The disconnection turn: Three facets of disconnective work in post-digital capitalism

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Karin Fast
University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Abstract

In post-digital capitalism, digital disconnection is not merely a "luxury" but also an obligation. Aiming to re-contextualize digital disconnection outside of digital detox resorts, social media, and elitist activism, this article asks how the ongoing disconnection turn affects how we (think about) work. With cues taken from digital disconnection studies and (digital) work/labour research, I inquire three facets of disconnective work. I elaborate, firstly, what disconnection might mean *for* work, as I scrutinize ideals pertaining to "deep" and "slow" work. Secondly, I unveil how disconnection may materialize *at* work, as I inspect "the post-digital workplace" and "disconnective technologies of work." Thirdly, using "The Post-Digital Housewife" as a rhetorical figure for grasping the daily, typically unpaid, work that the disconnection turn makes acute, I recognize disconnection *as* work. The article concludes by presenting four dialectics of disconnective work, which serve to remind us of the paradoxical role of disconnection in processes of empowerment and exploitation.

Keywords

digital disconnection, post-digital capitalism, workification, digital labour, work, disconnection turn, post-digital housewife, digital detox, disconnective work, post-digital workplace, technology of work, post-workification

Introduction

User modes and sentiments pertaining to digital disconnection are increasingly anticipated and valorized (Syvertsen, 2020). Mirroring what I here recognize as a wider *disconnection turn* in society, the last years have seen an upsurge in studies of deliberate "non-use" of, "withdrawal" from, "disengagement" with, or "resistance" against digital media. This special issue makes a case in point. Hitherto, such studies have been prone to inquire digital disconnection mainly in leisure or consumption contexts; notably within the frames of tourism (e.g., Egger et al., 2020; Syvertsen and

Corresponding author:
Karin Fast, Department of Media and Communication, P.O. Box 1093 Blindern, Oslo 0317, Norway.
Email: karin.fast@media.uio.no

Enli, 2019) or in relation to social media (see Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019). With a few noteworthy exceptions (e.g., Guyard and Kaun, 2018), the research field remains scarce on readings that approach disconnection as *a matter of work*. This does not mean that the topic of work is completely absent from digital disconnection studies; however, it typically appears more peripheral than focused. Conversely, work and labour studies still seem more inclined to use connectivity rather than *dis*-connectivity as a point of entry[1].

Aiming to remedy the identified blind spot, this article asks how the disconnection turn, and the grander post-digital value schemes that feed into it, affect how we (think about) work. In *post-digital capitalism*, which is my overarching fond here, companies and governments continue to promote connectivity as the key to a happy working life (Fast, 2018). Yet, while they do so, a growing number of agents—ranging from "Silicon Valley dystopians" (Karppi and Nieborg, 2020) to "digital detox coaches" argue that we should use digital technologies *less*, or at least more "mindfully" (Baym et al., 2020). As others have also explained, "post-digital" does not signify the end of digital hegemony (Berry, 2014), but rather that our "fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical" (Cramer, 2015: 12). The naturalization of digital media enforces, in turn, particular forms of digital reflexivity (Fast et al., 2021). To work "*disconnected*" represents one way to practice such reflexivity (here, I deliberately place "disconnect" within quotation marks to call awareness to the fact that, techno-materially speaking, digital disconnection is always "futile"; Lomborg, 2020; see also Bucher, 2020).

The lack of work-oriented disconnection studies (and contrariwise, disconnectivity-biased work/labour studies) appears peculiar if we consider merely some of the ways in which the disconnection turn in work contexts manifests itself. For instance, digital disconnection—as imaginary or material reality—currently leaves its mark on *work management* (e.g., as "digital wellbeing" or "work-fulness" programs), *work designs* (e.g., office layouts for disconnected recreation), *work technology* (e.g., distraction-blocking apps), *work markets* (e.g., "digital detox" tourism), *work policy* (e.g., "The Right to Disconnect" legislation), and *workstyles* (e.g., "slow work"). It makes even less sense if we recognize disconnection *as* hard work in and of itself, as does Syvertsen (2020) when she appropriately remarks that: "The more we move towards 24/7 connectivity, the more work it is to permanently or temporarily disconnect, and the more work must be done to find compensatory solutions and alternatives" (p. 10).

While the present article cannot grasp *all* facets of "disconnective work", it offers a three-parted inquiry of the ways in which sentiments pertaining to digital disconnection currently shape work and labour. First, through scrutiny of discourse around "deep" and "slow" work (e.g., Mountz et al., 2015; Newport, 2016), I ask what disconnection is claimed to do *for work*. Second, I attend to disconnection *at work* by identifying the "post-digital workplace" as an emergent workplace ideal and setting for disconnective work. Third, elaborating Jarrett's (2016) notion of "The Digital Housewife," I suggest *The Post-Digital Housewife* as a metaphor for mundane disconnective work. Doing so means approaching disconnection *as work* that cuts across productive and reproductive economies. In the concluding section of the article, I discuss the potential social consequences of the disconnection turn as I interrogate the *dialectics of disconnective work*.

The inquiry draws on previous empirical research and real-life examples, yet constitutes first and foremost a theoretical endeavor. By treating disconnection as a matter of work, the article in effect bridges two distinct "turns" in media studies: the already commentated disconnection turn and what elsewhere has been labeled the "labour turn" (De Peuter and Cohen, 2015: 312). The latter, which encompasses "non-essentialist" and "non-normative" categorizations of work (Richardson, 2018), teaches us that we need to accept as work or labour a range of mundane media-induced activities (e.g., Fuchs, 2014; Jarrett, 2016; Gandini, 2021; Gregg and Andrijasevic, 2019; Scholz, 2012).

While this sub-division of work studies too remains predominantly "nodocentric" (Mejias, 2013), or connectivity-biased, I argue that its perspectives can help us understand the paradoxical role of digital disconnection in processes of empowerment and exploitation.

Before continuing, a definition announcement is necessary. I deliberately use the terms *work* and *labour* interchangeably in this article, partly because digitalization renders these two categories of human activity increasingly open-ended (cf. Gandini, 2021; Scholz, 2017). While I primarily go by the term *work* in this article—to signify the broad spectrum of paid or unpaid tasks that we undertake to "make a living" (Watson, 2012: 6)—I write of *labour* mainly when referencing research in which this term is dominant (e.g., "digital labour" studies). Relatedly, since I recognize *paid* and *unpaid* work/labour as part and parcel of one capitalist "circuit of exploitation" (Brophy and De Peuter, 2014), I have actively looked for disconnective work in both professional and private life domains.

Post-digital capitalism and the attraction of disconnective work

It is difficult to explain *why* disconnective work, or work that readily incorporates digital disconnection practices, has gained increased attraction without reference to grander political, economic, and cultural changes. Therefore, this section aims to contextualize the exemplified trends that I here summarize as *the disconnection turn in work* (e.g., the coming of "digital wellbeing" management, "mindful" office layouts, distraction-blocking productivity apps, "The Right to Disconnect" regulation, "slow" workstyle ideals, etc.) within the capitalist system. To begin with, recent transformations of work should be understood in the light of the global re-organization of capitalism that accelerated in the 1970s, or *post-Fordist capitalism* (Amin, 1994; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Post-Fordist organizations are networked administrations that depend on information technologies, global financial systems, niche markets, and creative white-collar workers—or *knowledge workers* (Alvesson, 1993). In essence, post-Fordist capitalism is a *flexible* form of capitalism, centered as it is on "just-in-time" production logics rather than mass production (as was the case with Fordism). In such a "flexible regime" of work (Sennett, 2007), staff is easily replaceable. It is also flexible in the sense that it relies on a large category of relatively autonomous knowledge workers, whose digitally connected workplace is not necessarily tied to a specific location. Tellingly, post-Fordist capitalism saw the rise of "telework," "home offices," and other flexible work arrangements (Fast and Jansson, 2019; Gregg, 2011).

As per its reliance on responsibilized and self-disciplined workers, post-Fordist capitalism is ideologically calibrated with *neoliberalism* (Harvey, 2005). Idealized is the accessible, entrepreneurial, and self-optimizing worker who can adapt to ever-changing circumstances (Beckman and Mazmanian, 2020). Yet, being in a state of nonstop personal development, on precarious premises, can be wearing. Therefore, today's diligent workers are being taught how to develop *resilience,* or "bounce-backability" (Gill and Orgad, 2018). In order not to break under the weights of flexibilized, neoliberal capitalism, workers are stimulated to *take care* of themselves. While employee health management predates post-Fordist capitalism (Madsen, 2015), recent research testifies to significant ideological changes. Gill and Orgad (2018), for example, relate the current praise of resilience in managerial discourse to "the psychological turn in neoliberalism," whereas Cabanas and Illouz (2017) draw on Ahmed's (2010) notion of *the happiness turn* to suggest that happiness—like resiliency and flexibility—has become a "moral imperative" (p. 26).

Now, in times when connected knowledge workers suffer from health issues associated with extensive media use, digital disconnection is increasingly sold as *the* key to a "happy" working life. Thus, in self-help literature (e.g., Newport, 2016), "workfulness" management programs (Guyard and Kaun, 2018), and elsewhere, "always on" workers are now advised to be "sometimes off" for

the sake of their *digital wellbeing* (and/or productivity). Seen from this view point then, the thriving digital detox industry—which sells "mobile-free vacations" and other disconnectivity commodities—arguably represents a sub-fraction of what Davies (2015) calls the "happiness industry." Also from this outlook, disconnection crystallizes as a type of "socio-economic lubricant" (Light and Cassidy, 2014). However, it serves as such not only in relation to social media platforms by reducing the risk of users leaving for good, as Light and Cassidy (2014) observe, but also to capitalism at large by securing continued productivity.

While not rejecting the idea that digital disconnection might produce genuine "happiness" in individuals (e.g., work satisfaction or pleasure), I suggest that it is in the light of described changes that we need to understand the current hype for disconnective work and the intensifying valorization of post-digital sentiments more broadly. As previously indicated, the *post* in "post-digital" does not indicate a historical state beyond digital hegemony, but rather that the digital "is now presupposed" (Malott, 2019: n.p)—even "disenchanted" (Cramer, 2015: 12). Materially thus, *post-digital capitalism* (Ford, 2019; Jandrić and McLaren, 2020) rests largely on the same fundaments as what we have come to know as *digital capitalism* (e.g., Fuchs and Mosco, 2015; Schiller, 1999). As such, it relies on digital media as, for example, production technologies, commodities, means of circulation, and instruments of control (Pace, 2018). I employ the notion of post-digital capitalism here to pinpoint the growing prominence, in contemporary work settings as well as the economy at large, of digital reflexivity as at the same time a *moral obligation* and an *allure*. As both of these things, digital reflexivity (and digital disconnection especially) becomes a benchmark for good work—and good workers. As the remainder of this article will disclose, the disconnection turn in work is a turn away from the enduring romanticization of overwork, busyness, and media-induced flexibility (cf. Beckman and Mazmanian, 2020) and engenders as such new (or re-packaged) ideas about what constitutes desirable ways of working and living.

Digital disconnection *for* work

The post-digital version of the "happy worker" ideal manifests in its sharpest contours in self-help literature explicitly promoting digital disconnection as a strategy *for work*. Thus, such "digital-detox-for-work" literature makes a good source for inquiring emergent work ethics adhering to digital reflexivity in general and to digital disconnection in particular. As noticed by Wajcman (2018), "hardly a month goes by without a new book or newspaper article bemoaning our current state of busyness and distraction advising on how to deal with digital addiction" (p. 170). Syvertsen (2020) identifies in digital detox discourse a break with earlier forms of media activism—"a shift in emphasis from improving the media to improving the user" (p. 73) reflecting the developments described above. With rising authority in times of privatized responsibilization (Hochschild, 1994; Madsen, 2015), the digital detox genre promises to guide individuals—oftentimes via positive psychology, neuroscience, or spiritualism—to a healthy relationship *with* technology (Guyard and Kaun, 2018).

The explicitly targeted or implicitly imagined readers of digital detox for work guidance are typically *knowledge workers*—not, for instance, media-entangled health-service workers, truck drivers, or gig workers. The strong focus on knowledge workers is not surprising, given that positive psychology in general speaks to "people who 'have made it'" (De La Fabian and Stecher, 2017: 610), and that people with higher education are more likely to say they use digital media "too much" (Syvertsen, 2020: 103; see also Fast et al. (2021)). Thus, mainly reflecting middle-class concerns about work-life conflicts under the digital regime, much guidance proclaims that work in the digital age is now so flexibilized that it has become boundless (cf. Crary, 2013). In consequence, digital

disconnection is presented as a set of techniques by which workers can *regain control* over increasingly liquid life domains. However, while most self-help authors seem to share the idea *that* disconnection is valuable for work, they provide different answers to the question of *why*. As to illuminate the *continuum of post-digital reflexivity* that surfaces in this growing bulk of literature, I shall bring into dialogue two concepts which arguably sit at opposite ends on an "individual self-optimization—collective self-care" spectrum.

Disconnective work as *deep* or *slow* work

The first concept, *deep work*, is elaborated in Newport's (2016) popular book *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. In said book, computer scientist and family father Newport suggests a set of "rules" for focused, undistracted, or "deep" work, including *Embrace boredom* (resist checking your devices when bored) and *Quit social media* (only use social media purposefully). Newport claims apropos deep work that "If you don't cultivate this ability, you're likely to fall behind as technology advances" (p. 13). Next to stories about other focused (predominantly male) "high-skilled workers" or "superstars" (p. 24), he describes his own journey to academic success via deep work, a 1-year journey that resulted in no less than "*nine* peer reviewed papers" (p. 262, original emphasis) and a book. As revealed by the book title and sub-headings like "How to Become a Winner in the New Economy" and "Deep Work Helps You Produce at an Elite Level," Newport's focus is on *individual self-optimization* for the purpose of professional productivity.

The digital detox trend overlaps with the "slow movement" (cf. Honoré, 2005; Rauch, 2018), and the idea of *slow work*, our second concept, surfaces in an interventionist article by feminist geographer Mountz and her colleagues (2015), titled "For slow scholarship: A feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university" (cf. Berg and Seeber, 2016). Like Newport, Mountz et al. (2015) understand digital media as a distraction that needs to be dealt with. Quoting a chronicle in *The New York Times*, they proclaim: "We must dare to relax our grip of time for a day, or even for an hour, throwing clocks, watches and iPhones over the housetops, untethering ourselves solely for the thrill of not knowing what happens next" (Mountz et al., 2015: 1246; see Jenkins (2013) for original quote). Their suggested "strategies for slow scholarship" include "Write fewer emails" (p. 1251), "Turn off email" (p. 1251), and "Make time to think" by "'unplugging' from smartphones, tablets, and other 'electronic leashes'" (p. 1252). Thus, both "deep" work and "slow" work, as conceptualized in referenced publications, imply tactics for dealing with the demands of flexibilized, digitalized, work life. However, while Newport (2016) identifies disconnection as a means of "elite" (p. 29) productivity, Mountz et al. (2015) sees it rather as a crucial component in a program of *collective self-care* for the sake of systemic change. Taking aim at "the fast-paced, metric-oriented neoliberal university" (p. 1236), they encourage readers to "Reach for the minimum" (p. 1253), to accept "good enough" (p. 1253), and to "take care of others" (p. 151).

Hence, while deep work is meant to boost individual productivity, slow work is ultimately constructed as a "chronopolitical" (Rosa, 2013) instrument, developed to challenge precisely the kind of neoliberal, competitive ethics that push knowledge workers to their limits. In this regard, then, Newport's advice is more typical of conventional, individualistic, self-help literature (Hochschild, 1994; Madsen, 2015), whereas Mountz et al. (2015) exemplifies the facet of the disconnection turn that is ontologically more aligned with social theory that problematizes not the digital per se, but rather the economic, social, and political forces that create media dependencies (e.g., Jansson, 2018).

Disconnected workstyles—whether "deep" or "slow"—are increasingly catered for in contemporary (home) offices. If this section inquired the alleged value of disconnection for work—and

workers—the subsequent one discerns how digital disconnection is imagined and "put to work" in post-digital workplaces.

Digital disconnection *at* work

Post-digital workplaces constitute material manifestations of ideals surfacing in digital-detox-for-work guidance (cf. Fast and Jansson, forthcoming). Notably, they embody the kind of work flexibility critique that said guidance voices, and promote workstyles that are *fixed* rather than liquid. While previous research illuminates how disconnected work may be softly imposed via managerial programs (Guyard and Kaun, 2018) or more forcefully realized via "The Right to Disconnect" jurisdiction (Hesselberth, 2018; Von Bergen and Bressler, 2019), I here focus two "disconnective features" (Beattie, 2020) of the post-digital workplace: *disconnective workplace designs* and *disconnective technologies of work*.

Disconnective workplace designs

> 'Remember to unplug for a bit'
>
> *WeWork* Instagram (September 17, 2020)
>
> 'Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes – including you'
>
> *Coworker* Instagram (June 23, 2019)
>
> 'Work offline today'
>
> *Coworker* Instagram (June 16, 2019)

In post-digital capitalism, hyper-connected workplaces readily incorporate leisure and relaxation zones into their physical layout, so as to provide places where workers can "disconnect to re-connect." From public discourse, we might know these zones as "digital dead zones" or "break-away spots." Recently, an office design firm acknowledged the "digital-detox-at-work" trend and its benefits: "These disconnected spaces can be a great location choice for holding efficient no-tech meetings such as creative brainstorm sessions or forums that require focused attention and in-person interaction" (Tetris, 2021). The same company assures us that "It's okay to take a digital detox—even if you work from home."

The post-digital workplace has no set walls but may, as stipulated by mentioned design company, be installed even in our homes. There is, however, a certain category of workplaces where post-digital reflexivity and disconnectivity is increasingly and conspicuously incorporated into the very workplace design: *coworking spaces* (Fast and Jansson, 2019; Gregg, 2018a). These shared, curated work environments rent workspace to mobile freelancers and other flexible workers as well as to big corporations (e.g., (Gandini, 2015; Grazian, 2020). In previous research, they have been identified as nodal points for numerous work-related trends, including work precarization, virtualization, and flexibilization (De Peuter and Cohen, 2015; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Isaac, 2016). Richardson (2020) appropriately recognizes the coworking space as a flexible "space of services" which—akin to the model flexible worker herself—is always modifiable.

However, as much as coworking spaces are emblems of post-Fordist work flexibility, they are also promoters of *work fixity*. First of all, they (claim to) offer spatially unfixed workers a form of situated "social re-embedding" (Merkel, 2018: 19); a physical place at which isolated individuals

can come together. Moreover, they typically reproduce ideals pertaining to what Beattie (2020; chapter 5) calls *the fixable self*: "a subject position that draws upon a mix of the behavioural sciences and software development, viewing the brain and user behaviour as simultaneously irrational and fixable" (p. 198). While Beattie identifies the fixable self in therapeutic technology designs, the ideal is also readily incorporated into coworking space design and aesthetics. The typical coworking space layout shares features with Google's heterotopic office landscape and combines areas for work and non-work, or on-screen and off-screen activity (Brown, 2017). To speak with Gregg (2018a), who also acknowledges the growing interest in "mindful workplaces," coworking spaces promote productivity through "determined rituals of non-doing" (p. 124).

As the "inspirational quotes" at the beginning of this section indicate, the coworking space community also reproduce images of digital disconnection as a key instrument for "fixing" bad working habits (and ultimately the worker herself). Arguably, this is not so surprising considering the overlapping Californian origins of the coworking and digital detox movements/industries. With cues taken from Beattie (2020), we might understand them as two facets of the same Silicon Valley-centered "drop-out culture" that engenders countercultural (or at least seemingly so) ideas about how life should be lived: more authentically, less lonely, and so on. Technologies that specifically promotes disconnection as a tool for *fixating and fixing work* brings us additional insights the material constitution of the post-digital workplace.

Disconnective technologies of work

Technologies of work—such as calendars, video conference software, laptops, *Slack*, etc.—are reflections of contemporary (Silicon Valley-ingrained) work norms and shape how we work (Wajcman, 2019a, 2019b). Richardson (2020) notes in regards to connective technologies of work that they tend "less to divide space according to a specific function, and more to create spaces of coordination that can adjust the definition of purposeful activity" (p. 349). Such technologies, and the escalating platformization of work especially, she argues, do "not necessarily fix location" (p. 359) but rather stimulates de-territorialization. This conclusion is in synch with older as well as more recent observations of the powers of technology to create spatially "extensible" or "boundless" selves (Adams, 2005).

However, the digital-detox-at-work trend brings with it a particular segment of technologies of work which obstruct—or at least claim to obstruct—the transcending effects described by Richardson (2020). This segment exists within an expanding market of "mindful technologies" (Gregg, 2018a) which facilitate self-monitoring for the sake of reduced or more intentional screen-use[2]. What I here refer to as *disconnective technologies of work* are not primarily constructed as instruments of flexibility, speed, or efficiency (as is usually the case with connective media; cf. Fast, 2018), but rather as tools for accomplishing digital wellbeing. In promoting spatial and temporal fixity (or "presence" rather than multitasking), these technologies in effect prescribe that space (and time) *should* be "divided according to a specific function" (cf. Richardson, above)—typically work *or* non-work. Like much other (dis)connective technology, they are still largely sold on the promise of increased *productivity* (Beattie, 2020; Gregg, 2018a). However, their affordances go beyond calendar calibration, check-listing, and accessibility.

Roughly and with consideration to their respective affordance biases, disconnective technologies of work can be divided into two main categories. The first, which I call *disconnective chronomedia*, simulate *scheduled disconnection* and can be used to separate work time from non-work time. This category contains apps that allow users to schedule time-spans when apps or websites become un-accessible. The *Offtime* app is a case in point. Sold as "the app that helps you balance digital devices

usage in your life," it allows users to lock their devices during a self-selected period of time or occasion, for example, during dinner. Other apps, such as *Lock me Out* and *Appblock*, use (also) location-based proprieties that restrict usage in specific places, for example, at the office. This second sub-segment of disconnective technologies of work, *disconnective geomedia*, thus fabricates what Beattie and Cassidy (2020) call *locative disconnection*: "when a specific location is designated for the purposes of disconnecting from the Internet or when a disconnective practice is localized or grounded in place" (Beattie and Cassidy, 2020: 8).

While both time and place can certainly be managed without designated apps catering for temporal and/or spatial disconnection (see, e.g., Jansson, 2020), disconnective technologies of work are today sold as indispensable "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1988) which can further help to "fix" workers inept of self-regulation. To the extent that they are constructed as technologies of *housework*, they may well appear attractive to *The Post-Digital Housewife*, to whom we shall now turn.

Digital disconnection *as* work

In flexibilized, post-digital capitalism, workers need to spend significant amounts of energy and time on tasks that serve to *define* work relative to other life domains (Richardson, 2018). The kind of everyday digital work that contemporary livelihoods require has been conceptualized as, for example, "digital housekeeping" (Kennedy et al., 2015), "the invisible work of flexibility" (Whiting and Symon, 2020), "digital mundane work" (Wilson and Yochim, 2017), "online boundary work" (Siegert and Löwstedt, 2019), and "transcendent parenting" (Lim, 2019). Though these concepts are not directly interchangeable, they all point to work tasks which—like older forms of reproductive housework (Gregg and Andrijasevic, 2019; Jarrett, 2014)—are vital for the management of daily life *and* to capitalist value creation. Following this strand of studies, I here look for disconnective work outside of the formal wage market. Thus, while recognizing also that post-digital capitalism evokes new types of paid jobs (e.g., "digital detox consultant") that are carried out in formal workplaces, my focus here rests rather on the realm of working life that feminist literature recognizes as "the second shift" (Hochschild and Machung, 2012). In other words, I here acknowledge the *home* as another facet of the post-digital workplace, albeit one where work tasks are seldom awarded with a paycheck.

The (dis)connective work of The Post-Digital Housewife

With cues taken from digital work/labour studies, I here suggest *The Post-Digital Housewife* as a rhetorical device for pinpointing daily work tasks that are enforced by digitalization and made acute by the disconnection turn. My figure is partly inspired by Jarrett's (2016) re-interpretation of online user activity—or digital labour—in light of Marxist feminist theory (e.g., Federici, 2012; Fortunati, 1995; Weeks, 2007). To get at the contradictory nature of digital labour as something being "simultaneously inside and outside of capitalism" (p. 71), Jarrett engages the concept of *The Digital Housewife*. The gendered term house-*wife* is deliberately chosen to theoretically link contemporary digital labour to older forms of devalued, "quasi-voluntary," "women's work" (cf. Jarrett, 2014).

Yet, there are key differences between The Digital Housewife and her Post-Digital "sister." While the former works *on* "the commercial web" (Jarrett, 2016: 3), as an online user, the latter is predominantly occupied with watching and manipulating the (imagined) *boundaries of* "the web." Bluntly put, convinced of the harmful consequences of excessive or unwarranted digital media

usage, The Post-Digital Housewife would advise The Digital Housewife to *go offline* and do some *post-digital housekeeping*, or, as Newport (2019) would have it, a "digital declutter." As previously remarked though, such work might well involve digital tools and, subsequently, digital labour in the sense of commodified user activity (cf. Fuchs, 2014; Gandini, 2021; Scholz, 2012).

The activities of The Post-Digital Housewife must not be subjected to direct commodification to subsidize capitalist structures. They do so to the extent that they constitute *reproductive work* that invigorate current and future work forces (Hester and Srnicek, 2017). Provided that the main task of The Post-Digital Housewife is to secure the digital health of family members, s/he is effectively a care worker operating in what (Hester and Srnicek 2017) identify as the "unwaged indirectly market-mediated" sphere of social reproduction. *Post-digital parenting* is what we might call the specific form of child care that the disconnection turn imposes, notably tasks pertaining to screen-time control. Like the more wide-ranging phenomenon of "digital parenting" (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020) or "transcendent parenting" (Lim, 2019), such work is currently subjected to fast commodification and increasingly framed as an indispensable element of responsible child raising. The marketization of post-digital parenting also enables parents to outsource such work. Commercial software developer *Netnanny*, for example, promises that its products—screen-time management, Internet filtering, app-usage notifications, etc.—are everything "parents need to help their kids in the digital world" (Netnanny.com, 2020).

"The Digital Housewife is profoundly exploited," writes Jarrett (2016: 87), referring to the ways in which unpaid user activity is capitalized. Could we say the same thing about The Post-Digital Housewife? As to approach this question and bridge to the concluding discussion of the social consequences of the disconnection turn, let us inquire The Post-Digital Housewife's social position, which seems at the same time *privileged* (notably in terms of class and ethnicity) and *deprived* (in terms of gender). Previous research finds that digital disconnection practices and sentiments correspond with affluent rather than disadvantaged class positions and that digital detox discourse typically targets the capital rich/time-poor (Beattie and Cassidy, 2020; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Based on this, we can assume that The Post-Digital Housewife (still) belongs to the educated *reflexive middle-class* (cf. Savage, 2003) which may appreciate digital disconnection as tool of personal development. As suggested by Fast et al. (2021), this social bias may serve, in turn, to make digital reflexivity an increasingly powerful mark of distinction and a source of respectability (cf. Skeggs, 1997). Next, given the gendered nature of housework, it is also reasonable to think of The Post-Digital Housewife as a *feminine* subject. While such work is also conducted by men, it largely remains the responsibility of women (Beckman and Mazmanian, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2018). This gender bias also plays into our technology use. On this note, Beattie (2020) concludes that "the ideal disconnected subject is the Man Alone—a masculine figure who is unencumbered or connectionless, free from relationships, responsibility and the expectations that come with social ties" (p. 167–168). Thus, whereas masculine subjects might be excused for "disconnecting" from mediated social bonds, The Post-Digital Housewife risks breaking hegemonic gender norms if doing so.

Hence, as a typical female "second shift" worker, a main target of commercial propaganda, and potentially an online "free laborer" (Terranova, 2000), The Post-Digital Housewife do come across as an exploited subject. At the same time: to the degree that s/he is also the commissioner of outsourced reproductive work, the Post-Digital Housewife inevitably "imposes a capital-labour relationship" (Gandini, 2021, p. 6) upon *others*—potentially including underpaid platform workers in the global South, migrant workers, and other servants in the transnational "nanny chain" (Hochschild, 2018).

Concluding remarks: four dialectics of disconnective work

An inverted reading of Karl Marx's diagnosis of everything that is wrong with capitalism suggests that "happy" work depends on workers' autonomy (Cieslik, 2017). In this article, I have provided examples of how the *disconnection turn in work* brings with it promises about increased worker autonomy and self-realization. Against this backdrop, does it not seem as if disconnective work moves us closer to the emancipating future of work imagined by radical thinkers? In this concluding section, I aim to contribute a nuanced discussion of the social implications of the disconnection turn by crystallizing four interrelated *dialectics of disconnective work*, as they surface in existing research and the work contexts inquired here.

Firstly, work-induced digital disconnection appears as both a *moral obligation* and a *marker of distinction*. On the one hand, it is surfaces as a biopolitical instrument of (self-)governance and a necessity that increasingly responsibilized knowledge workers—desperate for some peace and rest—cannot afford to neglect, nor escape if top-down enforced (cf. Guyard and Kaun, 2018). On the other hand, to the extent that disconnective work *does* promote resilient bodies and upward mobility (or, to speak in "deep work" jargon: "elite productivity"), it becomes socially stratifying. From the latter viewpoint, intentional disconnection practices fit into a grander scheme of non-consumption dispositions that make for social recognition and distinction (e.g., *not* eating fast food, *not* shopping at IKEA, etc.) (Bourdieu, 1984; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). From this perspective too, *conspicuously post-digitalized* workplaces, such as coworking spaces, are likely to attract those "in the know" and thus in effect form exclusive territories of disconnection (cf. Fast et al., 2021).

Secondly, we have seen that digital disconnection in work contexts is simultaneously framed as a technology of *individual self-optimization* and an instrument of *collective self-care*. If the former, seemingly more common, facet of work-induced disconnection may result in patterns such as those sketched above, the latter, which here primarily surfaces in relation to the concept of "slow" work (Mountz et al., 2015), corresponds with other recent outlooks on disconnection as "a powerful tool for political mobilization" (Natale and Treré, 2020: 631). However, while efforts pertaining to "disconnection-through-engagement" (Natale and Treré, 2020), "push-back activism" (Kaun and Treré, 2020), or "active non-participation" (Casemajor et al., 2015) may well constitute sharp weapons against hegemonic power, they are—as Natale and Treré (2020) also acknowledge—likely to be used by a tech-savvy elite only. Thought of, alternatively, as a form of *slow workplace resistance* that even in the long run damages productivity, disconnection arises as a type of micropolitics akin to "the refusal of housework movement" (Jarrett, 2016: 172). After all, "working slowly" has been identified as the essence of the word *sabotage* (Paulsen, 2014: 51).

Thirdly, disconnective work produces a tension between *responsibilization* and *irresponsibilization*. As also observed by Syvertsen (2020), problems inherent to present-day capitalism are constructed as individual problems to be solved through self-improvement rather than political intervention. Subsequently, workers are made responsible for their own digital "fitness" and failure to succeed with a "digital diet" is bound to be taken personally (cf. Cederström and Spicer, 2015). However, as proposed with regard to the socially (and potentially also digitally) entangled Post-Digital Housewife, disconnective work might also engender a twin-process of irresponsibilization. In times when social relations are inherently mediatized, workers shielding themselves from digital distractions inevitably risk making *others* responsible for duties that do not make it through any self-selected digital filters (see also Gregg 2018b). Again, power

structures make it easier for certain subjects to act "irresponsibly" vis-à-vis work colleagues or family members.

Fourthly, disconnective work sits in a peculiar position with regards to processes of *workification* (Bergman and Gustafson, 2008) and what we might label *post-workification*. Apropos the latter, top-down-enforced or self-imposed disconnection possibly triggers work modes that are not only productive but also self-realizing. To the extent that office m^2 are increasingly dedicated to "disconnected" recreation and play, post-digital workstyles arguably align with the kind of post-work ideas—about a world freed from work as we know it—that have been advocated by progressive, typically socialist, movements (cf. Gregg, 2018b). Concurrently though, the ongoing platformization of work—which increasingly incorporates disconnective technology—turns even "digitally dead" workplaces into surveilled spaces of digital labour (Fuchs, 2014; Gandini, 2021; Scholz, 2012). Moreover, the disconnection turn in work seamlessly brings new work tasks into our private homes and, again, may stimulate workers to work *harder*. Per these observations then, digital disconnection might translate into more, not less, work.

If digital disconnection translates into liberation, oppression or exploitation ultimately depends on work and life conditions. I welcome future critical disconnection studies that combine system critique and intersectional analyses of power with curious inquiries into peoples' lived experiences of the demands and allures of post-digital capitalism. It is my hope that this article has stimulated such studies by offering relevant, hitherto largely dodged, perspectives on digital disconnection.

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ORCID iD

Karin Fast https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4704-5017

Notes

1. Tellingly, as of April 14, 2021, a database search in 16 peer-review work/labour studies journals (via EBSCO/OneSearch) for articles featuring the terms "digital detox" OR "digital disconnection" resulted in *zero* hits.
2. A systematic search for disconnectivity apps, in January 2021 via Appstore, Google Play, and Google Search, generated 70 hits (search words included, e.g., "pomodoro," "digital detox," "disconnection," "nomophobia," "phone addiction," "screen time"). 47/70 apps were categorized as 'Productivity'. The search was conducted by research assistant Ragnhild-Marie Nerheim, University of Oslo.

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Author biography

Karin Fast, PhD, is Associate Professor in media and communication studies and works at Department of Media and Communication, at University of Oslo, Norway. She has published her research on media work, mediatization, transmedia, and geomedia in international, peer-reviewed, journals, such as *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, Communication Theory, International Journal of Cultural Studies, Communications,* and *Media, Culture & Society*. She has authored *Transmedia Work: Privilege and Precariousness in Digital Modernity* (2019, with A. Jansson; Routledge) and co-edited *Geomedia Studies: Spaces and Mobilities in Mediatized Worlds* (2018, with A. Jansson, J. Lindell, L. Ryan Bengtsson, & M. Tesfahuney; Routledge). Between 2020 and 2021, she works full-time in the project *Intrusive Media, Ambivalent Users and Digital Detox (Digitox)*, led by Professor Trine Syvertsen at University of Oslo.