CONVERGENCE

# Advancing digital disconnection research: Introduction to the special issue

## Stine Lomborg [ORCID]
University of Copenhagen, Kobenhavn, Denmark

## Brita Ytre-Arne [ORCID]
Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

## Abstract
Over the past decade, scholarly interest in "digital disconnection" and related concepts has grown in media and communication studies, and in related disciplines. The idea of digital disconnection explicitly references digitalization as a key societal development, creating conditions of intensified and embedded media involvement across social life. The notion of digital disconnection thereby represents a critical response to mediated conditions that characterize our societies and permeate our everyday lives. In this special issue, we take stock of the contributions, challenges, and promises of digital disconnection research. We showcase how digital disconnection scholarship intersects with other developments in media and communication research, and is part of debates and empirical analysis in related disciplines from tourism studies to psychology. We argue that one of the key strengths of the emergent work is the variety of social domains and conceptual debates that are included and explored in digital disconnection research. On the other hand, we also point to the need for further methodological development, conceptual consolidation, and empirical diversity, particularly in the face of global inequalities and ongoing crises.

Resistance. Refusal. Avoidance. Abstention. Disengagement. Detox. Disconnection. Over the past decade, scholarly interest in "digital disconnection" and related concepts has grown in media and communication studies, across various subfields and in related disciplines. Whereas media criticism

**Corresponding author:**
Brita Ytre-Arne, Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, P.B. 7802, Bergen 5020, Norway.
Email: brita.ytre-arne@uib.no

is by no means a new phenomenon (Syvertsen, 2017), the idea of digital disconnection explicitly references digitalization as a key societal development, creating conditions of intensified and embedded media involvement across social life. The notion of digital disconnection thereby represents a critical response to mediated conditions that characterize our societies and permeate our everyday lives. This critical response can take the form of performative lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer, 2013), a sociocultural trend and societal dilemma (Syvertsen, 2020), an emergent political movement (Casemajor et al., 2015), a mindful reaction to social media presence (Baym et al., 2020),or daily struggles to check the smartphone less often (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020).

However, with growing interest in these and other expressions of digital disconnection, questions are also raised about what disconnection really means and how we can study it, about paradoxes and inherent dilemmas that affect research on disconnection as well as the phenomenon itself. As digital disconnection scholarship continues to grow, contributions discussing the impossibility of disconnection also abound (Bucher, 2020; Hesselberth, 2018; Treré et al., 2020a). It has been established, empirically and conceptually, that disconnection is rarely a binary case of either-or, but instead part of dilemmas, ambivalences, and practices of media use (Baumer et al., 2013; Baym et al., 2020; Brennen, 2019; Pennington, 2020). With dedicated interest in the form of collections such as this special issue and others (e.g.,Chia et al.forthcoming), the questions raised in disconnection scholarship are central to connection scholarship. By questioning established concepts and shedding light on new aspects of the empirical reality of disconnection, research on digital disconnection could potentially open new avenues in key debates on the meanings of media and communication technologies in our lives and in our societies.

In this special issue, we initiate such work by taking stock of the contributions, challenges, and promises of digital disconnection research. We showcase how digital disconnection scholarship intersects with other developments in media and communication research, and is part of debates and empirical analysis in related disciplines from tourism studies to psychology. We argue that one of the key strengths of the emergent work is the variety of social domains and conceptual debates that are included and explored in digital disconnection research. On the other hand, we also point to the need for further methodological development, conceptual consolidation, and empirical diversity, particularly in the face of global inequalities and ongoing crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Against this background, we hope to build foundations for further theoretical and empirical advances. Our introduction to the special issue is therefore structured around three central questions: Is digital disconnection research a field? How is it situated? How can digital disconnection research be advancedd? We believe these questions serve to assess the state of digital disconnection scholarship.. We also introduce the different contributing articles in the special issue as we go along, in relation to these three questions. First, then, we inquire into the historical grounding and key conceptualizations of digital disconnection as a potential research field, situating it in light of other debates in media and communication studies. Second, we outline some key topical areas and domains of inquiry that are emerging, in our special issue and beyond, situating disconnection across social domains and cultural contexts. Finally, we point to avenues for advancing disconnection scholarship further.

## Digital disconnection as a field? Historical grounding and theoretical lines

The study of digital disconnection, and the current surge of studies on this topic, can be seen as a response to the "backbone" role of digital technologies and communication in everyday life and in the functioning of society. The scholarly surge is also related to a series of normative discourses

around the dilemmas and challenges of digital media, discourses that have been raised and problematized in scholarly debates but also mainstreamed in broader cultural debates and popular expressions. These discourses suggest we should worry about what digital communication means to our sense of presence when interacting with colleagues, friends, and family; to our experiences of meaningful leisure or work productivity; to our privacy and autonomy vis-à-vis digital systems; or to the societal conditions in which children grow up, adolescents come of age, or adults seek fulfillment in life. Digital disconnection research has emerged in the intersection of observations of the embeddedness of digital technologies—the "backbone" role—in combination with attention to discourses of concern, ambivalence, and critique. As a response to the different expressions of both embedded connectivity and critical discourses, disconnection research itself is a multivocal endeavor. It is also an endeavor that can be unclear, running along several partly overlapping streams with ample opportunity for both theoretical and methodological development and consolidation.

The articles in this special issue contribute to consolidating and advancing digital disconnection research along some key dimensions. The first of these concerns historical and theoretical lines, where a shared starting point or shared understanding of historical trajectories is called for. Mariek Vanden Abeele and Victoria Mohr provide an analysis of current public discourses of digital disconnection in comparison with and to some extent, echoing media panics of the early days of television. Their analysis casts disconnection as a historical process of apparatgeist that situates media, including their technological aspects, in broader social and cultural developments.

Next, Annette Markham considers connection and disconnection as a matter of echolocating oneself in the social world, linking disconnection through computer-mediated communication to social interaction in an original theoretical contribution. She invigorates a historically central framework for media and communication studies, namely, symbolic interactionism, and offers an eloquent analysis that challenges often taken-for-granted assumptions that disconnection is a positive project for the self.

Where Vanden Abeele and Markham remind us of the historical and theoretical media trajectories along which disconnection must be understood, the next articles of the special issue reflect upon the status of disconnection research alongside scholarly and popular debates in and around media and communication research. Anne Kaun's article probes disconnection as an ontological, epistemological, and political project. She mobilizes Eva Illouz' framework of a negative sociology of social bonds (Illouz, 2019) to suggest disconnection as a lens that helps us to understand the possibility of sociality in digital culture. Specifically, Kaun expounds on disconnection as a way of seeing digital culture, with reference to examples from empirical research about media use in times of social crisis, media at the margins of society, and contemporary political activism.

In their analysis of what digital disconnection could mean beyond media studies, Hallvard Moe and Ole Jacob Madsen discuss digital disconnection in relation to a range of philosophical and cultural concerns, expressed in self-help literature and cultural commentary on optimization, wellbeing, and sustainability. Asking what digital disconnection is supposed to be good for, or which problems it is meant to solve, their analysis demonstrates the wide range of links between disconnection scholarship and popular discourses on human conditions. Their question of how the "home turf" of media and communication scholarship relates to this array of debates, from existential philosophy to environmental sustainability, is indicative of the potentials but also pitfalls currently facing digital disconnection scholarship. It seems possible to carve out a place for digital disconnection research at the center of key cultural debates, but the inclusive scope of inquiry also brings challenges, particularly working with a phenomenon so loosely defined.

Together, the articles in this special issue serve the vital purpose of situating disconnection, historically and theoretically, in broader research efforts at understanding the relationship between

media and communication, on the one hand, and cultural and social developments on the other. By extension, we hope this issue will stand not as an attempt to establish digital disconnection as a distinct subfield within media studies, but rather as an encouragement to utilize disconnection as a productive entry point for understanding baseline questions in media and communication research. These include questions about identity and self, sociality, cultural consumption, and our personal and collective aspirations and imaginaries of the good life, but also about inequality, labor, agency, and political engagement.

## Digital disconnection situated? Across domains and cultural contexts

The collection of articles presented in this issue showcases that digital disconnection research is concerned with a wide range of social domains, including work, leisure, health, family life, business, and education. In our special issue, as in other scholarship on disconnection, we find case studies, fieldwork sites, and empirical examples that represent these and other domains. We also find engagement with different adjoining disciplines and research fields to media and communication studies. Arguably, demonstrable relevance across social domains is a key strength of digital disconnection research and one that merits further empirical exploration to compare the mechanisms, experiential qualities, social costs, and consequences of disconnective practices in the different domains investigated.

In this collection, Karin Fast traces disconnection in the domain of work, offering a synthesis of scholarly literature and practices of disconnection with those of work and labor, after digitalization. She demonstrates how disconnection is in fact a matter of work and goes on to explore what disconnection might mean for recent calls for deep and slow work (disconnection for work), for the post-digital workplace (disconnection at work), and for mundane disconnective work in the home that she associates with the figure of the "post-digital housewife" (disconnection as work). Based on a rich theoretical discussion, Fast proposes that when seeing disconnection in entanglements with work, disconnection presents itself as a moral obligation and a marker of distinction.

The discourse of digital disconnection as part of "the good life" points to experiences that resonate in contemporary culture as particularly meaningful and authentic, but also ripe for commodification and commercialization. Others have already pointed to the embedded challenges of associating disconnection positively with authenticity and nostalgia (e.g., Natale and Treré, 2020; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). These tensions are further explored in two articles in this special issue, bringing new examples and conceptualizations to the table. Tero Karppi, Aleena Chia, and Ana Jorge discuss some very different case studies that represent the extensive commodification of disconnection, with an original analytical contribution on affective attunement: how disconnection represents attempts at regulating and harmonizing moods and emotions, living with and in media-saturated realities.

Likewise, Christine Lohmeier and Christian Schwarzenegger analyze the trend of "digital-free" tourism, based on qualitative fieldwork on how professionals in the tourism industry carefully facilitate disconnection as an alternative to hyper-connected society. Their analysis underlines the discursive associations between digital disconnection, authenticity ideals, and nostalgia: Disconnecting from digital devices is supposed to render the individual in a closer and more meaningful relationship with nature, but also with the self. These visions rather than particular disconnective acts are at the center of the phenomenon.

While disconnection scholarship is varied in terms of the inclusion of social domains, the empirical and cultural contexts of investigation need greater diversity, and more profound and critical attention to fundamental inequalities. Challenging core narratives of disconnection that

emanate from its primary empirical documentation in cultural contexts of constant connectivity and resource abundance, this special issue provides vital contributions to address digital disconnection beyond the Global North. In this way, it responds to recent calls for expanding empirical endeavors across the globe (Treré et al., 2020b). Importantly, these contributions suggest productive ways for crosspollinating questions of digital disconnection with well-tested frameworks and research literatures about digital inequalities and infrastructures. In our special issue, the global phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic is also a case context invoked.

Zixue Tai, Xiao Yu, and Bai He establish establish links to digital divides research in their study of the mandated Health QR Code in China that was issued to surveil and contain the spread of COVID-19. Specifically, they attune us to voluntary and involuntary acts of non-use and non-compliance with governance through digital technology, and show significant differences in rural versus urban enforcement of the Health QR Code and its corresponding practices of disconnecting. Tai, Yu, and He argue that we need to push away from individualist and toward socio-political and structural explanations of disconnection.

Also taking the COVID-19 pandemic as a starting point, Emiliano Treré investigates conditions of forced hyperconnectivity with a media ecology approach. Based on qualitative interviews spread across different countries and continents, conducted in lockdown, his analysis formulates three central categories that are fruitful and explanatory to disconnection scholarship in a global context: intensification, discovery, and abandonment. These are fruitful to explain how user practices of connection and disconnection transform over time in a crisis such as the pandemic, but also to delve deeper into inequalities and different expressions. These articles offer varied and refreshing perspectives on what might be considered general problematics of disconnection, but also on how disconnection might express itself differently across cultural contexts.

## Digital disconnection advanced? Beyond the special issue

We hope the special issue will be received as an invitation to develop a conversation around connective and disconnective practices that integrates with other topics, concepts, and historical insights of media and communication research and adjacent disciplines.

One promising, and much needed, line of inquiry has to do with furthering the historical grounding of disconnection practices and discourses alongside social and cultural reactions to previous media. While articles in our special issue contribute significantly to this project, potentials remain to connect and situate disconnection to other established scholarly conversations about media resistance and low use, such as the news avoidance literature (Aharoni et al., 2020; Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2019) or debates on digital inequalities (Helsper, 2021). We particularly underline that historical analysis of disconnection is needed in order to notice continuity as well as change in the way media and communication technologies and practices are valued in society, as Vanden Abeele's analysis in our special issue is a key example of. A contribution of this special issue is thereby to begin drawing such historical lines. Furthermore, the special issue takes on significant efforts to integrate disconnection with core theoretical questions in media and communication research, for instance, regarding the nature of sociality, the performance and maintenance of identity and self, and labor and power in society. Such theoretical endeavors may be further enhanced by attending to questions of, for instance, how concerns over disconnection might intersect with questions of surveillance and datafication.

The special issue also ignites an existing awareness of the need to address global inequalities and different meanings and limits of disconnection, by offering empirical analyses of people's disconnective practices in China and Latin American contexts, in particular, and drawing on these to

discuss contextualized problems and conceptualizations. The empirical knowledge base of disconnection needs further attention to counter the risks of taking for granted a Global North idea of connective media as the baseline against which to study disconnection. More empirical and comparative research across domains and cultures is needed to establish what are the relatively general features and dilemmas of disconnection, and what is context-specific.

Finally, we suggest that advancing disconnection should also involve methodological reflection and development. While interest in disconnection at least partly originates from ideas of disconnection as different to connection, as a type of critical or alternative phenomenon, it seems that the methods and approaches invoked to study disconnection are strikingly similar to those used to study media-saturated lives in general. We find, in our special issue as elsewhere, a prevalence of qualitative approaches including interviews, fieldwork, and discourse analysis, well suited to explore the social domains and various expressions often highlighted within disconnection scholarship. However, even though the connection/disconnection binary has long been questioned and abandoned, we believe there is need for a fundamental reflection on how disconnection can be studied. Our special issue starts this debate from a conceptual, methodological and epistemological point of view, through the contributions by Annette Markham, Anne Kaun, and Emiliano Treré, and we hope disconnection research will continue with further methodological imagination.

In making such calls upon disconnection scholarship—for further historical grounding, more diverse empirical analysis, and creative methods' development—it might seem as though we are addressing a field after all. Yet, we maintain that the questions discussed in this special issue are at the heart of media and communication scholarship in general, as we strive to understand what digital media mean to us, also considering its inherent tensions and dilemmas.

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## ORCID iDs

Stine Lomborg ⬤ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5672-7298
Brita Ytre-Arne ⬤ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4452-6007

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## Author biographies

**Stine Lomborg (PhD)** is Associate Professor of Communication and IT at the University of Copenhagen. Her main research is in the infrastructures and experiences of digital tracking and datafication across contexts of everyday life. She is the PI of the Personalizing the Professional and Datafied Living research projects.

**Brita Ytre-Arne (PhD)** is professor of media studies at the University of Bergen. Her main research interests are audiences, citizenship, and media and technology in everyday life. She is editor of The Future of Audiences (Das and Ytre-Arne, Palgrave, 2018) and a co-PI of the Digitox research project.