosocial conditions that lead to overconnection. From Facebook’s point of view, this is ideal. Facebook is structured to encourage “agnotology,” the cultural creation of ignorance (John & Nissenbaum, 2019). John and Nissenbaum (2019) write that Facebook’s “APIs leave us largely ignorant as to acts of disconnectivity such as unfriending, unlike, and so on” (p. 1). Users, they note, can know what they like but not what they unlike, who they friend, not who they unfriend or who unfriends them. “It is impossible to know what negative responses one’s social media activities have inspired among other people, such as causing them to hide a post or mute a conversation,” they write (John & Nissenbaum, 2019, p. 8). Were you Facebook friends with the participants in our study, you might never know they had realized anything, nor that they had changed their practices. “[The way I use Facebook] didn’t change at all,” wrote Participant 1859, “nobody noticed that I deactivated my Facebook account.”

Facebook’s Landscape Trap

Even when people find Facebook addictive, upsetting, and otherwise undesirable, they find it difficult to turn away. When they do, they are pulled back. Facebook provides genuine benefits and value, yet its power to entrap cannot be attributed entirely to its positive offerings. Seaver (2019) applies the anthropological concept of a “landscape trap” to listeners within music recommendation platforms. In a landscape trap, the environment has been designed so that once they enter the site, the “prey is already effectively caught.” He writes that “infrastructure is a trap in slow motion. Slowed down and spread out, we can see how traps are not just devices of momentary violence, but agents of ‘environmentalization’” (Seaver, 2019, p. 432). “To be caught at this speed,” Seaver continues, “is not to be dead, rather it is to be enclosed, known, and subject to manipulation” (p. 432).

In Facebook’s case, the ecological definition offered by Lindenmayer et al. (2011, p. 15887), may be a more apt metaphor. They define a landscape trap as that wherein entire landscapes are shifted into a state in which major functional and ecological attributes are compromised. These shifts in a landscape lead to feedback processes that either maintain an ecosystem in a compromised state or push it into a further regime shift in which an entirely new type of vegetation cover develops. Landscape traps are large-scale ecological phenomena that arise through a combination of altered spatial characteristics of a landscape coupled with synergistic interactions among multiple human and natural disturbances. Thus, changes in the frequency and spatial contagion of large-scale disturbances are the key interacting factors driving entire landscapes into an undesirable and potentially irreversible state (i.e., landscape trap).

When one sees how few people chose to remain deactivated in the Allcott et al. study, how few transformed awareness into change of practices, how many of the changed practices described worked around Facebook without challenging its structure or governance, and the extent to which even choices like spending more time reading or doing hobbies became ways of not using Facebook, it makes sense to see Facebook as having altered the landscape of everyday
life. Facebook is what Roberts and Koliska (2014) would call an “ambient media environment,” one that transcends the immediate location or moment of its use. “The study has made me realize how inconvenient it would be to get rid of Facebook for good,” wrote Participant 20848, “not that it is an actual possibility because of the way it’s set up.” Consciousness and mindfulness, no matter how diligently practiced, cannot save our landscape from the vegetation cover of Facebook. Disconnective practices may help people find balance in the trap, but it cannot set them free. The disturbances may already be irreversible.

**Authors’ Note**

This paper was conducted while all authors were at Microsoft Research. We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors wish to thank Hunt Allcott, Luca Braghieri, Sarah Eichmeyer, and Matthew Gentzkow.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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**Supplemental material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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