Ways of seeing digital disconnection: A negative sociology of digital culture

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Abstract
In this contribution, I do not engage in digital disconnection merely as an empirical phenomenon but as a way of seeing digital culture and as a heuristic. I do not ask whether or not digital disconnection is possible, is good or bad, or should be advocated or overcome. Instead, I adopt Eva Illouz’s framework of a negative sociology of social bonds to explore what it would mean to study digital culture from the perspective of negative choice. The conceptual framework is illustrated with three empirical cases that show what it would mean to engage in a negative sociology of digital culture. The shift in perspective from positive bonds to the choice to disengage, not use, or exit certain fora makes visible how digital culture is not only increasingly characterized by polarization, but also how disconnection emerges as a civic virtue that puts the individual user's responsibility at the forefront.

Keywords
Digital disconnection, negative bonds, negative sociology, digital culture, social media, COVID-19

Introduction
Media, regarded as representations and industries and deeply ingrained in our everyday lives, have from the outset been considered important for how we maintain relationships, build institutions, and social cohesion (Couldry, 2020; Murdock, 2018). Since the mid-2000s, these processes have increasingly been discussed as mediatization (for an overview, see Kaun, 2011; Kaun & Fast, 2014) that captures developments, including the growing importance of media to people in general (e.g., in the normalization of internet access, the spread of mobile phones, and the explosion of social media). Increasingly diverse research has considered the open-ended consequences of media for society beyond the nexus of production-text-audience since the 1980s (compare Couldry and Hepp, 2013). The field of media and communication studies has witnessed
new approaches to emerging power that recognize its reproduction in “huge networks of linkages, apparatuses, and habits within everyday life” (Couldry and Hepp, 2013: 194). Accordingly, Couldry and Hepp argue that the concept of mediatization makes it possible to study the consequences of media beyond simple media effects. Since around 2013, we have observed an increasing interest in the process of datafication that is defined as the conversion of all aspects of our lives into data (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier, 2013; van Dijck and Poell, 2013). In the context of datafied lives, digital disconnection has emerged as an empirical phenomenon that was first addressed as a pathology, a problem, or a shortcoming that needed to be overcome (Selwyn, 2003). Subsequently, it would be understood as a conscious choice linked to certain privileges that reinforce digital connection (Hesselberth, 2018) and as an impossibility in a world colonized by digital media and data (Bucher, 2020; Couldry and Mejias, 2019).

In this article, I do not engage in digital disconnection merely as an empirical phenomenon but as a way of studying—a way of seeing—digital culture, namely as a heuristic. I do not ask whether or not digital disconnection is possible, is good or bad, or should be advocated or overcome. Instead, I suggest digital disconnection as a perspective, a kind of negative sociology of digital culture. For example, instead of asking how we build connections in digital culture on both individual and societal levels, I suggest asking how we disconnect from individuals, groups, and society in digital culture. In other words, how do we make choices against social relations with the help of digital media? Ben Light (2014) has explored practices of disconnecting while using social networking sites, but my suggestion is broader and calls for rethinking some of the starting points of media and communication studies by means of a negative sociology of digital culture through digital disconnection. Drawing on Eva Illouz’s (2019) sociology of negative bonds and her diagnosis that modernity is increasingly characterized by “negative choice” (i.e., choosing not to engage and not to commit and adjusting choices on the go), I argue that digital disconnection can help us make sense of choices that contribute to both the sustenance and the dissolution of social relationships while being based on ideas of self-optimization and maximization of productivity and efficiency. Here, negative choice constitutes one way to reduce complexity and thus plays an important role on individual and societal levels.

The conceptual framework is briefly illustrated with three case studies that employ a negative sociology of digital culture and represent different levels of the heuristic, namely epistemology, ontology, and the politics of digital disconnection. It focuses first on practices of disconnecting from social media in times of societal crisis (epistemology), second on media at the margins in the prison context (ontology), and third on mediated temporalties that are out of synch with political activism (politics of digital disconnection). Through these examples, I aim to illustrate the shift in perspective from positive bonds and choices to engagement towards the choice to disengage, to not use, or to exit from certain digital fora. This shift makes visible how digital culture is increasingly characterized by polarization, as well as how disconnection emerges as a civic virtue that puts the responsibility on the individual user.

**Disconnecting from digital media: History, concepts, and practices**

In recent years, digital disconnection has gained a growing interest of media and communication scholars and can be viewed as contributing to the more general field of media non-use studies. This field also draws on historical forms of media refusal, such as television-free days (Syvertsen, 2020) or the rejection of vulgar literature in 18th-century Britain that Kirsten Drotner (1999) has explored. Similarly, the cinema was initially rejected as contaminating the public sphere (Drotner, 1999). Drotner argues that every new medium that has emerged has encountered initial pushback and moral
panic. Trine Syvertsen (2019) argues that we can distinguish among different media generations based on their love and hate for specific media. These love/hate relationships bring together and distinguish different groups in society from one another (Syvertsen and Elin, 2020). Countering the assumption that non-use is passive, Syvertsen furthermore shows that the avoidance of media is a laborious task that needs active work and is by no means something that just happens. On the contrary, Syvertsen argues that avoiding media requires media work. Media resistance and is paradoxically highly mediatized.

For the diverse forms of non-use that have been explored earlier, different terms circulate, describing related practices and phenomena. Hesselberth (2018) suggests distinguishing among technology non-use, media resistance, and media disruption. Media non-use is more closely related to the field of audience and reception studies and has emerged in the context of studying media technology use (Hesselberth, 2018). Media non-use refers to “individuals who intentionally and significantly limit their media use” (Woodstock, 2014: 1983). In contrast, media refusal, media resistance, and pushback include “negative actions and attitudes towards media [and] describe a refusal to accept the way media operate and evolve” (Syvertsen, 2017: 9). This form of refusal has collective components and goes beyond media non-use on the individual level. In contrast, media disruption discourses focus on strategies to shake up hegemonic conceptualizations of media ecologies (Hesselberth, 2018).

Digital disconnection, including digital detoxification (detox), thus concerns “disconnection from social or online media, or strategies to reduce digital media involvement” (Syvertsen and Elin, 2020: 1269). Based on a textual analysis of self-help books, memoirs, and websites on digital detox, Syvertsen and Elin suggest three dominant tropes of digital disconnection. First, digital disconnection is motivated by individual resistance and strategy against the temporal overload of 24/7 always-on connectivity. Second, this hyperconnectivity is connected to a loss of a sense of space and physical proximity and closeness that should be regained through digital disconnection. Third, digital disconnection counters the sense of a lost authentic self and body that emerges in connection with temporal overload and a lost sense of space. Syvertsen and Elin argue that these discourses on digital disconnection rest on and reinforce self-optimization, responsibilization, and commodification. Focusing on digital tools for digital disconnection, Alex Beattie similarly argues that digital disconnection forms a set of technologies of the self that open up heterotopian spaces of self-improvement (Beattie, 2020). Digital disconnection also becomes an important object of representing oneself on social media, as Ana Jorge (2019) shows in her analysis of Instagram posts on digital detox that link to tropes of regaining time and social relations. Such practices feed into lifestyle politics that are embedded in digital consumption patterns. Focusing on the epistemology of disconnection, Light (2014) argues that connection is only possible with disconnection. In the context of the partial non-use of certain features on social media (e.g., not liking, posting, or tagging), he argues that disconnection always emerges in conjunction with connection. Thus, rather than perceiving them as isolated phenomena, they should be considered part and parcel of digital culture.

Rather than approaching digital disconnection as an empirical phenomenon, Bucher (2020) asks for the ontological basis of digital disconnection, namely if there is actually anything to disconnect from when our presence is always already implied in digital infrastructures, whether we actively choose to use or not use them. She draws on the example of machine learning and increasing datafication that build increasingly and coercively on data by users, without the possibility to disconnect. The question remains: What forms of rejection or forms of negative choice tell us about the social world more generally?
Digital disconnection as a heuristic: A negative sociology of digital culture

The title of this article—Ways of seeing...—is borrowed from John Berger’s famous BBC series, Ways of Seeing, that documents the grammar of looking at and making sense of European art. Berger suggests that the way of seeing art tells us more about the current moment rather than the artwork itself, as “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (Berger et al., 1972). In a similar way, it is no coincidence that discourses on and practices of digital disconnection are currently emerging. They constitute an expression of a very specific way in which we relate to digital culture, and this specific way of (re-)producing and relating to digital culture lies at the center of the investigation in this article. Digital disconnection is an expression of hyperconnected modernity that is characterized by mediatization and datafication of the social world rather than a potential form of resistance against it. However, in my understanding, digital disconnection goes beyond forms of resisting against dominant media practices. Rather, digital disconnection emerges in conjunction with hyperconnectivity, not as a fundamental critique, but as a way to reproduce and sustain the social order that is increasingly built on digital technology, as discussed by Hesselberth (2018). Digital disconnection emerges as a form of negative choice, the decision to not use, participate, or contribute to digital platforms through user-generated content or just being there that is typical of the current moment of hyperconnected modernity. It is, however, also an expression of the very possibility of sociality in digital culture and hence relates not only to epistemology, but also ontology and the emergence of reconfigured power relations.

Sociologist Eva Illouz (2019: 21) describes the current state of hyperconnected modernity as being “marked by the formation of quasi-proxy or negative bonds.” Exploring forms of negative choice, including non-committing and short-lived romantic relationships, unfriending, and so-logamy, Illouz argues that the non-formation of bonds emerges as a sociological phenomenon in itself, a social practice, and a way of meaning making. She is mainly interested in sexual and emotional relationships that are based on these negative bonds, but I would argue that digital disconnection is, similarly, an expression of negative bonds or a negative choice.

[While] early and high modernity were marked by struggle [s] for certain forms of sociability where love, friendship, sexuality would be free of moral and social strictures, in networked modernity emotional experience seems to evade the names of emotions and relations inherited from eras where relationships were more stable (Illouz, 2019: 24).

Instead, contemporary relationships are characterized by a dynamic of ending, breaking, and waning that intertwines positive and negative choices or bonds and non-bonds. The choice to unchoose, disconnect, or disengage emerges as the prime form of choice at this stage of late or hyperconnected modernity. This epistemic category of non-formation of bonds follows the various struggles for freedom of early and high modernity. Freedom has become the right to not engage in and end social relations, namely the choice to unchoose, opt out, and end relationships, as Illouz (2019) argues. According to her, the main way of studying networked modernity is by following how social connections dissolve. Similarly, I argue that disconnection contributes to developing a deeper understanding of digital culture and in turn, connected sociality.

According to Illouz (2019), there are different reasons why negative choice emerges as a dominant social form. In late modernity, there are deep-seated changes in social institutions, including marriage in the case of relationships. These changes in social institutions are related to changing norms that allow and constitute the necessity for negative choices. This includes the fact that medical advances have led to the broad use of contraceptives, which in turn makes the decision...
against having children both a possibility and a requirement. At the same time, consumer markets of leisure have emerged, not only offering a plethora of options for free-time activities, but also turning leisure into an area of required choices. Similarly, digital technologies, including social media platforms and dating applications, allow ever new possibilities to connect, while features of negative choice, such as unfriending, are built into the platforms as legitimate and necessary options. Lastly, capitalism has produced goods and services at a never-before-seen scale but has caused what Nancy Fraser (2013) called “a crisis of care,” namely that social needs for reproduction and social bonds are in crisis (Illouz, 2019: 25). Nancy Fraser (2013) argues that while liberal capitalism has privatized social reproduction and state-managed capitalism has partly socialized it in welfare systems, social bonds are increasingly commodified in financialized capitalism. Financial capitalism has come for the majority, along with increased working hours to make ends meet, while cutting down on public support, leading to a crisis of care.

These developments have led to a shift in the focus of sociology from studying the emergence and sustenance of norms and rules to the study of crisis and uncertainty, both on the macro level, and more importantly, on the micro level. Along these lines and following Lauren Berlant’s crisis of ordinariness, Illouz has studied “the low-key ways in which actors, located in different cultural contexts and socioeconomic positions, struggle with the minute dramas of precariousness and uncertainty, with properties of what I call negative relationships” (2019: 25). Similarly, the Swedish sociologist Roland Paulsen (2020) focuses on the question of why people feel increasingly uncertain about the decisions that they are constantly forced to make. He argues that worry and anxiety have emerged as the most important experiences despite or rather because of increased welfare and economic security. The ontological and epistemological consequences of risk and uncertainty in modernity have of course been explored earlier. For example, Illouz (2019) refers to Beck and Gernsheim-Beck’s (1995) “The Normal Chaos of Love,” situating love and romantic relationships in a society of risk, where traditional bonds and institutions are increasingly dissolved. However, in contrast to Illouz (2019), Beck and Gernsheim-Beck consider the increasing risk that the individual has to navigate as a moment of positive sociality, as a moment for improvisation and possibility to produce new social bonds and reinvent the self. Instead, Illouz argues that the normal chaos today is a source of negative sociality. Instead of handling uncertainty by building new bonds, we disengage. Negative bonds are then expressions of the subjects’ not wanting or not being able to form relationships based on their desires. Negative bonds preclude recognition of and desire for the other altogether. Illouz argues that a negative bond “is a bond in which there is no attempt to find, know, appropriate, and conquer the subjectivity of another (…) others are means for self-expression and for the assertion of one’s autonomy – and not the object of recognition” (2019: 93). In the context of digital disconnection, this means that the disconnection from certain services and discourses is based on the idea of self-care. The retreat to disconnected islands of mindfulness, as well as the seclusion from discourses that are deviant from one’s own position, takes a similar stance of reinforcing the self rather than recognizing the other.

At the same time, negative bonds do not follow clear rules and definitions. Rather, they are fuzzy, unclear, and not well-defined. In reaction to the obsolescence of traditional institutions that previously framed and defined sociality, negative bonds constitute an expression of further increased uncertainty. However, they should still be considered bonds, though negative bonds. This also holds true for practices of digital disconnection that only follow fuzzy rules, that are set up individually and not collectively negotiated. Even if self-help books, such as Cal Newport’s Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World (Newport, 2019), Tanya Goodin’s Off: Your Digital Detox for a Better Life (Goodin, 2018), and Susan Maushart’s The Winter of Our Disconnect (Maushart, 2011), propose clear-cut rules of disconnecting and specifically defined periods, they
open up for individual adjustments and negotiations. Similarly, digital disconnection is a fluid concept that ranges from going completely offline to not using particular platforms and going analog.

In the context of digital disconnection, Hesselberth and de Bloois (2020) engage in the politics of withdrawal as a way to relocate power. In their understanding, withdrawal “signifies a suspension of entrenchment, and a certain weariness of the status quo. (...) withdrawal is neither the assault on power nor a flat rejection of it: it does not herald the end of politics, but rather relocates politics as we know it” (Hesselberth and de Bloois, 2020: 6). In terms of romantic relationships, it is the idea that there might always be someone who fits a person better that reinforces negative bonds. In the context of the digital media, there is always more to know and more information to obtain, information that more accurately represents “what is actually happening” and, more importantly, reinforces personal preferences.

Illouz (2019) argues that focusing on negative choice also encompasses a changed understanding of culture. If culture has traditionally been understood as being shaped through social relations that emerge in norms, rituals, and social scripts, in a culture dominated by negative choice, actors constantly struggle with the meaning and the implications of their actions, as well as their responsibility for their own lives. This is reflected in the increased popularity of advice and self-help products:

Culture taking increasingly the form of advice or self-help culture, it is done precisely because in the realm of love, parenting, and sexuality few cultural schemas guide action in a binding way and compel men and women to align themselves around agreed-upon rules and norms (Illouz, 2019: 96).

Following this line of argument, it is no surprise that digital disconnection is increasingly put forward as a way to grapple with intrusive, always-on media, especially in self-help literature (Syvertsen, 2020; Syvertsen and Elin, 2020). Digital disconnection and media non-use more broadly emerge then as ways to disengage or to choose not to engage in a specific focus on hyperconnectivity that requires negative choices in order to navigate the increasing information overload that is induced by digital media (Andrejevic, 2013).

Based on the negative sociology that Illouz proposes, I furthermore argue that digital disconnection constitutes both a way of seeing—a heuristic—to study digital culture at present and an increasingly dominant way of relating to digital culture. In turn, this requires media and communication studies to integrate the perspective of disconnection more broadly into their research agenda. Similar to negative bonds in social ties, digital disconnection is an expression of increased reflexivity in late modern societies. Thus, media and communication studies need to make a similar shift in focus toward crisis and uncertainty as drivers of media change in society.

Furthermore, digital disconnection constitutes an epistemological move. If we assume to live in hypermediated and hyperdatafied societies, how are we able to study their social logics while being fully immersed in them? Taking the media life metaphor proposed by Mark Deuze (2012) as an example, we could argue that digital connection is to us like water is to fish. It is a necessity for survival but not noticed until it is gone. In a similar way, we need to examine the margins of the mediated and datafied centers to make their logics visible and focus on the absences and the invisibilities (Sundén, 2016). Digital disconnection is linked to a specific ontology of being social and human. Negative bonds and disconnection as the dominant ontology form an understanding of being in the world in hyperconnected societies. Digital disconnection is fundamental to being human when our presence already implied in digital infrastructures (Bucher, 2020). Additionally, moving toward a negative sociology of digital culture follows a move, as suggested by Nick Couldry (2012), to question the centrality of media and the myth of the mediated center. Couldry argues that media institutions claim an exclusive entry point to social reality; they are the central
forces of meaning production. However, we should not buy into the myth uncritically and should question the power of media to define what societies revolve around and hence hints at the politics of digital disconnection.

**Disconnecting digitally—practices, marginal media, and temporalities out of synch**

What then does it mean to engage in a negative sociology of digital culture? The framework of digital disconnection is exemplified here with three examples of applying the lens of a negative sociology. The first example focuses on disconnecting from social media during the pandemic and emphasizes specific micro practices of disconnecting (epistemology of digital disconnection). The second example focuses on media at the margins of society, more specifically in the prison context (ontology of digital disconnection). The third example encompasses diverging mediated temporalities in political activism, underlining the disconnection between hegemonic temporal regimes and temporalities of political participation (politics of digital disconnection). The following examples serve as illustrations of what it would mean to develop a negative sociology of digital culture. In contrast to the studies reviewed earlier in this article that have focused on digital disconnection, for example, as digital detox, mindfulness, or forms of political resistance, I consider digital disconnection that emerges in practice, the marginality of media, and diverging temporalities. All three examples illustrate the emphasis on negative bonds in terms of non-engagement with digital media, positioning of specific media, and temporal disconnections.

**Distrust in social media as digital disconnection: Uncertainty, civic virtue, and responsibility**

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many of us to transition into largely digital-only social settings. From teaching and learning to meetings and socializing, we have mostly connected with others online. In this context, perhaps it becomes counterintuitive to ask for digital disconnection. However, a negative sociology of digital culture that is proposed here does just that, foregrounding how we still have the need to disconnect and emphasizing the negative bonds in digital culture while we are forced to maintain hyperconnectivity. The forms of negative bonds explored here emerge in a very specific context, namely a global pandemic that has led to strong restrictions in public and social lives throughout 2020 and in 2021. The materials for this case study of digital disconnection were gathered as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in Sweden. The material includes, first, a diary pilot study with 39 diarists documenting their media use between mid-March and mid-May 2020, when the pandemic initially emerged; second, a representative survey with three waves (May, August, and November 2020); and third, an extended diary study conducted in Sweden, with an average of 100 participants over six waves during the autumn and the winter of 2020/2021.

The survey data show the respondents’ rather high trust in social and political institutions, as well as in media; however, social media constitute an outlier. Therefore, it becomes interesting to further explore the low trust and choice to not rely on social media, which we have done in both the pilot diary study and the extended diary study. Here, muting, blocking, and unfriending offer different degrees of managing connection through disconnection. While the diarists consider engagement with opinions that differ from their own, they prefer not to expose themselves to these for the sake of their well-being. Psychological well-being is a recurring topic in the diaries. Certain sources and information are rather avoided and consciously chosen to not engage with in order to avoid disturbing what seems to be a fragile psychological balance. In this sense, discourses on digital
disconnection concern not only practices of engaging with digital devices but also conscious choices of news sources that are psychologized and incorporated in ideas of self-care and optimization (see also Syvertsen and Elin, 2020). Adopting Illouz’s (2019) framework and drawing on my empirical materials, I argue that negative bonds in digital culture that have emerged in the form of digital disconnection during the pandemic are characterized by disconnection as uncertainty, as a civic virtue, and as responsibilization.

First, Illouz (2019) argues that uncertainty and distrust are characteristic of the current hyperconnected culture. Relying on Niklas Luhmann’s sociology of trust, she points out that trust functions as a way to reduce complexity in an uncertain world, but so does distrust. Furthermore, she argues that Luhmann makes no difference here between trust and distrust. Both are central for social interactions and allow reducing complexity. For Luhmann, the media of communication, which include love, truth, money, and power, foster certain expectations and influence decisions among different options for how to act. Through these expectations, media of communication link specific motives to actions and allow predictability in social relationships. In this sense, distrust in certain digital platforms becomes a way to cope with the uncertainty that emerges in complex societies and more concretely here, in the context of the pandemic. Our participants struggle with developing strategies to stay informed while reducing the sheer amount of information available through social media, among others, and trying to cope with the distress and the uncertainty related to the pandemic.

Second, disconnection from social media emerges as a civic virtue that is part of the identity of the “good citizen.” In my materials, civic virtue and media literacy are expressed as being based, not primarily on choosing the right content and sources, but very much on disengaging from the wrong sources. As a good citizen, one is supposed to be suspicious and critical of sources, contextualize and evaluate posts, rationalize emerging emotions, and distance oneself. Social media are regarded as offering little ways of source criticism and balanced views. Rather, they are considered as reinforcing isolated positions without a control mechanism and the necessary accountability. The positions expressed here mirror dominant discourses on (social) media literacy, almost caricaturing them while positioning a critical and disconnected stance as an important aspect of civicness.

Third, this position is in turn connected to an emphasis on the individual’s responsibility for engaging with and disengaging from information, with which the diarists struggle. In their search for trustworthy information, they request support, for example, in the form of certificates for content that can be trusted, but ultimately, the individual user has to assume a distanced and critical position. This individual responsibility requires reflexivity that includes a certain kind of criticality. Nonetheless, rather than questioning dominant forms of being informed fundamentally, this kind of criticality remains within the confines of the established media ecologies, including dominant social media platforms. Although this study’s participants express distrust in social media while being overwhelmed by the amount of information, they consider a social media hiatus, while not leaving the platforms or imagining different ways of organizing social media. Furthermore, it is striking that the diaries are dominated by reflections on self-care and self-preservation, such as through a social media hiatus. Only rarely are questions of community and mutual support discussed beyond briefly mentioning self-organized neighborhood groups for supporting those in risk groups.

Prison media: Media at the margins

The second example draws on a context with specific marginality to society—the prison. The materials for this case study of digital disconnection have been gathered over a 6-year period (2015–2021) and include field visits to high-security prisons in Sweden, observations at prison and security
technology fairs, as well as archival materials (Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2021). I suggest considering heterotopian spaces such as prisons more explicitly in the analysis of the media landscape. Heterotopian spaces are spaces of otherness that are outside the social world. At the same time, they are crucial for sustaining the idea and the realization of a “good society.” For example, they confine people, behaviors, and characteristics that run counter to the utopian ideas of a good society, but they are also places where the rules and the norms for a good society are negotiated and implemented. Hence, we can learn about values, norms, and the structure of feeling of society, as well as crucial media-related change, by considering heterotopian spaces as constitutive parts of society. In this case study, the prison, as a heterotopian place in the Foucauldian sense, is situated between utopia and dystopia—a non-place—and serves as a lens through which media change and innovation can be explored. This focus opens unexpected connections to the everyday life of media users outside the prison.

Usually, we think of prisons as removed from society and as places outside the normal structures, on one hand, and as places of old media or obsolete technologies, on the other hand. Here, I suggest to turn this perspective upside down. I argue that prisons are not at all outside society but very much in it and necessary to stabilize social order. Rather than being removed from society, they are its dark mirrors, as Didier Fassin (2017) argues. In this sense, certain social structures crystallize in prisons and in particular, how we think and imagine media. I thus argue that prisons are places of media innovation where new formats are tested and implemented, while others are kept at a distance. Therefore, we can observe certain general media biases, such as the digital divide and access to the latest media technologies crystallizing in the prison context. On one hand, the latest innovative technology for surveillance and control is being tested and implemented in the prison and punishment context. Here, I also think of examples such as the ankle monitors that have spread from the punishment context to the broader society, taking the shape of fitbits and smart watches monitoring our every movement, as Andreas Bernard (2019) argues. On the other hand, prisoners are, at least in the European context, still largely deprived of access to digital media and the internet in particular. The Danish criminologist Peter Scharff Smith (2012) argues that this practice could be questioned as a violation of the human right to information. Nevertheless, the prison emerges as an interesting case where we can study media change and innovation that are taken to the extreme. Prisons provide one context for technological advancement, next to a plethora of other high-stake environments, such as the welfare, the health, and the education sectors. These are high-stake environments since they concern especially vulnerable populations that are strongly affected by technological and organizational changes. At the same time, these high-stake environments are the foremost places for implementing cutting-edge technological solutions, as Virginia Eubanks (2017) has argued for social benefit provision and child welfare.

Studying media and digital culture from marginal places such as prisons allows a shift in perspective that highlights sites where innovation and changes occur more often than at the centers of society, which follows Harold Innis (1951/2008), who argues that the margins of society are the sites for change and innovation. Often out of necessity, peripheral situatedness requires people to invent, among others, new communication technologies for survival (see also Fornäs, 2017). In this sense, being disconnected from the center and situated at the margins constitute an essential driver of media change more generally, while highlighting the role and the contributions of vulnerable populations to media development.

**Desynched: Activist temporalities and time regimes**

The last example draws on the temporalities of the media practices of protest movements. The materials for this case study of digital disconnection have been gathered by exploring the role of...
media technologies in protest movements from a diachronic comparative perspective, bringing together the analysis of media practices of the unemployed workers’ movement in the 1930s, the housing movement in the 1970s, and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the 2010s (Kaun, 2016a). Contemporary protest and activist movements are forced to adapt the logic of social media, including programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013) to gain a voice. Aiming for visibility of their movement and its political struggles, activists contribute to the production of digital media content, being partly constitutive of what Jodi Dean (2008, 2012) calls communicative capitalism that builds on the circulation of messages and the logic that the exchange value of the messages dominates, rather than the use value. One of the major principles of communicative capitalism is to accelerate the speed of circulation of messages in order to minimize the turnover time and increase the production of surplus value (Manzerolle and Kjøsen, 2012). As digital media enhance personalization, they enable new trajectories and pathways between production, exchange, and consumers. In this sense, personalization as an organizational principle of digital media enhances the already accelerated speed of exchange, which is taken to its extreme, namely the suspension of circulation in the age of digital immediacy.

In practical terms, this means that contemporary activist movements have to adapt to the temporal logic of digital immediacy that includes constantly contributing to digital flows of messages, including an overemphasis on quantifications of social media visibility in terms of uploads, clicks, likes, and followers. Political projects, especially those involving participatory practices of collective will formation (Bray, 2013; Graeber, 2013), need time to be implemented. The need for time is reflected in the numerous stories of endless meetings that are common to many movements, including the Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, as well as Anti-Austerity Protest Groups. However, the logic of digital immediacy does not allow these time-consuming procedures, as reflected in the expectation of perpetual production of content and output. Movements are forced to mirror the principles of platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, that are built on the logic of immediacy and newness (Kaun, 2016b). In this sense, the dominant logic of the current accelerated capitalism and the time-consuming practices of participatory democracy stand in stark contrast; they are desynchronized. In their attempts to resynchronize the political temporalities of organizing with the logic of digital immediacy, activists develop practices of disconnection and separation, including disconnecting from social media platforms and the conscious choice of relying on alternative platforms and publication formats (Barassi, 2013).

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have conceptualized digital disconnection as a form of the negative bonds that are characteristic of the current mode of hyperconnected modernity. These negative bonds follow the struggles for individual freedom in modernity, while turning the achieved freedom mainly into the choice to not connect and opt out of social relationships. The emerging relationships of negative bonds, for example, expressed as digital disconnection, are expressions of a changed relationship with others and with culture. On the individual level of relationships with others, this means that the others are merely instruments for self-assertion and confirmation of one’s own identity. On a cultural level, this means a recentering of the individual and the choices expressed in the dominant self-help culture (Illouz, 2019).

Digital disconnection as distrust and partial non-use of social media reinforces this focus on individual choice and disconnection as a way to assert oneself in comparison to other individuals and social groups. It emerges not only as a coping strategy but also as a civic virtue. However, this virtue is merely based on individual responsibility that rarely fosters collective, community-based
values. Turning toward negative bonds to analyze digital culture makes visible the ways in which sociality today is dominated by uncertainty and individual responsibility rather than recognition of others and the common grounds that are shared in society, which finds expression in the diagnosis of an epistemic crisis (Dahlgren, 2018). The negative sociology that is proposed here might also encompass shifting the analytical lens from the center to the margins that has been identified as a fruitful source for critical theoretical approaches (Illouz, 2019). Consequently, I propose that if we are interested in developing a deeper understanding of digital culture, this move to the margins is essential. It allows not only uncovering hidden practices that contribute to the development of our media systems, but also a shift in perspective that is essential to make logics of digital culture visible, while we are deeply immersed in it. Lastly, I propose considering the negotiation of a temporal disconnection between practices of activists and the temporal regime of social media. This temporal disconnection is met with different strategies to resynchronize political practices with the dominance of digital immediacy that includes the full or partial rejection of social media platforms by activists. This last example illustrates the political aspect of digital disconnections that invites users to renegotiate their relationship with digital culture. All three cases illustrate in different ways of defining what a negative sociology of digital culture and a focus on negative bonds might mean.

Couldry (2020: 122) invites readers to imagine the “world with media,” not in a technodeterministic way, but in a way that highlights how social worlds emerge through media. This article is not a contradiction but very much an extension of this argument, that is, the spheres that are largely shaped through media put pressure on individuals to find their places in these media worlds, both by choosing and by opting out of media bonds. A negative choice is not a negation but a reinforcement of hyperconnected, hypermediated modernity. In this sense, rather than establishing alternative forms of sociality, negative bonds deeply reinforce hyperconnected societies. Refocusing studies of digital culture around negative bonds by highlighting the relevance of digital disconnection on the epistemological, ontological, and political level will allow for deeper understanding of how sociality emerges nowadays including all its unresolvable contradictions and ambiguities.

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