The Process and Affordances of Platform-Specific Social Media Disconnection

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Abstract

This article examines millennials' experience of platform-specific disconnection, focusing on the ambiguous intersection of engagement and disengagement with social media. Drawing on 16 semi-structured interviews with (non)users[1] who have quit specific social media platforms while remaining users on other platforms, this study addresses a specific practice of social media disengagement as a phenomenon, regardless of the (non)users' demographics. As a result, the study introduces phases leading up to platform-specific disconnection, which can extend to, or derive from, other practices of media rejection and resistance. These different stages refer to the technical and social affordances that influence users in their decision to (dis)engage with specific platforms, revealing a bias between the perception of the phenomenon and the lived experience of the disconnected. By visualizing the process of platform-specific disengagement, this paper provides novel insight into media resistance and non-use, and challenges the misconception of disconnecting in the digital age.

Key words: platform-specific disconnection, disengagement, social media, affordances, user experience.

Introduction

Disconnection as deliberate disengagement from influential media platforms (including social networking sites) is not an entirely new phenomenon, but it is still rather uncommon in Western societies, where most of the population uses digital technologies daily. Our infrastructures include communication tools, applications, and media that have become entangled in how we interact and almost invisibly habitual to our daily practices (Chun, 2016). Since we are immersed in the digital to the extent that it has blurred the line between online and offline experiences (Floridi, 2015), cutting oneself off from technology and media seems to be a challenge (Tiidenberg et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, people do disengage. Along with having become extensively connected by technologies and networks (Chayko, 2016), users feel a need to manage their visibility, connectivity, and relationships, both online and offline. This often includes changing one's strategy for self-presentation (Marwick & boyd, 2014) and manipulating the technical affordances of the interface (Light, 2014), but in other cases, users prefer to stop using the media and leave it entirely (Portwood-Stacer, 2012; Karppi, 2014).

With the contemporary social norms now attributed to visibility and accessibility in relation to social networking sites (Baym, 2015), the use of these digital platforms is not only habitual (Tiidenberg et al., 2017) but almost compulsory for maintaining one's social capital (Sleeman et al., 2016; Neves et al., 2016) and trustworthiness (Cirucci, 2017; Brandom, 2016). Consequently, people who are not on the most influential platforms are subject to generalizations, as if they are disconnected because they don't understand or support new technologies, they don't have access

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1   For the purpose of differentiating the practitioners of platform-specific disconnection, the participants of this study are referred to as '(non)users.' All other disconnected users are called 'non-users' as suggested by Wyatt et al. (2003) and Neves et al. (2016).

to the infrastructure, or they feel too exposed when using the medium (Social Media Collective, 2011). Thus, users rather manage their visibility, availability, and relationships without deciding to become non-users (Cassidy, 2016; Light, 2014).

The ones who do choose to cut themselves off from media often do this as an ideological statement (Karppi, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2012); others are disconnected due to economic, demographic, or cultural reasons (Wyatt, Thomas & Terranova, 2002; Wyche & Baumer, 2016). Literature about disengagement and non-users in social sciences, then, often addresses reasons why people resist, avoid, or disconnect from media (Cassidy, 2016; Neves et al., 2015), or disconnect from each other with the help of technologies (Light, 2014). This is mostly discussed—and thus also perceived—as a means of resistance (Portwood-Stacer, 2012), detox (Syvertsen, 2017), and activism (Karppi, 2014). The renounced users make drastic changes in their media practice that seem to indicate a clear agenda.

I question what else could be learned about contemporary (social) media practices through the phenomenon of disconnection, regardless of the motivation behind it. Hence, this paper focuses on the context of disengagement – more specifically, how and in which conditions do users disconnect, and not specifically on *why* they disengage. The aim, then, is to provide more insight to the nuance of navigating in social media-saturated environments (cf. Markham, 2014) and to contribute to research on participation in social networking sites beyond the binary of use and non-use. Drawing on a recent study on the lived experience of deliberate disconnection from specific social media (Dremljuga, 2017), this paper discusses the process of leaving influential social media platforms, highlighting the limitations and opportunities that are discovered and lost, as well as those that are chosen or tailored.

Literature review: from binary use and non-use to flexible forms of (dis)engagement

Since non-use was recognized and explored as a research topic, scholars have highlighted that disconnection is not the opposite side of connection, as well as the idea that disengagement deserves to be studied as a separate phenomenon, even though the two phenomena are intertwined (Karppi, 2014; Light, 2014). Furthermore, it is difficult to distinguish use and non-use as a binary phenomenon in practice (Baumer et al., 2013), as users have virtual extensions of self (see Mitchell, 2003) even if they are only *existing* on online platforms without actively participating (Floridi, 2015).

Online visibility and connections are part of building one's reputation and persona, and influential social media platforms are recognized as official spaces for presenting one's authentic identity (Cirucci, 2017). Thus, it might be considered impossible to be 'off the grid' without it having an effect on your image. In Western culture it is more common to disconnect using methods that are not visible to other users instead of opting out entirely. Users can modify the exposure of others' practices to them (John & Gal, 2016) as well as the visibility of their own activities in a network (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Users often change their media practice short term in order to test their addiction to social media (Syvertsen, 2017) or simply because they perceive it as a waste of time (Tiidenberg et al., 2017).

Periodic unplugging is one way to deal with the pressure of being 'always on' (boyd, 2012). In addition to non-use being seen as something odd that needs to be justified, diversified means for connecting have created new forms of personal connections (see Baym, 2015) that are accompanied by expectations as to how one should communicate. As highlighted by Baym (2015), one's communication practice is influenced by interactivity, temporal structure, social cues, storage, replicability, reach, and mobility, which have emerged together with new technologies, including social networking sites (Baym, 2015, p. 6). "Therefore, I call for exploring the context in which they disconnect."

Introducing the concept of affordances, Gibson has suggested that in order to understand a subject, one needs to investigate the environment that one is placed in (Gibson, 1977). To put it simply, affordances represent what the environment, together with the objects that it holds, allows a user to do, regardless of his or her expertise. For example, a door handle suggests grabbing for its user to open the door while the handle alone does not suggest whether to pull or push the door to enter; however, door plates clearly indicate to the need to push as there is nothing to grab on to. In the context of communication technologies, features of social media can be seen as affordances that imply, but not force, certain acts of interaction. Regardless of the actions suggested by the design of social media applications, its perceived affordances offer alternative ways of taking advantage of the platforms' properties (Norman, 1990).

Consequently, when interacting with or on a platform, the subjects make use of its settings, (co)creating new norms within and with that environment. Madianou (2015) refers to the diverse playing field of communicative opportunities and environments as 'polymedia'. Using a combination of media allows users to navigate between different platforms and make the environment fit their communicative needs (Madianou, 2015). In order to introduce new ways of interacting in these conditions, the opportunities and limitations that influence and are created by disconnecting need also to be addressed.

This paper presents partial findings from a larger study of the phenomenon of disconnection, in which users in their 20ies and 30ies have opted out from a specific social media platform while continuing to use their other social media account(s). In the context of this article, I will refer to this media practice as *platform-specific disconnection* and the practitioners of this practice as (non)users. This paper addresses the larger question of "What is the experience of disconnection when quitting an influential social media platform but not leaving all social media?" Concurrently, the study explores social media as environments with technical affordances that suggest certain social norms that are coproduced by networked counterparts, asking "Which affordances are noted when learning about the process of disconnecting?"

Methodology

A snowball sampling strategy can be used to locate people who might be otherwise difficult to find (Tracy, 2013), but in this case, the disconnected could not refer to other users with a similar social media practice. Thus, participants were found as a result of 'making the ball roll' from different entry points, utilizing both personal and professional networks of the researcher, and not via the research participants themselves. This resulted in a cross-national sample, with interviewees of different professions and ages between 20 and 40, which also prevented the creation of a homogenous sample.

Interviews were first conducted with 24 people who were disconnected from some social media. After excluding the contacts who did not meet all the criteria of platform-specific disconnection and fell out of that specific (non)user group, the data sample was compiled of 16 interviewees in their twenties and thirties, including people of different professions and nationalities (see Table 1). This demonstrates theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006), since the focus was to explore a particular type of disconnection, regardless of the participants' background.

To be included in the sample, the interviewee had to be an active, long-term user of social media who had deliberately quit one or more of his or her social media accounts. The act of leaving one or more social media platforms while continuing to use other social media accounts—without signing up as a new member for another platform—was the central criterion for study participants. Interviewees who had immediately migrated to a similar platform after quitting another were not included in the sample, as the focus was on disengagement rather than migration.

Table 1: Overview of interviewees

Name	Interview language	Origin (living in, if different)	Field of work	Quit platform(s)
Matt	English	North-America (Central Europe)	Science	Facebook
Susan	English	Scandinavia	Education	Facebook
Martin	Estonian	Europe	Business	Facebook, Snapchat
Olaf	Estonian	Eastern Europe (Scandinavia)	IT	Facebook, Google, Twitter
Mike	Estonian	Eastern Europe	Business	Facebook, Instagram
Tom	English	South-Western Europe (Eastern Europe)	Education	Facebook
Josephine	Estonian	Eastern Europe (Central Europe)	Student	Facebook
Paul	English	South-Eastern Europe (Scandinavia)	Student	Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat
Jane	English	North-America (Scandinavia)	Student	Facebook
Christie	Estonian	Eastern Europe	Sales	Facebook
Greg	English	Scandinavia	Business	Facebook
Maria	Estonian	Eastern Europe	Student	Facebook
Chris	English	Scandinavia	IT	Facebook, Google
Josh	Estonian	Eastern Europe	Media	Facebook, Snapchat
Jake	English	Western Asia (Scandinavia)	Media	Facebook
Peter	English	Central Europe	Student	Facebook

Note: To protect participants' privacy, interviewees have been assigned pseudonyms, their origin and location is referred to as an area instead of a country, and their field of work is generalized based on their profession.

The analysis is based on the transcriptions of audio and video recordings of 16 semi-structured interviews held individually between November 2016 and May 2017 in the form of friendly conversations (Spradley, 1979). Depending on participants' nationality, interviews were conducted in English or Estonian (the mother tongue of the researcher). Due to geographical distances, most interviews were organized via video or audio calls on Skype, FaceTime, Facebook Messenger, or WhatsApp—depending upon the preferences of the interviewees. Additional questions and comments were later collected via emails or texts.

The video and audio files were transcribed and coded in the same language as the recordings. Conducting interviews, transcribing, and analysing the materials continued simultaneously as is inherent to grounded theory methods. Illustrating inductive research, conversations and analysis were guided by the topics and findings highlighted in previous phases of the interviews and iterations of analysis. This approach is influenced by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), which also enables the researcher to engage in constant comparison of concepts brought to his or her attention throughout the research process from data collection to data analysis until

reaching a satisfying level of saturation.

Findings and discussion then addresses selected topics that were found to be characteristic to this certain type of disengagement and new or surprising information in this field of study. Consequently, the following chapter covers some peculiarities of (non)users, the phases of platform-specific disconnection, and the implications of such media practice in relation to the misconception of opting out from social media.

Findings and discussion

The participants in this study are educated young people of different professions from countries with a Western culture (see Table 1). Their daily practice includes, but does not assume, interactions via several means of communication technology common for their cultural background and living environment. They choose to leave the influential social media platform(s) with which they have had disagreements, regardless of their accessibility to the Internet and their overall approval of digital media use. This separates them from the non-users studied by Wyatt et al. (2003) and Neves et al. (2016), who are either not interested in adopting media or reject it altogether for ideological reasons. Like other disengaged users, (non)users' discontent is mainly rooted in the perceived usefulness of a site (Cassidy, 2016) and the social conventions created in specific networks, as well as the expectations that come along with new ways of connecting via social networking sites (Baym, 2015).

As introduced by Ben Light (2014), appropriation and avoidance techniques are aimed to avoid certain experiences in social media. By disconnecting with (and not from) social networking sites, users keep a distance from selected human and nonhuman connections without making the other members of the network aware of their disconnective practice (Light, 2014). In the case of platform-specific disconnection, users do not disengage and manage their connections in secret. As these (non)users report to have left a platform for self-care purposes, expressing worry about the possible consequences or setting specific goals for its results are uncommon.

> *"They'll probably forget to send me an invite to some party they arrange on Facebook, but that's fine, it is what it is. I'll hear about it from someone else anyways, or afterwards, when I see them. They'll feel more awkward than I will about it."* (Paul)

The findings suggest that these (non)users either do not experience fear of missing out or prioritize the content they wish to consume over these fears – either way, they choose to challenge the assumed negative consequences of disconnecting which often guide users to appropriate platforms rather than leave the platform entirely. From the viewpoint of technological appropriation as discussed by Light (2014, p. 22-26), (non)users take agency to actively influence which path the technologies are leading them to. Their experience can show an example to other users about the possibility of disconnecting without serious social consequences, yet, these (non)users do not announce their motivation for the decision to disconnect. Despite the activist character of platform-specific disconnection, the practice then moves from a politically charged act of resistance to a lifestyle choice which is supported by seeing social media "as another space people choose to inhabit, or not, alongside others in their lives" (Light, 2014, p. 24).

The practice is then still self-induced and deliberate, but it is less strategic than other types of disengagement. Platform-specific disconnection serves as a bridge bridge between ideological media resistance and experiments with disengagement. The (non)users do not set a due date for their changed media practice, as is often the case when users detox from the digital (see Syvertsen, 2017). Unlike with appropriation (Light, 2014), users leave the platform instead of playing with its affordances in an attempt to make the platform fit better to their preferences, as well as purposes of use (Kaufmann, 2015). And unlike in performative media resistance cases (Karppi, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2012), these disconnecting users remain connected to other similar media platforms. Even though they are deliberately 'off the radar' for some of their network, (non)users are not in hiding.

As the disconnected abandon a platform, it is easy to assume that with fewer platforms in use, the subjects would be less reachable. Conducting this study proved that being reachable is closely associated with the diversity of one's connections to different media, rather than just one's own social media presence. For someone using only one social networking site, a disconnected user of that platform can be less conveniently accessible even if he or she is active on other social media. This is where polymedia (see Madianou, 2015) plays a supportive role in enabling users to opt out as well as to find such people.

With social network(ing) sites, connections are made visible and inherently "the users could construct a public or semi-public profile and articulate a list of other users with whom they shared a connection" (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). However, the current affordances of most social media sites do not enable seeing users with whom they used to share a connection and the remaining users are not made aware when their network members disconnect. (Non)users are then not difficult to approach because they are unreachable; locating the deliberately disconnected is more complicated due to a lack of reference points to former network members. The difficulty of finding (non)users highlights the peculiar nature of the phenomenon: platform-specific disconnection is quite unnoticeable for other members unless their polymedia coincides with alternative contact points of the (non)user.

Regardless of how visible they are to other network members, all users make daily observations and choices about how to be connected. This brings us to the process that (non)users go through when opting for this specific practice. Whereas the decision to disconnect may seem to occur at the moment a profile is deleted or deactivated, in truth, disengagement starts earlier. Motivation to leave is aggregated throughout the users' media practice whenever they observe conflicts with the affordances of the platforms. Platform-specific disconnection is then a result of long-term negotiations between the user, the platform, and the affordances of the environment.

To describe the experience of (non)users, I will introduce this type of disconnection in more detail by highlighting four phases in the suggested process model (see Figure 1): motive collection, disconnective practice, modified media practice, and retrospective sensemaking. The first subchapter will focus on the observations and actions taken prior to disconnecting from one (or some) specific platform(s); the second subchapter describes media use after the act of disconnecting; the last subchapter addresses the implications and misconceptions related to opting for such social media practice.
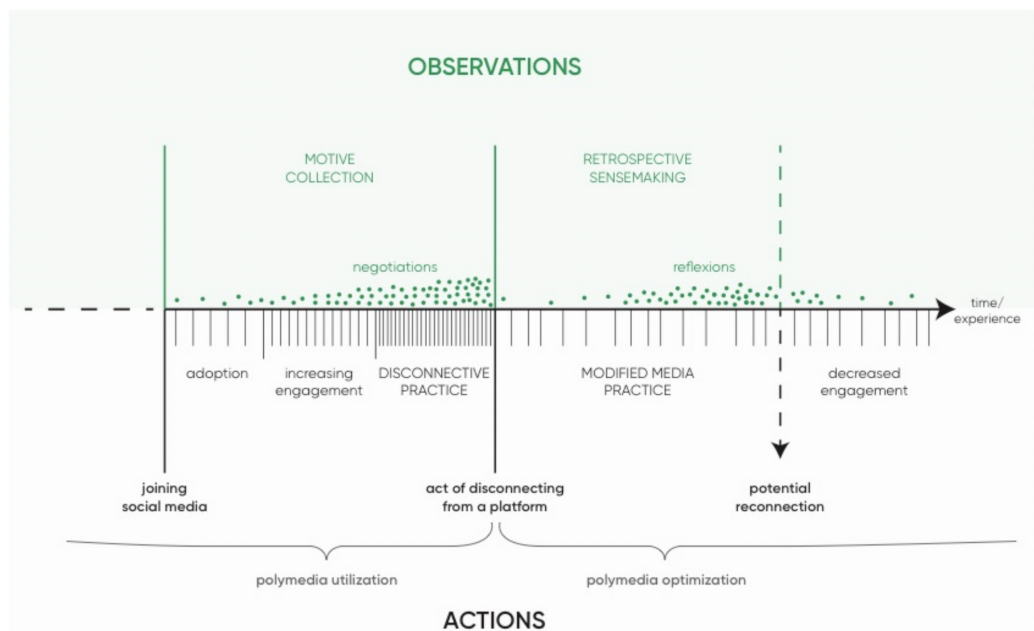
Figure 1: Observations and actions taken in the process of platform-specific disconnection

Lead-up to the act of disconnecting

Leaving a specific social media platform not only highlights the experience of that platform but of social media more generally. The findings, based on studying platform-specific disconnection as a phenomenon beyond reasoning and demographics, suggest that the sociotechnical affordances of any platform influence users' media practice across platforms, and long term. In other words, users' first memories from interacting in and with social media are as influential as the moments that precede to the act of disconnecting from a certain platform. Thus, disconnection is not just an act or a state but a process comprised of several phases that, as a whole, represent disconnection as an experience.

In the case of platform-specific disconnection, the experience starts with a latent *motive collection* phase, which spans from the moment a person starts using any social media to the moment he or she quits a specific platform (see Figure 1). Throughout this period, users get acquainted with the platform, discover its benefits and weaknesses, and adapt to its affordances regardless of the extent to which they agree with the opportunities and limitations created by the platform. These observations are not given much attention initially, but they become impactful later. Drawing comparisons to other solutions in their communication practice online or offline, users often start questioning some of the features and conventions they have adapted to.

Disagreements with specific platforms, their technical affordances, and the social norms built on these affordances are noted and collected on the background of daily media use across platforms. As the users' media consumption becomes more sophisticated, they start to recognize a change in their preferences in comparison to earlier experience on social media, and feel affected by the mismatch between their new expectations and current media practice. Users negotiate whether the discomfort and negative feelings that come along with this imbalance outweigh the benefits of being a member on the platform. This collection of thoughts and moments that are described as frustrating, invasive, unexpected, questionable, or unwanted, gives the user motivation and justification later when deciding to leave the platform.

> *"So Facebook now tells me that I should take an umbrella with me because it's raining. Well, maybe I'm not going out? And even if I was, maybe I don't want to know this? Let me find that out by myself."* (Susan)

During these negotiations with self and the platform, disconnected users discover that the use of modern technologies has a price. Believing that *"there is no good without the bad,"* users recognize the ambivalence of media (Ribak & Rosenthal, 2015) and accept the undesirable features and conventions in exchange for having access to the appreciated features of that media. Nevertheless, users only endure these conformations to a certain extent, which is rather unpredictable.

The connection between a platform's affordances and the user's patience can be seen as a set of fragile strings that are being pulled by the strength of the negative emotions and thoughts that occur when using the platform. As the platform offers new instances of disappointment or negative surprises from unwanted features made available on or by the interface, the connection becomes increasingly fragile. Interested in 'fixing' the disagreeable parts, the users detect means provided by the platform to alter their (and others') experience.

This leads users to *disconnective practice* (see Figure 1), a phase in which they create coping mechanisms for the frustration experienced on the platform by playing with its settings. With the help of the technology that they feel discontent with, users filter information and connections that they are exposed to as well as limit what they expose to others when using the platform. These activities combine avoidance techniques (see Plaut, 2015; Portwood-Stacer, 2012), such as using technology to ignore other members or disregard certain information from the overall flow, and appropriation (Light, 2014), which is when the user repurposes the platform by playing with its affordances.

In the context of Facebook, the phase of disconnective practice includes 'unfollowing' or 'unfriending' other members in the network, 'unliking' or 'unfollowing' companies' pages, and hiding selected information about themselves from specific users and audiences. Whereas this kind of management of one's connections and visibility to other users of the network can be discussed in terms of self-presentation and identity management (Cirucci, 2017), in the case of platform-specific disconnection, the emphasis is on managing the content shared by other members in that network and interactions enabled by the platform, rather than others' perceptions of the disengaging user.

Another example of this phase is when users turn off push notifications about messages from specific people, disable notifications from a certain platform entirely, or stop using the mobile application of the social media platform and visit its website version in a browser instead. In this way, individuals avoid being distracted or called to engage with the network (Plaut, 2015), and manipulate their connection to the platform as well as to its other members (Light, 2014). With the help of its technical affordances, they modify the social affordances made habitual with the help of the platform, such as expecting the same level of reachability from all members of the network, wherever and whenever.

Others aim to claim agency and exercise self-control: instead of eliminating the possibility of getting called back to the platform through alerts, the users choose a certain time of day for answering their messages and returning calls, even if they see the notifications as soon as they're received. In this way, users play with the temporal structure of communication (see Baym, 2015), controlling access to them and their information via the platform.

> "I check but deliberately ignore those conversations. If it's not urgent, I will reply when I feel like dealing with it." (Joan)

The aforementioned techniques are used to only partially disengage from the platform and are mostly not noticeable to other influenced counterparts. By manipulating with the visibility, temporality, and reach of the information that is shared between members in a social network, users proactively eliminate communicative moments from their social media practice that they do not want to experience, choosing how and when to be connected. At this stage, the users do not yet think about terminating their connection with the platform. However, disconnective practice shows their initiative to take control over how the platform can be used by the network, instead of abiding to its conventional use. This includes setting boundaries to connectivity and "the extent to which connection and disconnection through sites will be determined manually or automatically via human or non-human activity" (Light, 2014, p.17).

While continuously appropriating the platform and discovering new preferences, users begin to acknowledge observations from the motive collection phase. As a result of aggregated disagreements, users question whether modifying the settings of the platform is enough and assess whether the beneficial features of the social media warrant the efforts of modification. Realizing that the time and emotions invested in appropriating the platform can be discarded, users decide to take a step further from disengagement and disconnect from the platform. With that, they embrace *modified media practice*.

Life after platform-specific disconnection

Making the decision to disconnect often coincides with important life events that highlight the relevance, need, or opportunity to disengage from certain social media or engage elsewhere. These life events, such as entering college, moving to another country, and changes in relationships or influential family matters are often viewed as justification for disconnecting; if nothing else, they make disconnecting more convenient. For example, Joan moved to another continent to go to college and focus on her studies. She made the decision not to continue using Facebook, because she believed it might distract her from her studies. Based on her earlier experience, she knew that using social

media would make her miss home, cause her to feel like she was being left out of activities that she would have wanted to attend to, and result in her spending *"too much time"* on unproductive pursuits. Leaving the platform takes place in an instant, even though the decision to disconnect is not based on the specific moment when users leave their account. The decision to disconnect from a platform is made rather spontaneously, with little fear of missing out, despite the risk of social exclusion, and limiting their means for keeping in touch with relevant connections. In that moment, individuals do tend to consider the gratification that their modified media practice can bring, however, they also take notice of the limitations they might face after disconnecting from sites that are actively used by family members, peers, and colleagues.

> *"I knew people wouldn't contact me separately to invite me to their party, but I figured I'd hear about it otherwise. They did often forget about inviting me because I wasn't on their friend list. But that's fine, those events aren't usually that relevant. My friends would probably send me a text about it anyways."* (Matt)

One of the limitations users fear prior to disconnecting is being deprived of information shared online and conversations held in those virtual spaces. These days, this would include the majority of communication that is not held in person: organizing and inviting people to events, asking for help, offering special 'friend deals', announcing important life events, and so on. The ease of using a mobile application to quickly reach a network, regardless of its members' location, has become so accepted that social media is the most common space for such activities and announcements.

While this limitation is met and the (non)users perceive a decline in the information shared with them after disconnecting, it is often found to be a less damaging or influential consequence than feared. One scenario is that the network gives the (non)user special treatment. In that case, information that would otherwise be missed is shared separately to the disconnected user through their preferred channels. In another scenario, the individual receives the information indirectly, thanks to common daily conversations with friends, colleagues, or family members.

Unexpected opportunities are discovered when users disconnect. For example, delegation of filtering content—users leave the decision-making about what is relevant to be shared from the overall social media flow (without asking for it in words) to their connections. These individuals then trust their family, friends, and colleagues to anticipate their needs and preferences better than the platform would. Despite someone else being in control of deciding what should be shared with the renounced user and what should not, the disconnected generally find that this provides an appropriate balance between the effort needed from them, the control that they have over the situation, and the reward of this combination.

So the users find the act of disconnecting to be fairly easy, both technically and emotionally. As noted by many, the most disturbing part of the process was the personalized suggestions given to the user by the platform right before or after deleting or deactivating one's profile. For example, before deleting an account, Facebook warns the user that many people will miss him or her after leaving the platform, using the pictures of their closest friends and family to drive the point home. The site encourages users to stay connected and reconsider other options, suggesting that the user deactivate rather than delete his or her profile, with the aim of increasing the likelihood and ease of the user reconnecting.

> *"Facebook does this evil disconnection thing when you're leaving and shows you pictures of the people it knows you care about. And so... it showed me a picture of my sister, and it was like 'Emma is going to miss you.' And then my sister actually sent me a message saying that 'I'm so sad you're not on Facebook anymore (---)' and I was like 'Oh, man, dagger in the heart!'. But you're not gonna stop hearing from me, so..."* (Matt)

The disconnected do often return to the platform soon after disconnecting, but this happens accidentally, as a result of habitual muscle and memory behaviour (see also Tiidenberg et al., 2017).

Users report seeking the social media application or notifications from the network whenever they unlock their smartphone; they find themselves typing in the first letters of the social media website whenever they open a browser window or a new tab, and they commonly think of or suggest activities as if they were still users on that platform. These incidents make (non)users learn just how habitual the social media had become for them.

Despite the subtle 'withdrawal' signs in this 'reverse domestication' process (see Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016), the disconnected feel little temptation to return to the platform for its content. While reporting that they are happy with, if not happy *about*, their decision to disconnect from the platform, all of them refer to many of its practical features that they wish were still available to them. This includes birthday reminders, event invitations, expert advice from other members, and community groups. Nevertheless, when disconnecting, users settle for less convenient solutions or make an extra effort to substitute the missed affordances with tools from the renounced platform. This is perceived as more rewarding than what is given to them in return when investing time and emotions into appropriating the platform. Disconnecting is found to be less difficult than accepting the environment as it is, regardless of the features that are appreciated on the platform.

This social labour is encouraged by polymedia (see Madianou, 2015), the communicative opportunities across platforms that are enabled for individuals with access to the technologies. The diversity of one's polymedia enables a more convenient transmission when starting with the modified media practice. As different environments, both within and besides social media, are used to prevent context collapse (see Vitak et al., 2010), most of their network already has other connection points that can easily be used after disconnecting. The main difficulty lies in whether the network is willing to come along with the suggested alteration in media habits, or a partial platform switch.

> "We had a group on Facebook where we shared who should work on which task and agreed on meeting times and... I realized that I can't be without Facebook, because the study-related stuff was still always there." (Maria)

Regardless of users' sturdiness and comfort in leaving the platform, they are confronted with situations where they must consider returning to the platform. These include needs related to work or study, mostly in relation to cooperation and information-sharing in online environments, but peer pressure may also be a factor. On many occasions, the need to return is derived from, reminded by, and even somewhat forced onto them by the remaining users of the platforms. As others in their network are less flexible and less open to changes in their current media practice, the remaining users blame the disconnected for causing problems with their modified media practice.

> "All kinds of event organizing and aftermath were made that way. So some nice person had to call me and then you would thank that person as if you owed to them like 'I'm sorry for not having Facebook and being so annoying for you guys.' That's how it felt like, as if I wasn't making this easy for them." (Mike)

This kind of blaming has an effect on the disconnected and can be seen as a consequence of a certain sociality that is engineered in platforms (van Dijck, 2013). The remaining users' need for their network to remain 'online' (meaning on the same platforms as them) and available on the most influential social media platforms, overrides the disconnected users' self-perceived need to be there. Depending on the relevance of the criticizing party to the (non)user, the situation is then usually 'solved' when the disconnected user returns to the platform and continues with a lower level of engagement compared to his or her practice prior to disconnecting (see Figure 1).

> "So I created a new profile, but didn't add anyone (as friends). I didn't post any pictures, or anything. I didn't really use it other than for that (study) group. Sometimes my friends would also send me funny pictures." (Maria)

In other cases, the disconnected put more effort into familizaring their important connections with the alternatives used in their modified practice. Platforms with similar functions, and those that were used prior to social networking sites (e.g. phone calls, Skype, Viber, WhatsApp, etc.), are often forgotten or disregarded, but not discarded, when users adopt new platforms. By suggesting other ways to stay connected after disconnecting, all users are reminded of the usefulness of the other platforms they have signed up for earlier in time.

Disconnecting, then, has a long-term impact on users' media practice, regardless of whether the platform is abandoned terminally or reconnected with in the the (unforeseeable) future. As the disconnected reflect on their experience of disconnecting, they discover the expectations and preferences to communication more generally. In the phase of *retrospective sensemaking*, individuals are reminded of the obstacles faced, the limitations crossed or exceeded, and the opportunities created throughout their social media practice. Although these moments are not presented as reasons to disconnect, they reveal details about the experience that they seek for in their ideal communication practice.

While users are still members of the disliked platform, much agency is given to the technology, including its affordances, but once the platform has been left, more agency is retrospectively given to self. Users then choose to blame their own personal characteristics for the frustration experienced on social media, rather than the character of the renounced platform(s) and the norms related to these platforms. This is accompanied by the remaining users' accusations that it is the (non)user causing a problematic situation, and not the platforms. As their practice differs from the majority's and the emphasis is put on the disconnected user's own agency—by themselves as well as by the remaining users of the network—instead of the platform's or the network's, the participants often admit to being 'different'. The feeling of being 'othered' due to one's expectations of a platform (Cassidy, 2016) connects disengaging user groups, as their media practice is still perceived as less conventional.

> *"I didn't believe I will be able to live without it and that after some time I'll renew it. But I managed, and now I don't miss it at all. And I'm not feeling a need any more to comment every single thing that happened last week elsewhere. Or to give advice and guaranteed manual how to succeed."* (Peter)

When disconnecting, users eliminate their role in developing the platform and co-creating new norms for its use. Even though they hold an active stance and are the ones who wish to start a change, they invest in changing their own practice instead of contributing to changing the media. With this, they support building better environments outside, or without, and not within the platform.

The implications and misconception of disconnecting from social media

Mostly, users' assumptions about the results and consequences of disconnection are negatively charged, derived from the general discourse of disconnection that suggests resisting media entirely rather than just a specific social media platform. The misconception, then, is that the disconnected decline participation in online sociality altogether (van Dijck, 2013), which calls for social consequences such as exclusion. The real implications are hardly as impactful, as the boundaries of disconnection and connection are blurred with different levels of (dis)engagement.

According to (non)users, the limitations that are difficult to negotiate when disconnecting are work-related. Social media has become essential in business, especially when one wants to gain more visibility with inexpensive solutions and resources that are otherwise inaccessible. Some of the users in the study found that they needed to manage social media for business purposes, as it is an inexpensive and efficient tool for recruiting, networking, advertising, and customer service. In order to be visible on social media and utilize the opportunities provided by the platforms, the company needs a representative with a social media account, as company pages are often linked

to personal accounts.

Social networking sites are also used for self-branding, professional community building, and jobseeking. Thus, being off certain platforms influences professional opportunities for individuals. Limited visibility in online networks keeps users from seeing unlisted job offers and additional cooperation possibilities. Even though this fear does not keep users from disconnecting, it is yet another motivation to return to certain platforms, due to the inevitable need for self-branding and visibility for professional purposes, or possibly to postpone disconnecting.

> *"I have some projects where I sometimes need Facebook so I decided to go back in. I can show others what I've been doing... maybe someone would find me from the network and offer me a job. /.../ Otherwise I don't really want to mix Facebook with work. In my last work, I used Facebook differently because I didn't need to promote myself."* (Olaf)

Having found the optimal balance in polymedia by disconnecting from certain platforms and utilizing others, users eventually realize that although disconnecting has implications, it is not as difficult, strenuous, and limiting as expected. As the disconnected do not migrate to new, additional platforms, the previously unnoticed or unused affordances of platforms that are already in use are discovered, stretched, modified, or repurposed. This knowledge is passed on when seeking other opportunities to remain connected with members in their network.

Regardless of whether the different tools have an effect on the extent to which users continue to communicate with each other, this does not change the judgment given to the experience by the counterparts. In spite of the ease in which these alternatives tools are introduced and implemented, users continue to voice the commonly shared main narrative as if it were an objective statement, suggesting that disconnection complicates, not eases, one's life. Even though personal experience contradicts the generally assumed consequences of disconnection, disconnected users support the existing misconception of disconnection instead of arguing against it. Thus, other users continue to believe that disconnecting is difficult and both socially and professionally damaging. As a result, this alternative practice remains rather invisible and uncommon.

Platform-specific disconnection can then be beneficial for all users, on or off certain platforms, as it opens up a discussion about the alternative scenarios, expectations, and opportunities related to social media use. However, this knowledge is currently veiled due to the majority of the network not understanding or hearing about the real experience of disconnection. Whereas comparisons can be drawn to earlier research on disengagement and non-users, it is most evident that users' preferences in terms of both engagement and disengagement in social media are constantly changing as new or updated applications are created. The affordances guide people's use of the platform, but users are negotiating and discovering their role in tailoring the experience and the social conventions built around it.

Concluding remarks

Disengagement is not just a state or an act, but a process of observations and actions. Platform-specific disconnection includes phases of motive collection, disconnective practice, modified media practice, and retrospective sensemaking (see Figure 1) which represent long-term negotiations and reflections held in relation to all media environments throughout time. When disconnecting, (non)users choose how they wish to experience communication instead of conforming to the conventions of contemporary social media practice, or trying to escape from being connected. Nevertheless, disengaged users are often pushed to consider reconnecting, which assumes placing the preferences of their network above their personal needs.

Retrospectively, users learn about the expected and true implications of disconnection, as well as their expectations to social media. Whereas abstaining from influential platforms is often

perceived to have serious implications due to the extent to which we are connected through social media, the only negative side effect of disconnecting as seen by (non)users is limited professional opportunities. Reflecting on the outcomes of platform-specific disconnection suggest a misconception which is left unchallenged as (non)users do not argue against the main understanding of disconnecting, regardless of their personal experience.

Platform-specific disconnection then bridges ideological resistance and experimental disengagement. Shuffling and choosing between different media environments enabled by the diverse opportunities for communication is found to be more rewarding than following conventional social media practices as well as rejecting or appropriating the platforms like other disengaged users. This can represent, or encourage, a new wave of activism that is less noticeable, but not secret, wherein the ecology of polymedia is not only utilized, but optimized. Consequently, instead of becoming less accessible, platform-specific disconnection allows users to modify their connections for a more enjoyable media experience.

Limitations and future research

It's important to note that media practices are in constant change, and this research only captures a moment in time, representing a very specific type of disengagement. Nevertheless, it provides a good foundation for further research into different types of disconnection and disengagement. Future research could focus on certain parts of the process of platform-specific disconnection (visualized in Figure 1) that would help us investigate and become more knowledgeable about how, or whether, social media can be designed to accommodate different users' tastes better. Another idea is to explore the concept by focusing on specific demographics or areas which would help to understand the nuance to the phenomenon, as well as test this model of a disconnecting process within certain contexts.

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