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Paradoxes of Digital dis/engagement: a follow up study (businesses and services)

Seed project final report

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Executive summary

This study emerges from our initial empirical seed project funded by CCN+ (Kuntsman and Miyake 2015) on *digital dis-engagement*, a term we coined to define a proactive form of citizenship which consciously resists, refuses and pushes against the current move towards the 'digital default'. Having developed a typology of motivations, degrees and contexts of digital disengagement, the initial pilot revealed a plethora of contradictory practices of digital disengagement, the most paradoxical being where the communication, organisation and dissemination of ideas around digital disengagement relied on those very tools the disengagers are aiming to limit (e.g. blogging about the need to spend time away from the computer, or posting selfies of "unplugging" on social media). This paradox was particularly evident in two main areas dedicated to digital disengagement, which due to time and funding constraints were unable at the time to pursue in further depth: a) collective organising; b) commercialised services. This follow up study thus explores these two areas in order to complement our initial findings on digital disengagement as a media discourse and as a lived experience.

Our study consists of two key components corresponding to our main areas of interest. In Part 1 we document, map and review the different organisations dedicated to collective forms of digital disengagement. In particular, we focus on two initiatives, 'National Day of Unplugging' (US) and 'National Unplugging Day' (UK), conducting initial textual and visual analyses of these projects' websites. Part 2 documents, maps and reviews the different businesses, experts and services offering commercialised and corporate forms of digital disengagement. Here, we focus on a particular London-based digital life-coaching service – 'Consciously Digital' – through qualitative analysis of the company website alongside an interview with its founder and acting manager, Anastasia Dedyukhina.

Overall, the study suggests that at the heart of events and services that support digital disengagement lies a paradox, where those very digital tools, devices and platforms one is encouraged to disengage from, are central to the process of disengagement itself.

Aims and Objectives

1. Background

Our initial seed project funded by CCN+ (Kuntsman and Miyake 2015) investigates what we coined as *digital dis-engagement*, a proactive form of citizenship which consciously resists, refuses and pushes against the current move towards the 'digital default'. Having developed a typology of motivations, degrees and contexts of digital disengagement, the pilot study revealed a plethora of contradictory practices of digital disengagement, the most paradoxical being where the communication, organisation and dissemination of ideas around digital disengagement relied on those very tools the disengagers are aiming to limit (e.g. blogging about the need to spend time away from the computer, or posting selfies of "unplugging" on social media). This paradox was particularly evident in two areas which we were able to note as being important, but did not have the time and funding to investigate further: collective organising, and commercialised services, both dedicated to digital disengagement.

This follow up explores these two areas, in order to complement our initial findings on digital disengagement as a media discourse, and as a lived experience. In the follow up study, we ask: **What kind of collective action emerge around digital disengagement? What services are currently being offered to support it? Is digital disengagement a resistance or a co-optation?**

2. Aims and objectives

1. To create a preliminary map of the types of events, groups and organisations, dedicated to digital disengagement, and to one of them in depth, focusing on their aims, scope, tactics, organisational structure and web presence.
2. To create a preliminary overview of the types of businesses and experts that support digital disengagement, and to carry out an in-depth study of one of them, focusing on their approach, type of service, vision and web presence.
3. To analyse the ways organisations and businesses dedicated to digital disengagement navigate its paradox
4. To apply and test different methods (visual, textual, digital, ethnographic), in order to develop a multi-method toolkit for a larger study of digital disengagement.
5. To set up base for future collaborative partnerships and knowledge exchange activities.

3. Data collection

The study was based on two components:

1. Documenting and mapping events and/or organisations dedicated to collective forms of digital disengagement. More specifically, we focused on the preliminary mapping of activities offered by two initiatives, "National Day of Unplugging" (US) and "National Unplugging Day" (UK).. We have also conducted detailed textual and visual analysis of the projects' websites, as these appeared in 2015.
2. Documenting and mapping businesses and experts offering commercialised and corporate forms of digital disengagement. We have also conducted a detailed case study of one of them, "Consciously Digital" life coaching service, based on London. The study included an analysis of the business' website, and an interview with its founder and acting manager, Anastasia Dedyukhina.

Key Findings

PART I: COLLECTIVE ORGANISING

1. National Day of Unplugging (NDU)

NDU is a US-based project/event backed by *Reboot*, a large collective consisting of '480 network members, 700 community organization partners, and hundreds of thousands of people'. *Reboot* is described on the NDU website as being 'inspired by Jewish ritual and embracing the arts, humour, food, philosophy, and social justice' in order to 'produce creative projects that spark the interest of young Jews and the larger community'. *Reboot's* Jewish ethos and practices are reflected on NDU's emphasis on the Sabbath Manifesto (top priority being '01. Avoid Technology'), with links and downloadable content provided by NDU.¹

The role of the NDU website seems to be to: a) promote the off-line NDU event; b) gather participants' and potential partners' personal information; c) promotion; d) networking; e) providing some limited resources and information. Key distinguishing points about their website that evidence one or more of these include:



NDU homepage, <http://nationaldayofunplugging.com/>

- Main homepage consists of a 'gallery' of NDU participants' selfies: all of them include people holding completed 'I Unplug to _____' signs (e.g. I Unplug to hug, I unplug to chill, I unplug to salsa), their names and location.
- The 'Signing of the Pledge': The 'Pledge' is presented in the form of an online form, where a potential digital disengager 'submits' their email address, name and surname, country and zip code beneath the following words:

¹ <http://sabbathmanifesto.org/>

I pledge to unplug during the National Day of Unplugging on March 6-7, 2015. I understand that the important first step is to unplug for as long as I can, even if it is not the full day.

- There are two types of ‘membership’, or audiences NDU are addressing, evidenced by their specified sections ‘For Families’ and ‘For Community Partners’: both of which come with online forms asking for personal details (email, name, number of participants, organisation if applicable, who is organising, zip code).
 - ‘For Families’ includes a short guide on ways to re-connect with your family and improve quality of domestic life (e.g. eating dinner together without devices). Section also provides ‘additional resources’ which refers to ScreenFree Week²
 - For Community Partners’ is more extensive in content, including suggestions to ‘sign up to become a Community Partner’ (again, a link takes you to another page with an online form requiring personal data input *in addition* to the online form on the actual section itself), downloadable content (‘I unplug to_____’ poster), list of testimonials from past participants, and a long list acknowledging existing NDU partners.

- Almost every page has SNS links: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Google+

2. National Unplugging Day (NUD)

National Unplugging Day is a UK based group that is part of , and is sponsored by “MyFamilyClub”.³ NUD’s website changes over time, and is structure around the annual cycle of preparing for the UK “National Day of Unplugging”. In the process, NUD created multiple links with various charities, to promote “unplugging” from digital technologies, in order to foster a better connection between parents and children and foster “family values”. NUD also repeatedly emphasises the importance of outdoors, for children and families.

² <http://nationaldayofunplugging.com/for-families/>, <http://www.screenfree.org/>

³ <http://www.myfamilyclub.co.uk/>

Summertime Picnics – the perfect ‘unplugged’ family time moment

Primula Cheese, who conducted the survey for National Picnic Week (13-21 June 2015), is...
[Family Time](#) | June 18, 2015 | 43 |



Snapshot from NUD website, <http://nationalunpluggingday.co.uk/>, from June 2015.

Dreams Come True Children’s Charity Partners With National Unplugging Day

Dreams Come True teams up with National Unplugging Day to encourage families to #GoGadgetFree...
[Partnerships](#) | June 18, 2015 | 118 |



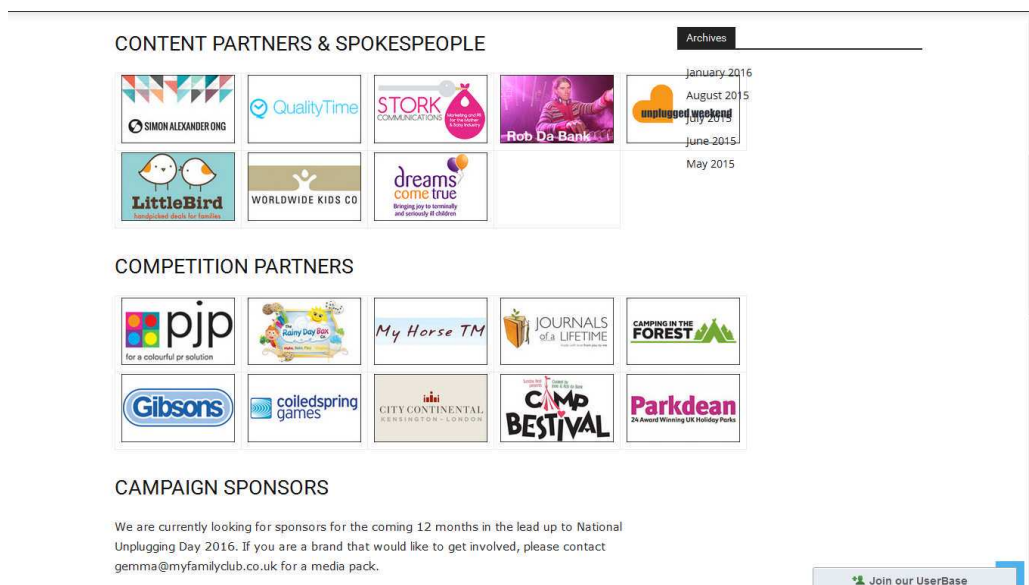
Snapshot from NUD website, <http://nationalunpluggingday.co.uk/>, from July 2015.

NUD website is structured as a blog, with new entries added periodically. The entries are tagged under the following categories, which are not mutually exclusive, therefore some entries appear under more than one tag:

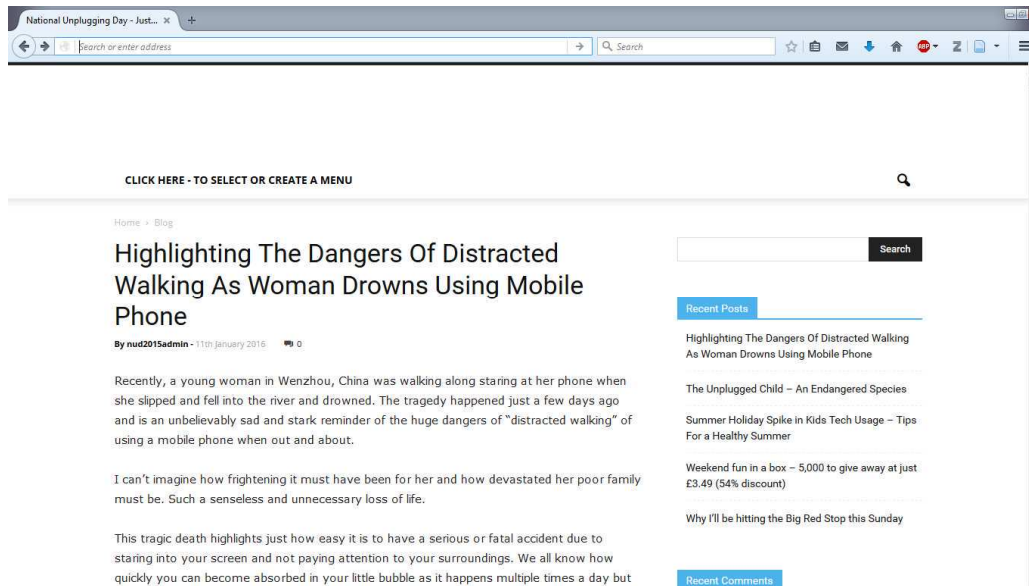
- Addiction – entries discussing “smartphone addiction” and offering tips to manage it
- Competitions – promotional offers, focusing on non-digital educational games; packages of outdoor family activities or holidays; or participation in “digital detox” retreats.
- Digital Detox – a collection of entries on various “digital detox” challenges and “unplugged” activities
- Discounts & Offers – very similar to “competitions”, containing promotional offers

- Experts – articles by academics offering popular advice on managing technology in everyday life (such as taking regular breaks or developing “healthy technology habits”)
- Family Time – a mixture of essays on “quality” family time and promotional offers and competitions
- Outdoors – entries on outdoor activities and promotional offers
- Partnerships – links to commercial partners and charities
- Research – popular essays on research into negative effects of digital technologies
- Sleep – an article on improving sleep by taking breaks from digital technologies
- Smartphone – entries specifically focusing on smartphones
- Tech habits – tips for reducing and managing the use of digital technologies
- Tips – similar articles as those tagged under “tech habits”
- Unplugged – contains one item on parents’ pledge to “ditch smartphones”

Over the course of our observations in later 2015 the site has changed dramatically. Initially, at the time of the National Unplugging Day in summer 2015, and later that year, the site contained a high number of images and colourful links to blog entries, as well as a densely populated area of logos, featuring all the commercial and charity partners of the event. The logos of partners and sponsors were subsequently removed, as the site announced that new sponsors are sought for the National Unplugging Day 2016. At the time of completing this report in early 2016, the site has changed even further, and currently contains almost no images. Its appearance changed from the glossy, branded and overcommercialised outlook to a more text-based, informative and minimalist appearance. A future research, including close discussions with the site’s manages and NUD members might reveal whether the reasons for this are technical, practical and/or ideological – in other words, whether NUD members are now actively disengaging from on-line platforms and switching their activities to off-line, or whether the changes are due to restrictions on funding or stuffing. It would also be important to follow up and document whether these are permanent changes, or a temporary redesign of the site, as NUD moves to its next day of unplugging, to be held in 2016. A future research might also reveal whether NUD has switched largely, or entirely, to other platforms – a change already noticeable during the National Unplugging Day 28th June 2015, which was actively promoted and discussed on Twitter, under the following hashtags: #unplug2015 and #gogadgetfree.



National Unplugging Day sponsors and commercial links to brands, as these appeared on the site in 2015 <http://nationalunpluggingday.co.uk/our-partners/>



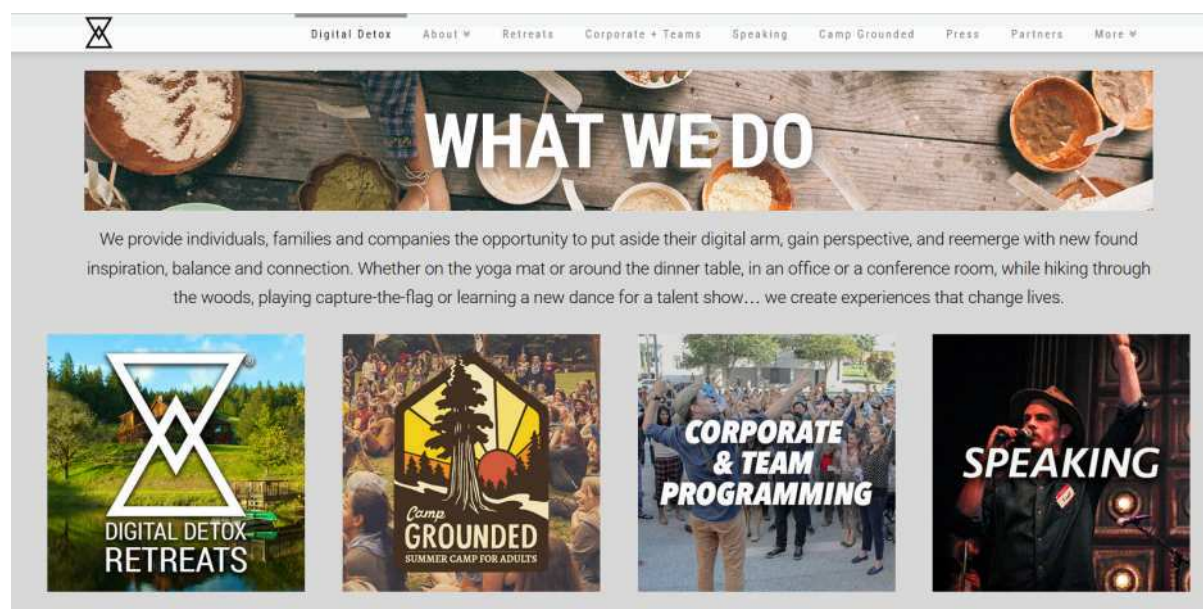
National Unplugging Day, homepage in February 2016 <http://nationalunpluggingday.co.uk/>

PART II: COMMERCIALISED ACTIVITIES

1. Mapping Businesses in Digital Disengagement

There are two main ways in which businesses and companies offer services to those wishing to participate in digital disengagement, both with different aims and modes of delivery.

Firstly, there are companies which organise off-line events and activities in spaces where people can be free of (or learn how to be free of) devices, technology and internet. The emphasis here is usually on 'digital detox', and the idea of removing technology from life (usually on a temporary basis, for the duration of the service) to improve health, wellbeing and communication. Common services include nature-based holiday packages, boot-camps, digital detox 'luxury' relaxation hotels; all aimed towards the consumer who wants to escape from and ultimately, relax away from digital living. Having said this, there are also companies who offer these services to more corporate groups for 'team-building' events or 'away days' in order to improve business (rather than personal health, for example). Here, the website operates as a way of promoting services, booking/administration and paradoxically, connecting digitally (e.g. email/subscribing to their newsletter).

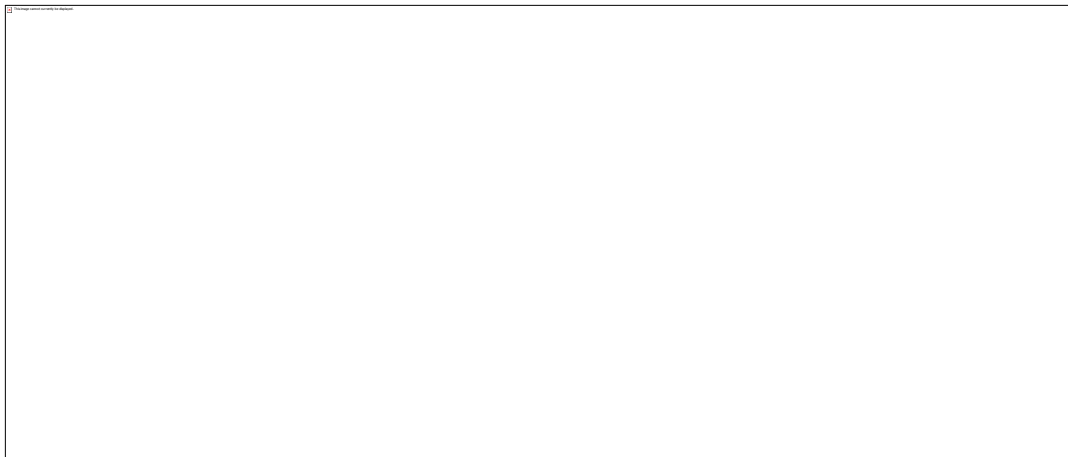


Digital Detox, disconnect to reconnect, homepage <http://digitaldetox.org/>

Secondly and most commonly, companies offer digital disengagement in the form of downloadable apps. Whilst holidays and events (as above) offer temporary relief from constant digital presence and connectivity by removing the technology altogether, apps are more about offering ongoing and permanent assistance in managing the technology within an everyday digital context. Specific settings and timers enable users to control, regulate, manage and monitor their time (e.g. measuring how long they spend on a given software/app per day) and information (e.g. 'de-cluttering' unused apps and duplicated files) in relation to their devices: both of which are related to issues such as productivity (i.e. are you on SNS too much? Are your files organised clearly?) and health (too much screen-time? Are you using your devices before sleeping?).



Moment, an iOS App, <https://inthemoment.io/>



The Big Red Stop, homepage and advertisement of the App, <http://www.bigredstop.com/>

The apps seem to be aimed at people who want to increase their productivity and efficiency whilst managing their time and energy more effectively, whether it is for work or for quality of life. This does not necessarily mean getting rid of technology through digital disengagement, but rather, managing technology through negotiated/selective digital disengagement: as The Big Red Stop offers through its app, 'simple controls to *come back on-line when you want*'.⁴

2. In-depth Case Study: Consciously Digital with Anastasia Dedyukhina

As part of our initial investigation into businesses and services around digital disengagement, we embarked on a case study of "Consciously Digital"- a life coaching company based in London, offering advice and educational services and courses, "digital detox" events and advice to tech

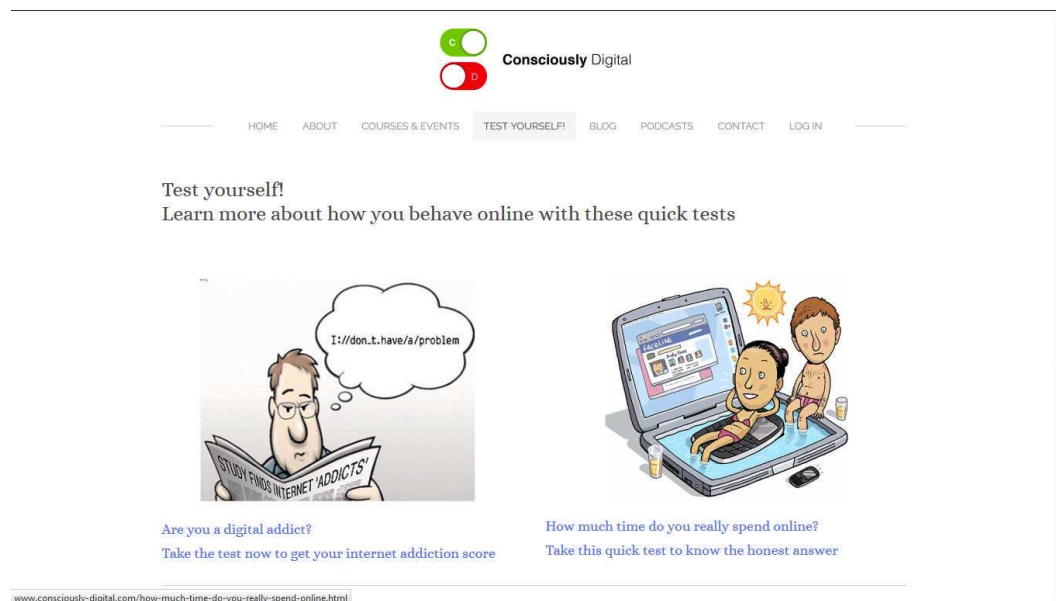
⁴ <http://www.bigredstop.com/>

companies, and tailored services to business companies and individuals. Consciously Digital describe their mission in the following way:

Our mission is to help people take control over their lives, and balance their online and offline behaviour. We want everyone to make conscious choices about what and when they go online, and not get manipulated by device manufacturers or app developers. We believe that it is a fundamental right for people to not only connect, but also to disconnect, and decide when and where they want to be connected and which information they want to share. An individual should always remain in control of their agenda.

We think that people shouldn't unplug altogether, but also acknowledge the positive impact that technology can have on our lives, including health, career opportunities and social connections. However, we think that above all it should remain a tool, and as any tool, it should have its own place. We believe that people have the right and ability to place boundaries between their online and offline lives, and strongly support the view that technology should help people become more human and less computer-like.⁵

Despite being a profit-oriented business, the site offers a wealth of free information, including blog entries and podcasts and various “tests” and “tips” which help assessing one’s use of digital technologies, the presumed degree of “digital addiction” and “digital clutter”, and offer clear, simple and practical solutions for improvement.



“Test Yourself!” Consciously Digital <http://www.consciously-digital.com/test-yourself.html>

The initiative and the concept of “Consciously Digital” is closely tied to its founder, Anastasia Dedyukhina, whose story is described in detail on a separate part of the site, and is also presented briefly on the “blog” section of the site. In both locations, we can read Anastasia’s story of a dramatic change of lifestyle, from being surrounded by digital devices and highly stressed colleagues, when she had worked in digital marketing and leading digital media companies, to

⁵ <http://www.consciously-digital.com/our-mission.html>

focusing on health, well-being and work-life balance, by becoming “digitally conscious”, reducing her use of computers and social media, and giving up a smartphone altogether.

In an interview for this study, Anastasia told the story in more details, describing the intensity of the “always on” work environment, and the importance of her own change and transformation. She then emphasised that her mission is not to abandon digital communication, but to manage it, describing her approach as consisting of “time management, space management, relationship management and self management” (Interview, 11 December 2015).

Similarly, her business and the services she offers to clients focus on management rather than refusal of the digital: a substantial part of Anastasia’s work is done on her laptop, and the meetings with clients take place face to face as well as via video chats and emails. At the same time, it is important to her to offer moments without technology. For example, in a guest lecture to students at Manchester Metropolitan University, which Anastasia offered as part of our research encounter, she asked the students to switch off all their devices for 30 minutes and to document every time they attempt use the devices, or feel anxious or uneasy without them.

And lastly, Anastasia sees her business not as a specific solution, but as a coaching in support of a new form of “consciousness”, a new awareness that helps using digital technologies more responsibly and wisely. At the same time, she also positions “Consciously digital” as part of her broader field of entrepreneurial interests – whether these include training for digital leadership, or geographical expansion of coaching services to countries beyond the UK.

Key issues

1. Digital Disengagement: a necessity of a trend?

Our analysis of the growing organising in support of “unplugging” and other related forms of digital refusal reveals that digital disengagement is moving from the margins to the centre. In part, such move can be explained by the growing sense of being overwhelmed by the digital, in one’s work or personal life, and the feeling that digital technologies increase stress and take up too much time in one’s life (Weizman, 2014). At the same time, digital disengagement can be also understood as a trend, a fashion adopted by many because its “in” – see, for example, the high popularity of the “I unplug...” selfies. Such popularity, in itself, relies on the rise of various social media trends and fashions – such as the use of selfies as a form of connectivity and civil participation by means of social networking, and as a mode of digital self-promotion (Senft and Baym, 2015; Kuntsman forthcoming).

2. Digital Disengagement: a freedom or a new form of self-management?

A striking common feature, that unites most businesses, services and collective initiatives around digital disengagement, is the emphasis on freedom which in turn is dependent on limiting the use of digitally mediated communication and associated devices. The “unplugging” days invite individuals and families to unplug in order to be free to connect to nature and to each other and to experience rest, harmony and balance. Businesses and services insist on the “winding down”, “decluttering”, and “getting back to one’s life”. And yet, those same services – whether they come in the form of behavioural training, or actual apps – are about self-regulation, self-monitoring and self-discipline (Lupton 2015). Apps in particular are often akin to health-related devices such as the FitBit: manage the device and you manage yourself; in that sense, the disengager’s desire to be free is always already seen, experienced, and managed through the eyes of digital technology” (Rettberg 2014).

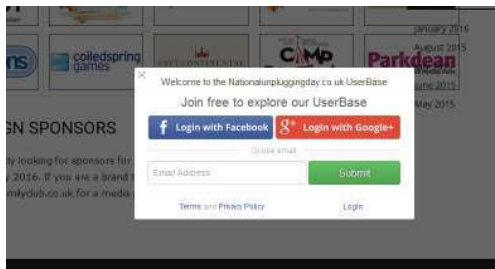
3. Digital Disengagement: the paradox of refusal in the era of digital solutionism

The high number of businesses and charities supporting initiatives such as the National Unplugging Day, and the rising number of businesses and digital solutions (such as apps) that have mushroomed in the last year alone, to help users manage their “digital addictions” and “declutter their digital lives”, suggests that the need to digitally disengage is increasingly recognised and serviced. Or rather, as Evgeny Morozov (2013) has poignantly argued in his critique of “digital solutionism”, it is the market itself, which creates the sense of such “need”, for which a solution is then invented and promoted.

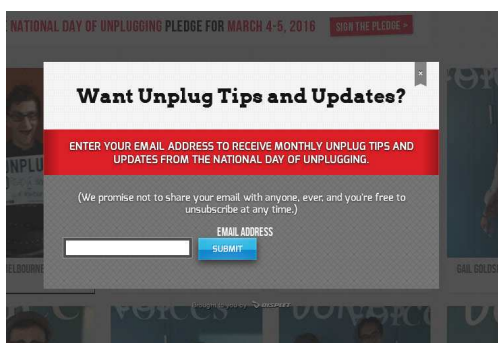
As our overview has already demonstrated, digital disengagement is mostly about selective, negotiated disconnection. As such, it is *simultaneously* about “letting go” *and* about self-regulation and an ever-growing, and increasingly digitised, management of time. And here we come to the central paradox of digital disengagement. First and foremost, the refusal (or the reduction) of the digital will likely have substantial consequences for the digital economy – the move to use less smartphones or minimise the time spent on digital platforms can indeed be seen as an anti-industry move, as a drop in the overall digital consumption. However, the rising professionalisation and commercialisation of digital disengagement means that rather than moving away from the digital industry, the “refusal” or “management” become as firmly embedded in the digital economy as the digital lives they are trying to change.

It is not surprising, then, that both the sites dedicated to digital unplugging *and* the life coaching service focusing on reducing the digital, relied heavily on the digital tools. All three welcomed their digital visitors with full-screen size banners inviting to join, subscribe and follow them.

We therefore end this report with an open question, for future exploration: can digital disengagement even be possible as long as it relies on those same digital tools?



National Unplugging Day pop up <http://nationalunpluggingday.co.uk/our-partners/>



National Day of Unplugging, pop up on homepage <http://nationaldayofunplugging.com/>

Next steps

The main next step is preparing the proposal for a large study of digital disengagement (one funding application is currently being finalised, and other funding possibilities are being explored), which would incorporate insights from the two seed studies.

The preparation for expanding our current findings works on two levels: first, to carry out a large-scale empirical study of digital disengagement, which would include a cultural analysis of policies around digital engagement; alternative discourses of engagement and disengagement; interviews with those who profess to digitally disengage; ethnographies of disengagement events and groups; and a detail ethnographic study of the blooming businesses and services, dedicated to digital disengagement, such as “digital detox” workshops and retreats. Secondly, to expand the study into a comparative, international dimension, by addressing the phenomenon as it occurs in different countries and contexts. In addition, venues for public engagement are also explored.

Impact

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

- contribution to scholarly knowledge and theoretical innovation
- engagement with the community to address issues of digital freedom and coercion and explore the possibilities of collective digital refusal; and to explore what kind of services can be offered to support digital disengagement.

The larger study is expected to produce research of high social impact, by focusing on the following questions: How can collective action change the dominating forms of digital media use? What forms of activism / what organisational structures are most effective in doing this? What services are needed to support those wishing to reduce their use of digital tools? What expertise is required for such services to be effective?

Dissemination

The main dissemination venue, at this stage, is the final report; a seminar talk to take place later this year; and a journal article. In addition, we plan two knowledge exchange and consultation events, which would combine insights from our two seed studies, and will discuss the initial findings with academics and community members. The first event will target academics and will take place at MMU in 2016, at its recently established “Digital Transformations” network, as part of the network’s activities around digital citizenship. The second event, likely to take part in late 2016-early 2017, would target community members and non-academic participants.

Funding

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

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