Political Solutions or user Responsibilization? How Politicians understand Problems Connected to Digital Overload

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Abstract
Politicians are decision-makers responsible for policy and opinion leaders with unique powers to construct challenges and problems as political. An emerging problematic issue pertains to users’ experiences of digital overload and invasive media (Syvertsen 2020; Lomborg and Ytre-Arne, 2021). Existing studies report that users struggle to self-regulate their digital media use – or ‘disconnect’. This relates to how connectivity platforms develop increasingly advanced techniques to keep them from logging off (Karppi 2018; Zuboff, 2019; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020).

This article aims to unpack how politicians understand problems about digital overload and invasive media and to what degree they regard digital disconnection as a potential political issue. We have selected Norway as our case country because of the population’s level of digital connectivity and the tradition of media regulation in the Nordic region (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Based on 16 research interviews with politicians and think-thank experts and a document analysis of official party-political platforms, we ask to what degree the politicians experience digital overload and invasive media as problematic, and if so, whom they believe is responsible for causing and solving the problems, and what specific solutions they suggest to the issues. In addition to digital disconnection literature, we draw on theoretical perspectives from media policy, political theory, and responsibilization.

Key findings indicate that politicians regard digital overload and invasive media as highly problematic. However, they are reluctant to suggest political interventions as solutions to these problems but rather place responsibility on the users and the platform industries. The politicians struggle to imagine political interventions that could help users disconnect while respecting personal authority and are doubtful about their power vis-à-vis the global tech companies. The article concludes with a critical discussion about the politicians’ acceptance of the neoliberal idea of responsibilization. This ultimately produces a reluctance to discuss disconnection as a political issue, not just an individual challenge.

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Introduction
Politicians are policy-makers and opinion-leaders with unique powers to construct challenges and problems as political. An emerging problem field in deeply mediatized societies pertains to the issues that are usually – and so also in this article – summarized by the concepts of ‘digital overload’ and ‘invasive media’ (Adams and Jansson, 2021; Karppi, 2018; Lomborg and Ytre-Arne, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020). Accordingly, a crucial question is if experiences of digital overload and invasive media demand political solutions or if individual users best deal with them.

A key finding in research on digital disconnection, which is increasingly imagined as a solution to mentioned problems, is that users struggle to regulate their use of digital media. Although many users today have developed disconnection strategies such as ‘digital detox’, these have been characterized as insufficient and having limited lasting effects (Syvertsen 2020; Lomborg and Ytre-Arne, 2021). The most common explanation for why individual attempts to regulate digital media often fail is a combination of the increasing ‘indispensability’ (Jansson 2018) of digital media in everyday life caused by escalating and deepening mediatization (Couldry and Hepp 2017; Hepp 2019), and the fact that connectivity platforms and other actors in the digital industries continuously develop and implement new techniques to keep users engaged and ‘logged on’ (Adams and Jansson, 2021; Karppi, 2018; Karppi and Nieborg, 2021).

While much research has focused on either the digital industries’ connection strategies (e.g., Karppi 2018; Zuboff 2019) or the users’ disconnection strategies (e.g., Portwood-Stacer, 2012; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020), the relationship between digital overload and invasive media as a problem-field and the political sphere remains relatively unexplored. This is not to say that the political dimension of digital disconnection per se has been completely unnoticed. On the contrary, critical disconnection studies do identify digital disconnection as a potentially powerful means of social change (Syvertsen 2020). For example, Natale and Trère (2020: 631) envision that ‘disconnection could be situated within a broader frame of collective political responsibility aimed at producing social and political change’. Similarly, Kaun and Tréré (2020) frame media refusal and non-use as political practices akin to other forms of ‘push-back activism’. Digital disconnection, the authors argue, may serve as resistance on both individual and collective levels and ultimately challenge hegemonic constructions of connectivity as something always inherently good (Kaun and Trère 2020: 707). Nonetheless, while bottom-up perspectives on disconnection have made it into the research field, we still know little about the point of view of the politicians; how they perceive problems stemming from the abundance of digital media and connectivity in today’s society – including problematic media ‘useover-use’ – and how they imagine problems to be solved.

In media policy studies, a body of research has documented how the expansion of US connectivity platforms – such as those owned by Meta (e.g., Facebook) – into European media markets is challenging national media policies by discounting local regulations (Moore and Tambini 2018). Even in the state-regulated Nordic media market, with its long tradition of extensive collaboration between the regulators and the private media companies (Syvertsen et al., 2014), attempts to collaborate with global tech companies in a regulation context have failed (Enli and Syvertsen, 2016). Thus far, however, the efforts to regulate digital platforms have mainly focused on either privacy matters (e.g., the GDPR jurisdiction) or economic restrictions and taxation to secure an
‘equal playing field’ for local media companies competing with multi-national digital platforms. In the Nordic region, regulation targeting the problems of digital overload and invasive media has so far been limited.

A significant motivation for this study is, thus, to expand the scope of digital disconnection studies and media policy studies by exploring to what degree problems of digital overload and invasive media have caught politicians’ attention and emerged as a distinct political problem field. Our primary strategy is to shift the perspective on disconnection from the micro level of the users to the macro level of the politicians. We do this by asking (1) to what degree politicians understand digital overload and invasive media to be problematic, and if so, (2) who they believe are responsible for causing and solving these problems, and (3) what specific solutions they suggest to the problems. To explore the relationship between digital disconnection and media policy in a national context characterized by a high degree of digital connectivity and a tradition of media market regulation, we selected Norway as our case country. Based on the mentioned factors, one might expect Norwegian politicians to be at the forefront internationally when defining digital overload and invasive media as political issues with political solutions.

The article is divided into three main parts. First, we discuss existing research in a literature review; then, we present the results in the analysis of the interview data. Last, we outline our findings’ main political and theoretical implications and discuss key research contributions.

**Literature review**

**Digital disconnection – a political matter**

Digital disconnection has been characterized as the defining topic of the social sciences in the 2020s, akin to the way social networking emerged as a central topic in the 2000s and 2010s (Adams and Jansson, 2021: 3). Digital disconnection studies are an emerging sub-field in media and communication studies as well as a trending topic in research dealing with societal dilemmas, such as health, economy and ecology (Moe and Madsen 2021). The research field has mainly focused on user reactions to ‘invasive’ or ‘intrusive’ media; that is, on negative user experiences of digital media as exploitative, disturbing and overwhelming (Mollen and Dhaenens 2018; Karlsen and Ytre-Arne, 2021). In much of this research, digital disconnection practices – such as putting away one’s mobile phone or deleting Facebook – crystallize as mundane user responses to experiences of digital overload and media invasiveness.

A recurrent finding across studies is that connectivity produces ambivalence, meaning that user experiences of digital technology are neither entirely positive nor wholly negative (e.g., Ribak and Rosenthal, 2015; Syvertsen, 2020, 2022). Connective devices can make our lives easier and more meaningful, yet ‘too much’ connectivity can make people feel ‘entangled’ (Adams and Jansson, 2021) by digital media. Thus, users often struggle to find a comfortable or ‘appropriate’ balance between connectivity and disconnectivity (Portwood-Stacer 2012; Syvertsen 2020; Lomborg and Ytre-Arne, 2021).

Existing research also indicates that digital disconnection is often socially constructed, by self-help literature not least as, a means of protection by which individual users can shield themselves from harmful digital media effects (e.g., author; author). Strategies to self-regulate are frequently summarized as, for instance, ‘digital detox’ (Syvertsen 2020), ‘digital minimalism’ (Newport, 2019) or ‘digital wellbeing’ (Jorge et al., 2022). As remarked by Docherty (2021: 3834), strategies such as these correspond with other forms of what might be termed ‘neoliberal self-care’.
Empirical studies in the realm of ‘screen’ or ‘digital’ ambivalence (Syvertsen 2022) demonstrate how users develop mundane strategies to disconnect, such as taking a break from social media, making rules for smartphone use, or hiding one’s devices (Light 2014; Mannell 2019; Siegert and Löwstedt 2019; Syvertsen 2020). Yet disconnection studies and adjacent analyses also indicate that self-regulation may be an insufficient and reductive solution to problems of digital overload and invasive media (Karppi 2018; Jorge 2019; Bucher, 2021). It appears inadequate because the force or ‘depth’ of mediatization in our time (Couldry and Hepp 2017; Jansson 2018; Hepp 2019) makes it more or less mandatory to stay digitally connected. ‘Disentangling’ from digital media would imply to ‘disentangle’ from society itself (Adams and Jansson, 2021). It seems reductive because it frames problems experienced by users across generations, geographies and socio-economic cultures as individual problems that can be quickly fixed through small measures (Jorge et al., 2022) instead of acknowledging the societal and commercial character of media dependence (Orben 2020; Vanden Abeele and Mohr 2021).

The individualization of problems about digital overload and invasive media manifests itself as a flourishing consumer market, offering digital detox services and -products that promise to facilitate digital disconnection (Beattie, 2020; Guyard and Kaun, 2018; Natale and Treré, 2020). The fact that digital detox has become a cultural megatrend and a rising industry can be seen as proof of the insufficiency of self-regulation; many users find it so difficult to disconnect that they are willing to seek professional help to pay their way out of their problems. Accordingly, digital disconnection has been acknowledged as the ‘new luxury’ (Haak 2016), targeted towards and available for an exclusive ‘disconnection elite’ (Fast et al., 2021; Jorge, 2019).

In sum, we learn three key things from disconnection research. First: users typically struggle with feelings of ambivalence towards digital media as well as with self-regulating their media use. Second, a growing commercial market offers ‘packaged disconnectivity’ for those who can afford it. In addition to commodifying disconnection, this market discursively and materially constructs self-control as the solution to digitally induced problems (Docherty 2021). Third, and relatedly, digital overload and invasive media are socially stratified problems. Except for the fact that digital detox commodities tend to be targeted at socio-economically privileged users, we also know that certain groups of users for example, cultural entrepreneurs and low-income gig workers rely particularly heavily on their connected devices to make a living (Fast and Jansson, 2019).

Hence, disconnection and related issues evoke fundamental questions about the relationship between (unevenly distributed) human agency and societal structures, individualistic or collectivistic solutions, and so on. Therefore, one might expect politicians – especially those ideologically inclined to favor state intervention to overbridge social divides (notably left-oriented politicians) – to perceive digital disconnection as a political matter.

**Media policy and responsibilization**

The Nordic region is characterized as a Media Welfare State, meaning that the Nordic countries have developed comprehensive policies for media and communication (Syvertsen et al., 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Brüggemann et al., 2014). The Nordic region has a tradition of regulating media ownership as well as media content, partly from aims to reduce harmful effects on audiences and promote the ideals of the welfare state, such as enlightenment and social representation. In Norway, there are regulations prohibiting advertisements for alcohol, gambling, and political TV commercials as well as advertisements targeting children, and there is a well-established and thorough system for regulating age limits for films and video games.
Over the years, the Nordic region has become increasingly connected globally and digitally. While it was possible to postpone the introduction of terrestrial broadcast television in Norway, the current media landscape is characterized by transnational tech companies and ICT technology. In tandem with technological changes, there has been a political shift towards the deregulation of the Norwegian media industry, in which digitalization has been an important driver. An overarching goal for digitalization policies has been to reduce hindrances to private investments, which has made users less protected by regulation (Syvertsen 2020).

The political shift can perhaps best be characterized by responsibilization, a term that refers to a governance praxis that operates through ascribing freedom and autonomy to individuals while simultaneously appealing to individual responsibility-taking (Rose, 1999; Pyysiäinen et al., 2017). Responsibilization processes allocate responsibility for social problems to individuals and have been identified as an essential component of the neoliberal agenda that characterizes contemporary information policies (O’Malley 2009). This corresponds well with a fundamental shift in the Nordic countries towards ‘stressing the individual’s responsibility over the social responsibilities of the state’ (Jacobsson et al. 2021).

In the context of digital media, responsibilization means that ‘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’ (Syvertsen, 2020: 7). According to US-based scholar Zuboff, problems connected to digital media cannot be dealt with by citizens only: ‘If the past two decades have thought us anything, it is that the individual alone cannot bear the burden of this fight at the new frontier of power’ (Zuboff 2019: 482). To what degree critique of this kind manifests itself in our interviews with Norwegian politicians or if individualism is the dominant approach?

The main point to be drawn from this strand of research is that, on the one hand, we might expect Norway, as a frontrunner in media policy matters, to be a pioneer in putting disconnection matters on the political and even regulatory agenda. Yet, on the other hand, there are reasons to assume the opposite. This is chiefly because Norway, like many other Western countries, has embraced the neoliberal ideal of responsibilization in many realms of society and still largely lacks regulatory strategies for digital platforms (Moore and Tambini 2018; Jakobsson et al., 2021).

**Nudging and behavioral public policy**

Given that classic media regulation is challenging for policy-makers in the context of the global tech industry, it is worth exploring alternative practices, often described in political theory. A key aim of political theory is to theorize, critique and diagnose the norms, procedures and organization of political action (Dryzek, 2008) and thus also to think outside of the practices of establishing and enforcing legal rules.

Nudging is defined as ‘an aspect of choice architecture that predictably alters people’s behavior without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives’ (Thaler and Sunstein 2008: 6). Nudging, as a behavioral practice, is currently being implemented by governments across the world, mainly targeting lifestyle factors, such as smoking, alcohol intake, exercising and diets (Quigley 2013; Ewert 2020). Critics of nudging describe it as a top-down, moralist and elitist method (Ewert 2020; White 2019), incapable of solving complex policy problems, let alone the underlying socio-economic challenges at the roots of the issues (Chaufan et al. 2015). By governing individual behaviors rather than structural factors, nudging has also been recognized as a neoliberal strategy focusing exclusively on the micro-level (Quigley and Farrell, 2019).
In the context of digital overload and invasive media, nudging is primarily used by tech companies promising to facilitate mindful or intentional use of digital devices, for example, through digital well-being, productivity, or health apps (Plaut 2015; Beattie 2022). These services are criticized for complicating the notion of responsibility as it is unclear whether the user or the app designer initiates the disconnection nudge (Beattie 2022), for appearing to respond to customer concerns regarding overload while not making systemic changes to their services, and for being a tactic to avoid governmental regulation (Beattie and Daubs 2020).

Behavioral public policy differs from nudging by including behavioral and social sciences in addition to behavioral economics and psychology, and thus targets not only citizens, consumers, and end-users but also stakeholders and organizations (Ewert 2020). In the context of our study, the prevailing focus on micro-level rather than macro-level solutions might make behavioral public policy a context where digital disconnection has the potential to emerge as a political topic. The main conclusion from political theory is that policy-making amounts to more than laws and regulations; hence, we might expect our informants to reflect on such alternatives.

Method and material

Norway is selected as our empirical context because of the country’s relatively long tradition of media regulation as well as its digital maturity. Based on these two circumstances, we expect Norwegian politicians to be international frontrunners when debating digitally induced problems in general and digital disconnection in particular.

Our primary method is theory-generating expert interviews. We define ‘experts’ as those who are responsible for the development, implementation or control of a solution or who are agents in decision-making (Meuser and Nagel, 2009; Döringer 2021). We explore interpretative knowledge, viewpoints or perspectives the experts might draw when developing or implementing policies (Van Audenhove and Donders, 2019; Döringer 2021). We understand that our informants’ way of understanding and talking about digital media and (dis-)connectivity will be more or less influenced by public discourse, including a scholarly critique of digital media and commercial praise of digital disconnection, as well as by the language we use in the interview situation (although we have strived to use an as neutral and non-deterministic jargon as possible).

Accordingly, our analysis draws on empirical data gathered through qualitative interviews. Our material includes 16 semi-structured interviews with Norwegian politicians and think-thank experts. The main selection criteria when choosing informants were (1) representability, as we aimed to interview representatives from all Norwegian political parties that were represented in Government at the time of the data collection, while also reflecting the size of the political party so that more than one respondent is selected from the major parties; (2) competence, since we aimed to interview politicians with a particular interest, experience and formal responsibility in the field of digitalization due to their political expertise; and (3) diversity, because we aimed to include both local and national politicians, including think-thank experts, as well as to achieve a gender balance (we ended up interviewing nine male and seven female respondents). The think-thank experts are included because we might expect them to contribute with innovative, creative and academic perspectives, given their position outside the formal political landscape. Yet, in the analysis, they are grouped with the politicians unless we make a comparative point of separating the two groups.

The authors conducted all interviews. All but two were done via a video-service platform (the other two were conducted via audio phone). The authors used an interview guide to gather interpretative knowledge, subjective experiences and opinions about issues of digital overload, invasive media and digital disconnection (Syvertsen 2020; Döringer 2021). The interview guide was
structured around three main parts and started with a battery of questions about the informants’ personal and professional experiences of living with (or without) digital media. In the second part, we asked specifically about any strategies that our informants might have to disconnect from their digital devices and to what degree they trust self-regulation as an efficient strategy for dealing with digitally induced problems. Third, we moved from the personal to the political and asked to what degree they consider matters like digital overload and invasive media to be political issues and how they perceive policy-making as a potential solution to problems of this kind. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min, and all were transcribed in full length by the company Semantix. The informants were asked to sign a consent form and review their quotes in line with ethical guidelines and to secure that all quotes were reliable. The interviews were then analyzed qualitatively and systematically to identify dominant and diverging perspectives.

As a pilot study to prepare for the interviews, we conducted a document analysis of the political platforms of the Norwegian parties that were represented in the Parliament at the time of study.² This material supplements our analysis.

Politicians’ interpretation of digital disconnection

A key finding from the interviews is that while digital overload and invasive media have become a mainstream topic, the idea that digital disconnection could be discussed on more than a macro level is still marginal. Based on the analysis of the interview material, this section will discuss our three research questions, starting with how politicians experience digital connectivity and to what degree they are familiar with the challenges of digital overload.

Main challenges: Time management, deep work and mental health

As a starting point, we shall investigate to what degree politicians experience digital overload as problematic. Given that digital disconnection had been debated publicly around the time of the interviews – not least through media coverage with ‘digital detox’ tips and the publication of tech-critical books arguing that people should log off – we expected the informants to relate to the problem field. However, not only did they relate to problem field; they were far more engaged and personal in their answers than we expected.

A general finding is that politicians are indeed challenged by digital overload and invasive media on a personal level. Every informant expressed interest in the topic and described it as urgent, relevant and timely. Many shared experiences of media dependency, both in private and professional contexts. One of the most powerful politicians in our material argues that struggles with digital overload are among the currently most debated topics around kitchen tables in Norway: ‘Whenever friends and families are gathered, they daily or weekly discuss screen time and digital media use’ (Røe Isaksen, the Conservative party).

The analysis demonstrates that the politicians identify three main problem areas of digital connectivity: media dependency, shortening of attention span and mental health struggles. Of these, media dependency came across as the overarching and main problem. The politicians describe time management as a major challenge in the era of constant digital connectivity, and many of the informants confessed to losing track of time while being online. Many of them explain that they spend more time on their phone than they intend to and are comfortable with.

Moreover, the informants frequently use the word ‘addiction’ when talking about the problem in more general terms, and when expanding the scope from themselves to the entire population. One politician, for example, compares heavy mobile phone use to ‘heroin addiction’, while others
describe scrolling as addictive. Such uses of diagnosis and (drug) metaphors are problematized in research because it reduces the problem to a question of self-discipline rather than a structural problem (Sutton 2017; Syvertsen 2020).

A second problem identified by the politicians is the impact of digital media uses on the attention span; also, many had personal experiences of relevance. Several politicians said they struggle with focus and deep work because of digital distractions and multitasking. One of the informants compares the experience of digital overload with ‘a popcorn brain, jumping from one topic to the other’ (Søndenaa, the Green party). On this issue, some of the informants, particularly the think-thank experts, referred to literature such as *The Shallows* (Carr, 2010) as evidence to support their arguments that digital media use is reducing our capacity to focus on deep work.

Third, the politicians pinpointed mental health struggles, or even emotional disorders, as one of the significant problematic aspects of digital media usage, mainly social media usage. The politicians argue that social media invites users to compare themselves to others constantly and that the algorithms they operate by make you vulnerable, to the extent that they generate a content feed shaped by your previous online activity. A high-profile politician argues that being constantly confronted with the staged and seemingly perfect achievements and actions of others might result in stress and other psychological challenges (Tybring-Gjedde, the Conservative party). Yet, in this issue, none of the politicians shared personal experiences but merely talked about the topic on a general level.

**Not (yet) a political responsibility**

The second research question investigates whom the interviewed politicians think of as responsible for the problem, meaning who has caused the problem and who should be held accountable. As demonstrated in the previous discussion, the politicians regard digital overload as a significant problem. Still, they were more reluctant when asked if they thought of it as a political issue or if politicians were to be held responsible.

This finding corresponds with the document analysis, which demonstrates that none of the Norwegian political parties mention digital disconnection, or similar terminology, in their party programs. Rather the opposite; most parties have explicit goals to scale up the digitalization of the welfare state, and to secure universal access to high-speed Internet, regardless of income or geography. This should be seen in the context of the general push towards a more digital public sector, based on the understanding that digitalization makes the welfare state more efficient yet without reflecting on the opposing sides of increased media dependency (Syvertsen 2020).

When asked about the degree to which they regard themselves, as politicians, to be responsible for problems pertaining to digital overload and invasive media, the majority were reluctant and fairly skeptical of politicizing the issue. This reluctance was more explicitly expressed by politicians representing right-wing parties compared to left-wing politicians, and their skepticism was based on pragmatic and ideological arguments: ‘Politics neither can, nor should regulate your screen time’ (Røe Isaksen, the Conservative party), ‘This problem is not something that we can regulate or solve by decision-making. This is an individual challenge’ (Chaffey, the Conservative party), and ‘Rather than to expect the state to solve our problems, we need to solve things ourselves. In Norway, we tend to expect the state to fix every new problem’ (Svendsrud, the Progress party).

Accordingly, the politicians reject the possibility that they are responsible for causing and/or solving the problem, and they mainly base their arguments on a general skepticism against regulation of digital media use. What seems to be missing is a more nuanced reflection about the relation between individual, institutional and political responsibility. Also, contrary to our
expectations, alternatives to regulation, such as nudging, do not surface in the conversations. The explanation of politicians’ reluctance to take responsibility might be found in the political context, as argued by one of the most experienced politicians in the field: ‘The politicians fear exposure to as tech-sceptics. We are in the Nordics after all, where people welcome new technology and owns plenty digital devices’ (Chaffey, the Conservative party).

If the politicians are not responsible for the problem, then who are? According to the informants, the responsibility is split between the industry and the users. First, they argue that the Internet companies are responsible, because they design addictive features and base their income models on maximizing users’ time and attention online. The informant representing the center-left think-thank argues that the industry is responsible: ‘This is rigged to get us addicted. The media industry has a serious responsibility’ (Nagel, Agenda). In this case, the think-thank expert is more hard-hitting and critical compared to the party politicians, and we might interpret that this attitude will be more common in the years to come. However, none of the informants complete this line of argument, for example by reflecting on how politicians could reduce the pressure to be digitally connected.

Second, the politicians argue that the users are responsible. This argument was most explicitly expressed by politicians representing the right-wing: ‘Most people can make good choices for themselves and their children’ (Chaffey, the Conservative party) and that ‘there is a difference between drinking one glass of wine and three bottles’ (Røe Isaksen, the Conservative party). This simplified notion of individual choices is to a lesser degree found in the quotes from left-oriented politicians.

The paradox of self-regulation as a solution

The question of what solutions the politicians imagine to deal with digital overload is explorative. We invited the informants to reflect on an issue that is not (yet) political without progressive policies outlined in the party platforms. As a result, the findings should be read as reflections on tentative political issues. That said, most informants argue in the direction of non-political solutions: ‘I do not think politicians can do anything about how people use social media and how it affects their everyday life. Regulating Internet companies is a difficult territory’ (Jacobsen, the Labour party). However, there were a couple of exceptions, such as the left-wing politician who, despite a degree of disillusion, supported the idea of regulation: ‘I don’t think this development can be stopped because the forces are too strong, but there are ways to regulate and limit. We can make sure it doesn’t invade all aspects of life’ (Kristjánsson, the Red party).

In general, the degree that the politicians thought they could reduce the problem suggested enlightenment and guidance of users to self-regulate. Yet, they imagined such measures as tasks for the future rather than the presence: ‘If this becomes a public health issue in line with obesity, alcohol or tobacco sometime in the future, we might want to do a public health campaign’ (Jacobsen, the Labour party). The question of digital connection becoming a public health issue is relevant as an expression of how evidence-based policy is preferred. Yet, it might be more challenging to document the health aspects in connection compared to food, tobacco and alcohol (see also Sutton 2017). The suggested campaign could be criticized for being a part of the responsibilization of users and the self-regulation regime. Still, it could also be seen as a nudge in which the politicians acknowledged the problem as a societal challenge.

The think-thank expert representing the center-left suggested customer activism and protest as a solution: ‘Customers should protest harder against this digital economy. We could join forces and protest against invasive digital media’ (Nagel, Agenda). One might argue that activism represents yet another solution depending on the (responsibilization of) users rather than the politicians. Still,
in turn, civic engagement often results in political action, and activism might, in some cases, be a prerequisite for policy making.

In addition to users, the informants argue that the industry should solve the problem. There is broad agreement across the political spectrum that Internet companies should solve the problem: ‘This is rigged to get us addicted. The media industry has serious responsibility’ (Tybring-Gjedde, the Conservative party). Moreover, the center-left think thank expert is even more explicit in her critique against self-regulation as the preferred solution: ‘The solution is not to try to limit our use, read more books or escape to the mountains. We rather have to change how it works. We should not accept the anti-human and addictive digital economy (Nagel, Agenda). This critique corresponds with arguments that have been brought forward by international activists, such as Tristan Harris, co-founder of the Center for Human Technology, who argue that tech companies have ‘downgraded’ humanity by promoting shortened attention spans and smartphone addiction. However, attempts from politicians to hold tech companies responsible have primarily resulted in a strategy of advertising tools that seemingly are helping users but, in reality, are allowing tech companies to postpone political regulation (Beattie and Daubs 2020).

The politicians’ power to impact the tech companies’ business models and design practices are limited, according to the informants in this study. Politicians representing the largest parties agree on that the national state has limited power over the global companies: ‘The problem is that this market is international, and we have to work on various political levels to get results’ (Tybring-Gjedde), ‘The traditional national regulatory regimes do not work on the Internet’ (Røe Isaksen), ‘The power is moved to the big companies and decisions are not made in democratic institutions’ (Nagel).

Related to the distance from Oslo to Silicon Valley is the distance in expertise, and a hindrance to political solutions, according to our informants, is that politicians have limited technical knowledge and lack confidence in the field. Politicians talk of themselves as just ‘lay-people’ in the technology field (Sandberg, the Labour party) and often fear using incorrect terminology and being ridiculed by the industry (Chaffey, the Conservative party). Accordingly, Internet companies might benefit from an uneven power – ‘The lack of knowledge can be a goldmine for the companies. They can reassure us that they are harmless and continue as before’ (Søndenaa, the Green party).

To summarize this part, we demonstrate that the politicians’ solutions are variations over the theme of the responsibilization of users and that often boils down to self-regulation. This is a paradox because the politicians also acknowledge that self-regulation is a vulnerable strategy in the context of immense tech power, algorithmic cultures, and ever-increasing digitalization. Despite what we might have expected, the Norwegian politicians do not seem to be innovative in their approach to digital disconnection and only, to a limited degree, discuss alternatives to media regulation, on the one hand, and self-regulation, on the other.

**Conclusion**

Based on research documenting that users increasingly experience digital media as invasive and that they are ambivalent towards digital connectivity and the entangling force of digital media (Adams and Jansson, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020), our main aim is to investigate to what degree and how politicians, as decision-makers and opinion leaders, relate to this problem field. More specifically, we ask to what degree the politicians experience digital overload and invasive media as problematic, and if so, whom they believe is responsible for causing and solving the problems, and what specific solutions they suggest to the issues.

Drawing on interviews with 16 Norwegian politicians and think-thank experts as well as political documents, we analyzed these questions systematically in light of insights drawn from the emerging
field of disconnection studies, as well as media policy research and behavioral public policy studies. The overall finding is that the politicians describe digital overload and invasive digital media as highly problematic for media users, including themselves, but that they are reluctant to define the problem as a political issue. The main reason is that they regard regulating media use as a challenge for the individual rather than a societal challenge. On the one hand, this might be as expected, given that digital media use is more individualistic than, for example, watching broadcast television or going to the movies. On the other hand, the Nordic tradition of regulating the media is recognized by including new media technologies in the regulatory framework, and one might thus expect Norwegian politicians to be at the forefront when discussing digital disconnection as a political issue. However, the findings do not indicate any particular engagement among Norwegian politicians to discuss disconnection in political terms. Rather other European nations, and particularly France, which in 2018 introduced the Right to Disconnect law, enacting the right to disconnect to protect workers from being penalized for ignoring after-hours work messages, have been at the forefront. The law, later implemented in countries like Italy, Spain, and Ireland, demonstrates that nation-states have leeway to develop policies to protect citizens against the adverse effects of digital media use. The regulatory shift in the Nordic region is partly explained by technological and economic change, but also ideological change involving elements from neo-liberalism (Jacobsson et al. 2021).

The primary responsibility is thus attributed to the users, who are asked to self-regulate and find a balance between being digitally connected and disconnected. Yet, we know from the research literature, as well as the empirical data in this study, that users struggle to self-regulate and that for many users, this seems an impossible task, which is associated with disappointment and self-blame (Docherty 2021). Paradoxically, although the politicians interviewed for this study essentially admit that self-regulation is demanding to the point that large user groups will fail in their attempts, self-regulation is nevertheless the preferred solution to problems about digital media use. The informants additionally place responsibility on the tech companies, but they do not express willingness to regulate the companies. As shown in the interviews, Norwegian politicians seem to consider digital platforms out of reach for national regulation. They thus await traction aid from the EU, given that international cooperation is needed to impact the tech companies.

Looking at suggested solutions, we found that the politicians point to the users and frame digital (dis)connection as an individual lifestyle choice rather than a systemic challenge with collective solutions. The preferred solution is self-regulation and personal strategies to balance online and offline activities, and the informants refer to their own strategies such as hiding the phone and forbidding phones at the dinner table. Yet, as problematized by several informants representing the left-wing parties, the responsibilization of users and self-regulation might not be a sufficient solution for vulnerable groups such as youths and people from lower socio-economic classes who lacks the resources and the luxury to disconnect. Arguably, the lack of political debate and societal solutions leaves more space for private commercial companies offering ‘digital detox’ as a part of the ‘digital well-being’ industry (see also Beattie and Daubs, 2020).

Consequently, the politicians and think-thank experts did not explore alternative solutions between the classic macro level of political regulation on the one hand and the micro level of personal self-regulation on the other, except for a few mentions of potential health campaigns and customer activism. The leeway to think outside established practices seems to be limited, perhaps precisely because of the tradition of regulations within the Media Welfare State, which might also reduce creativity. Possible interventions on the meso-level could be measures in public spaces such as libraries, offices and universities.
Further research is needed to explore the dynamics between users’ experiences of digital overload and invasive media and the political climate for debating these issues as less of a personal problem and a question of self-regulation, and more of a societal problem, which demands collective solutions.

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Notes

1. List of informants and their political role at the time of the interview: Trine Skei Grande, former minister and party leader, Liberal party (22.6.2020); Thorbjørn Røe Isaksen, Minister of labour and social affairs, The Conservative party (6.6.2020); Paul Chaffey, Secretary of State and active in the digitalization debate, the Conservative party (25.5.2020); Hilde Nagell, expert in the center-left think-thank Agenda and author of Digital revolusjon – hvordan ta makten og friheten tilbake (28.8.2020); Eirik Løkke, expert in the conservative think-thank Civita and author of Personvern etter Snowden: Privatliv i det digitale samfunn (4.9.2020); Robert Steen, leader of division for health, elderly and public service in the city council of Oslo and active in the digitalization debate, the Labour party (11.5.2020); Frode Jacobsen, leader of the Oslo Labour party (29.9.2020); Nina Sandberg, member of the Standing Committee of Education and Research, the Labour party (21.8.2020); Espen Hasle, party group leader in Oslo City Council, The Christian-Conservative party (14.9.2020); Mathilde Tybring- Gjedde, member of the Standing Committee of Education and Research, the Conservative party (11.5.2020); Karin Andersen, leader of the Standing Committee on Local Government and Public Administration, The socialist-left party (22.5.2020); Marit Knutsdatter Strand, member of the Standing Committee of Education and Research, The Centre party (5.7.2020); Herman Søndenaa, secretary for the Oslo City Council for urban development, The Green party (6.7.2020); Bjørn-Christian Svendsrud, former leader of FrpU, the youth division of the Progress party (21.9.2020); Solveig Schytz, member of the Standing Committee of Education and Research, the Liberal party (24.8.2020); and Mimir Kristjánsson, member of the Government’s Freedom of Speech Commission and local politician in Stavanger, the Red party (11.3.2020).


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