DIGITAL DETOX

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DIGITAL DETOX: THE POLITICS OF DISCONNECTING

TRINE SYVERTSEN
University of Oslo, Norway

emerald
PUBLISHING

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2020

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78769-342-5 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-78769-339-5 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-78769-341-8 (Epub)

ISOQAR certified Management System, awarded to Emerald for adherence to Environmental standard ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Further praise for *Digital Detox*:

'Trine Syvertsen has again fascinated us with a reflexive and nuanced discussion of our guilt-ridden and ambivalent engagement with digital media. Situating the phenomenon of digital detox in the much longer history of media resistance, and its roots in the perceived pervasiveness of digital personal and mobile media, Syvertsen discusses how "the problem" is framed, who is held responsible for solving it (spoiler: you!), what "solutions" are offered, and how these are received among digital media users. A must-read for anyone who has ever owned a smart-phone!'

– **Göran Bolin**, Professor, Södertörn University, Author of *Media Generations* and *Value and the Media: The Shaping of Culture in Media and Society*

'Trine Syvertsen wisely considers the significance of both the societal and the individual dilemmas and influences. The author looks at the huge pressure on economic, political and culture-driven influences and, at a micro level, at the daily life anxieties and demands for detox periods, that can rely on ambivalence, self-determination and work. This tackles the need and struggle for an identity, often different from the mainstream digital culture, even with the most intimate persons as family and friends. Another aspect that that is very interesting is the reflection on the three Ps motivation for detox: Presence, Productivity and Privacy. Finally, I consider of extreme relevance the discussion on digital policies and on how they are driven to get us online at all time, without discussing how this might affect (negatively) our life.'

– **Maria José Brites**, Associate Professor at the Lusófona University of Porto (ULP) and Researcher at the Centre for Research in Applied Communication, Culture, and New Technologies (CICANT)

'Syvertsen offers a valuable look at the social dimensions of digital detox, explaining why it is more than just a lifestyle trend or a tool for self-optimization. Her work confirms that we have much to learn about presence, productivity and privacy from media resisters who engage with devices and networks on their *own* terms.'

– **Jennifer Rauch**, Professor, Long Island University, Author of *Slow Media: Why Slow is Satisfying, Sustainable and Smart*

'In this timely and critical analysis of the growing industry of digital detoxing, Trine Syvertsen provides a compelling, historically informed account of how the commercial and political push for 24/7-connectivity intertwines and clashes with personal strategies of resistance. Locating digital detox in broader trajectories for responsibilizing individuals in digital society, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in the everyday politics of digitalization and the digital battle for our attention.'

– **Stine Lomborg**, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen, Author of *Social Media, Social Genres: Making Sense of the Ordinary*, Editor of *Ubiquitous Internet*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trine Syvertsen is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Oslo. She has published extensively on topics of online media, television, media policy and media history in international journals. Syvertsen is author of several books including *Media Resistance: Dislike, Protest, Abstention* (Palgrave, 2017) and co-author of *The Media Welfare State* (University of Michigan Press, 2014). She is currently chairing a four-year research project on invasive media and digital detox (Digitox 2019–2023). Trine Syvertsen has held a range of academic leadership positions, serves on editorial boards, contributes to public debates and is an experienced public speaker.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For over a decade, I have been interested in media resistance: how people express dislike for and ambivalence towards mass and digital media. I have talked to numerous people who have described their experiences, offered their views and inspired me to delve deeper into phenomena such as digital detox. Life as a media researcher is privileged – there is no shortage of fascinating topics – but none of my previous research interests has been met with a similar level of engagement. A heartfelt thanks to those who have shared their ideas in formal interviews and informal conversations.

I am indebted to colleagues who share my interest in digital detox. Faltin Karlsen is a long-time collaborator, and more recently, we have teamed up with Gunn Enli, Brita Ytre-Arne, Hallvard Moe and Ole Jacob Madsen to conduct a larger project. Many of my ideas are products of discussions with these colleagues, and I am especially thankful for feedback on chapters. I am grateful to the Norwegian Council of Applied Media Research and the Norwegian Research Council that have funded our research. Our current project *Digitox: Invasive media, ambivalent users and digital detox* is funded by the Norwegian Research Council and runs until 2023. I am also grateful to our research assistant Jørgen Bolling for gathering data, transcribing and organising.

The leadership, colleagues and students at the Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, have been

supportive and taken a keen interest in digital detox, Marika Lüders and Petter Bae Brandtzæg have been particularly helpful. At Oslo Metropolitan University, Curt Rice has been a rich source of input on social and digital media use. During my research leave, I have had an opportunity to present ideas on digital detox to staff and students at the University of Westminster, Free University of Brussels, Århus University, Free University of Berlin, Humboldt University, Kristiania University College and the University of Bergen. I am thankful for invitations, feedback and criticism, and particularly want to thank students who have shared ideas and experiences. Nils Petter Strømmen and Kantar media have encouraged my research ideas and provided valuable survey data. I am thankful to Arild Aspøy for all the small and large conversations and for accepting that our lives sometimes turn into a digital detox laboratory.

Last, but not least, I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers at Emerald who provided critical and useful feedback and to my editor, Jen McCall, who has been great fun, tremendously supportive, and a great reader and discussion partner.

Trine Syvertsen, Oslo, August 2019.

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INTRODUCTION: DO WE HAVE A PROBLEM?*

INTRODUCTION

The first time I heard about digital detox was in 2010. Journalist Susan Maushart used the term in her book *The Winter of Our Disconnect,* where she wrote about her family's six months media fast. At that time, social media were still in their infancy, and the smartphone had just appeared, but Maushart (2010) was shocked by the effects on her family: 'our media habits had reached a scary kind of crescendo' (p. 11). Although the detox was brutal at times, she had no regrets:

> *Our digital detox messed with our heads, our hearts, and our homework. It changed the way we ate and the way we slept, the way we 'friended', fought, planned, and played. It altered the very taste and texture of our family life. Hell, it even altered the mouthfeel. In the end, our family's self-imposed*

*The asterisks denote texts or titles translated from Norwegian.

> *exile from the Information Age changed our lives indelibly – and infinitely for the better. (p. 3)*

The Winter of Our Disconnect appeared at the beginning of a decade where digital media expanded alongside reactions to such expansion. New media do not appear overnight, but significant changes have happened fast. Online and social media now shape even our most mundane activities (the toilet is a favoured place to check smartphones) and present us with constant dilemmas about our online and offline presence. There is no doubt that digital media enrich lives and save time and effort. But at the same time, concerns are expressed that digital media use, and especially the smartphone and social media, deplete lives, invade privacy and steal time.

In this book, I critically examine the pressures to be online, as well as the measures to control and resist such pressures. My interest is in exploring why reducing and limiting media use became a talking point in the 2010s. In the book, I discuss how the digital detox trend is expressed and how it relates to other movements and tendencies. I discuss reported outcomes, limitations and paradoxes of taking a media pause, as well as the broader contexts that make digital detoxing meaningful.

Digital detox is often understood as taking a distinct break from smartphones or social media, but the term may cover different activities and mindsets. Offline periods vary from several months to less than a day. Digital detox is used to describe rules for screen-free periods and spaces, extensive and moderate lifestyle changes, gradual reductions or media diets. Taking a digital break is also discussed under other headings, such as going offline, a scroll-free month, an unplugging day or simply quitting Facebook. The book discusses these options and locates them in a context of self-regulation and self-optimisation: the tendency in neoliberal

societies to place responsibility for managing risks and problems on individuals. Studying digital detox is not just a way to understand digitalisation and how people manage online media, it is also an opening to understand more about how people experience and express dislike, resistance and protest in the twenty-first century.

THE PROBLEM

The title of this chapter is: Do we have a problem? The problem, in this case, would be a common experience of digital media overload and indications that online media or smartphone use is causing concern for individuals and institutions. Although it is difficult to determine the exact nature of the problem and how widespread it might be, indications of concern are found in numbers, in media texts and in discussion.

Surveys and statistics from the world's internet-rich countries show that a substantial proportion expressly agrees to statements such as 'I use my phone too much'. In this book, I will draw especially on a representative survey conducted in the Norwegian market where 55% of the population answered affirmatively to the question 'Do you think you are spending too much time online'?[1] (Kantar, 2018). Norway is a relevant case because it is one of the world's most digitally connected countries and studies of Nordic populations confirm a widespread sense of online overuse (Deloitte, 2018). However, surveys from large markets elsewhere indicate that such concerns are shared; in the UK and the US, between one-third and half of the adult population say that they spend too much time on their phones.[2]

Parallel to the growing numbers, media texts about offline measures proliferate. According to the global news database Factiva, the first mention of digital detox was in 2006, but

usage did not take off until 2010. In 2013, digital detox was added to the Oxford online dictionary, and that year saw a distinct increase in mentions.[3] By mid-2019, the total number of entries on digital detox in the database was rapidly approaching 9,000. The UK tops the list of countries referring to it, followed by Germany, the US, Australia and India, while the most mentioned industries are, by far, smartphones and social media. Not surprisingly, Facebook is the most referenced company. Mentions also include other media and entertainment industries as well as digital detox hotels and tourism (see below).

The numbers and texts reflect that overuse and restricting media use have become talking points. The topic is discussed in social media, blogs, family gatherings, schools and workplaces. New terms and aphorisms enrich our vocabularies. FOMO has emerged as shorthand for a new condition: Fear of Missing Out, a force presumably driving smartphone and social media use. JOMO is the opposite: Joy of Missing Out, what digital detoxers strive for, a sense of enjoying life here-and-now and not through a screen. Phubbing is shorthand for mobile phone snubbing: using the phone to shut someone out. Screen wall is another way to say the same, and screen time is emerging as a central object of negotiation in families. Already in 2008, the UK Post Office was cited as saying that 13 million Britons suffered from nomophobia – No Mobile Phobia, feeling stressed when their mobile was out of battery or lost (Euromonitor, 2012). Digital detox is a new term but stands in a long tradition of using medical vocabulary to talk about media use (Syvertsen, 2017). Throughout history, media have been likened to infections, trash and poison and digital detox is a metaphorical way to clean up.

A final indication that concerns are on the rise is the upsurge of digital detox products and services. Digital free tourism generates lots of coverage and rising interest in

the hospitality industry (Li, Pearce, & Low, 2018). Two of the first media mentions of digital detox were in 2008 and described a Canadian resort where visitors were encouraged to log off, and in 2012, *The World Travel Market Global Trends Report* pointed to digital detox as one of the hottest trends in the travel industry (Euromonitor, 2012). Around the same time, self-help manuals with digital detox began to appear on Amazon, indicating an emerging market. Since then, companies and campaigns have organised screen-free events and holidays, sold merchandise, offered consultancy and provided apps and software to prevent digital distractions.

A decade after Maushart and family blacked-out media for six months, tech writer Kevin Roose (2019) described his more professional and shorter detox in the *New York Times*. After getting worried about the consequences of his phone use: 'I found myself incapable of reading books, watching full-length movies or having long uninterrupted conversations', Roose called one of the several coaches who had begun to specialise in digital detoxing. The coach recommended consciousness-raising, switching to other activities, rules for phone use, as well as a (short) off-line trip. Despite complications such as getting lost without Google maps, Roose loved his two days in a remote cabin:

> *I basked in 19th-century leisure, feeling my nerves softening, and my attention span stretching back out. I read books. I did the crossword puzzle. I lit a fire and looked at the stars …. I also felt twinges of anger – at myself, for missing out on this feeling of restorative boredom for so many years.*

In a decade, digital detox had become a topic of talk and discussion, an element in media users' toolbox, a business opportunity and also a quick-fix solution for those who did not have six months to spare.

Although numbers, text and talk indicate that there is a problem, such indications come with a caveat: reporting that you use your phone too much or talking about digital detox does not mean that your use is pathological or even that you are seriously considering limitations. Numbers, text and talk reflect that digital time use has become a hot topic entering conversations and consciousness, but not that there is consensus on causes or solutions. In the book, I discuss practices of digital detox, as well as how talking about media overload can function as a conversation starter or a marker of identity. Criticising the smartphone and social media is not necessarily something you wish to act on; it may also be a way to say something about who you are and the values you subscribe to.

THE BIG PICTURE

The book asks why digital detox has emerged as a phenomenon in the 2010s and how it is expressed. There are two ways to begin to answer these questions – one on the societal level and one on the individual. On the societal level, I argue that three historical trajectories are essential to understand experiences of overload and the expressions of digital detox.

The first trajectory is the intensification of what we call the attention economy. The scarcest commodity is people's attention, and new media have been developed to capture it, holding on to it and earning money from it. Social media, games, streaming and the smartphone all contribute to experiences of overload and a sense that there is always something else going on. Mobility and broadband offer 24/7 connectivity and persistent notifications and persuasive design tempt users to check for messages and updates. Through gamification techniques: likes, badges, rewards, timelines, etc., both old and new media are designed to interrupt users in what

they are doing and turn their attention to the screens. The devices that we depend on for work, education and keeping in touch, simultaneously function as distraction technologies offering endless temptations and entertainment.

The second factor is political, the pressure to get everybody online and digitise products and services. There are legitimate reasons to digitise state and public services – for example, reducing state expenditure and being more environmentally friendly – and there is a strong belief that digitalisation will enhance productivity. However, state digitalisation policies and widespread digitalisation of services: taxes, transport, education, weather, mail communication, etc. contribute to the pressures on users to stay online. Along with a political thrust towards digitalisation, emerged a more liberal regulatory regime for digital services and platforms; global communication platforms have been practically unregulated in Western countries and have been allowed to set their own rules in the belief that regulation would hamper innovation (Moore & Tambini, 2018). As a result, users are increasingly left to their own devices in handling media and online pressures, with the state urging each one to take responsibility for what is seen as a personal problem.

The third factor is the prevailing culture of self-optimisation. Digital detox is new but can also be placed in a long tradition of media resistance. In each historical phase, expressions of media dislike and dissatisfaction are coloured by how people handle dislike and discomfort more generally, and in our era, self-optimisation is a frequent way of dealing with problems that have social or political roots. Cultural psychologist Ole Jacob Madsen (2015) points to how the lessening of social control in modern societies produces a constant demand for authoritative sources as to how to live your life, and how different concerns are fed into self-optimisation projects (Madsen, 2015). As a self-optimising trend, digital

detox borrows characteristics from corporate self-optimisation, inspired by bestsellers such as *Getting Things Done* (Allen & Fallows, 2015 [2001]). The balance and mindfulness movements inspire digital detox; the detox holidays that emerged in the early 2010s were spin-offs from the healthy holiday market of spirituality, yoga and mindfulness and digital detox is often included in so-called wellness tourism (Smith & Puczkó, 2015). Other inspirations come from the decluttering trend and bestsellers such as *The Life-changing Magic of Tidying Up,* by Marie Kondō (2014). Common to all is the belief that you are in charge, you can take control over and improve your life, including your media and digital life.

Allocating responsibility for social problems to individuals is part of the neoliberal agenda that characterise information policies (O'Malley, 2009). With neoliberalism and deregulation, individuals are allocated more responsibility for managing areas such as health and lifestyle, employment, crime prevention, workplace safety and online risks. Digital detox resembles reactions against the telephone, cinema, comics, television, video and games, but digital detoxers rarely wage political campaigns or advocate total abstention. Although some claim that a new social movement is emerging, most digital detoxes function as a short-term cleansing – akin to a juice fast or a colon cleanse – rather than being part of a collective action to handle root causes. However, digital detox is not only necessary for self-optimising the individual but also fits into different contexts that may be deeply meaningful and encompass broader concerns.

THE PERSONAL VIEW

Economic, political and cultural trends are essential to explain why digital detox is becoming a trend. But digital detox is