

Conclusion: Paradoxes and the Elastic Continuum of Digital Disengagement

So Is There an Opt-Out Button?

Throughout this book, in our search for the opt-out button, we made a range of interdisciplinary interventions that explore the concept of digital disengagement within the contexts of health, citizenship, education, consumption, labour and the environment. The various chapters within this book have shown the ways in which efforts to opt out across most areas of life are embedded within a socio-cultural, economic, infrastructural and techno-practical logic of social media and digital solutionism. This means that many opt-out efforts ultimately fail to offer any transformative challenge to the world of compulsory digitality, and instead, only support and sustain it as the fundamental central point of reference, mediation and return. Further, and crucially, the shrinking or disappearing spaces of opt-out makes digital disengagement a privilege reserved for the select few, whilst costing others their livelihood, freedom and even lives.

Part I of this book explored how the legal, social and technical spaces of digital disengagement and opting out are shrinking, becoming impossible or severely limited, and asked what are the individual and collective implications of this shrinkage? In Chapter 1, for example, we argued that the appisation of health services turns smartphone apps – the ‘mundane software’ (Morris and Murray 2018, 7) that has penetrated all aspects of everyday techno-sociality – into seductive data traps, which lure in their users with the promise of effective, affordable and instant health services available at their fingertips. At the same time, such apps also create a network of data sharing and data mining, which can be complex and cumbersome for the individual to understand or resist. We showed that apps’ infringement of privacy and data rights is not always communicated clearly and fully; nor is it necessarily comprehended by the health care

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providers who may advocate for such apps. Most recently, the coronavirus pandemic and the resultant rapid adoption of contact tracing apps has cemented a particular, and rather limited, understanding of apps' data grabbing, often seen through the lens of centralised state power versus individual control of one's Covid-19 related information, with the role of platform power and the global data economy and their spin-off profits often remaining unacknowledged in public debates. Finally, we suggested that while existing legal frameworks, such as GDPR, are a welcome development in the field of digital rights, their impact is ambiguous and uncertain, for while they protect *individual* data rights, the data economy of apps traffics in the collective value of accumulated information. Thus, we argued that it is imperative that digital disengagement is based on collective data justice, rather than individual data rights.

Benjamin, in her book, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (2019), makes a similar critique of GDPR and its individualised focus, as it fails to address the systemic racist and other discriminatory biases of digital data – the 'New Jim Code'. The protection of individual digital rights by GDPR stops when it comes to 'crime and security', frameworks that are inherently racialised, criminalising Black and POC (People of Colour) communities. 'What looks like an expansion of data rights for individuals rests on the ability of governments to revoke those rights from anyone deemed a public threat' (2019, 188), notes Benjamin, in her insightful argument about systemic digital injustice that cannot be remedied individually. In our own analysis of digital rights and digital justice, in Chapter 2 we turned to the field of digital citizenship, public services and AI-led governance. Here we documented the ways in which UK public services have shifted to being 'digital by default', a process known as e-government. E-government prioritises online services, connecting databases and deploying AI for a range of decision-making processes, while also speaking the language of voluntary digital engagement and connectivity, promising streamlined services and the freedom to choose how to engage. At the same time, digital encroachment of combined databases, the use of discriminatory data and other racist tech, and the black-boxing of AI-led decision-making processes, in particular in areas of dire importance such as welfare services or immigration and settlement, makes it abundantly clear that any possibility to disengage is tied to national privilege (citizenship), racial privilege (whiteness), and class and wealth privilege (not depending on state support for survival). We demonstrated that the growing adoption of algorithms for decision-making processes in the UK serves as a case of 'Emperor's New Clothes' for long-held and long-lasting forms of state cruelty in areas such as racial profiling and racial policing, the war on the poor, and border control. While offering a more convenient or streamlined service to those more privileged – who are also less dependent on the state and have more opportunities to escape digital-by-default governance – it leaves no room for opting out to those whose lives are most dependent on violent techno-governmentality. We

concluded the chapter by urging for the necessity of alternatives that are grounded in justice-led digital abolition and grassroots digital self-defence.

In Chapter 3, we focused on the ways in which the educational sector, within the context of Higher Education in the UK, is increasingly implementing digital tools and systems in an effort to supposedly improve efficiency, access and pedagogical engagement. We argued that this general move towards blended and e-learning results in a simultaneous corporatisation and platformisation of education. It turns the teaching/learning subject into digital subjects embedded within a neoliberal system governed by both a Big Data and social media logic. We critiqued how digital engagement and pedagogical engagement are collapsed, where the pedagogical subject must self-monitor and be monitored *digitally*, and, most problematically, be measured through a Big Data and social media logic that values quantified numerical impacts of digital performance (e.g., number of recorded video ‘likes’, or the h-index impact factor). ‘Failure’ to comply and perform numerically through digitality becomes equated with ‘failure’ to learn and teach. Opting out of the digital thus becomes difficult – if not impossible – as it has become so naturalised with the educator’s job. Finally, we problematised the ways in which the conflation of the pedagogical and digital subject represents a wider issue concerning the persistence of data, where the human subject is forever divorced from, but also wedded to, their ‘data doubles’, which keep performing and existing long after the human subject may have opted out of digitality. We demonstrated that, rather than resulting in *more* control of one’s data – how it is collected, shared and used, whether it is kept or destroyed, and how it can be used and misused – the process of digital disengagement creates a further decoupling of the individual from their data, leading to *less* control over its ‘afterlife’. We called this process a decoupling of data selves from their subjects, whose ‘data doubles’ continue their digital lives regardless – and despite of – the subject’s efforts to resist or refuse compulsory digitality.

Part II of this book documented the many forms of digital disengagement, which are co-opted into the capitalist loop of never-ending digitality and digital solutionism. Chapter 4, for example, explored one of the most explicitly capitalist-driven loops in the form of a cyclic double-bind involving the self-feeding consumer and labourer of digital disengagement. Here, we described how the individual, trying to take a break from the digital, is forever trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle where the problem of one’s digital over-consumption is ‘solved’ not through the practice, but the *consumption*, of digital disengagement. We analysed this cycle through examples of digital detox holidays and initiatives such as National Unplugging Days. These require further digital engagement (through digital performances, social networking, or digital admin), are temporary by necessity and/or require resources whether financial, temporal or otherwise. As such, the consumer of digital disengagement must not only pay for their own digital disengagement with resources earned as a

(digital) labourer, but they must also return back to the ‘normality’ and normativity of the digital from their consumer experience of disengagement as ‘newly refreshed’ labourers, only to start the cycle again. Here, opt-out becomes a form of self-entrapment, where digital disengagement represents an empty consumer sign that is self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating in ways that support and maintain the dominant capitalist and neoliberal structures of digitality.

Chapter 5 explored the question of the sheer amount of labour needed in the whole process of digital disengagement and then re-engagement back into the normative digital, which ultimately always forms the centre, starting and end point of digital (dis)engagement. Through our critique of digital apps that supposedly ‘solve’ the problem of over-digitality, we revealed the ways in which the management of these apps require various forms of digital labour that are often gendered through discourses of affective care: from managing the device, managing the data, and ultimately managing the self and the family. Furthermore, we also explored the labour needed in ‘returning back to normal’, in the form of data simply ‘waiting’ or ‘continuing’ whilst the pause button had been hit. This, once again, ties digital disengagement to questions of ‘data doubles’ who continue and persist beyond the opt-out. We ended the chapter by looking at changes in digital labour, and the shifting and increasing visibility of digital privilege, during the Covid-19 pandemic. By exploring precarious and platform labour, we also addressed the racialised and classed aspects of digital disengagement. We argued that opting out is a privilege resting upon the unequal distribution of digital and spatio-temporal capital, only affordable to some and unattainable to others.

Concluding the discussion of digital solutionism and the trap of digitality, Chapter 6 turned to the materiality of the digital, and to its environmental harms. We showed that despite the widely available evidence of environmental damage brought on by the digital economy, due to mining and extraction, e-waste, high energy consumption and carbon emissions of data-driven activities, and toxic and exploitative labour conditions, academic and policy discourses on environmental sustainability continue to glorify digital technologies as environmental saviours and are unwilling to consider environmentally motivated digital disengagement. We then discussed several imaginaries and discourses that do put forward such a motivation. We have demonstrated that they range from semiotic extractivism and greenwashing that lacks any actual environmental commitment, to racialised colonial fantasies of exotic ‘non-digital’ lands, devoid of actual people. We then turned to several examples of partial refusals from within the digital industry – a refusal of ‘dirty’ web design that is high in energy consumption and carbon emissions, and a refusal of digital disposability. We showed that such initiatives have a real transformative potential, but can often sustain and cement our reliance on the capitalist digital economy instead of refusing it. Examining the prevalence of digital solutionism, our analysis turned to the necessity of critical racial and decolonial analyses of

eco-fascism. We argued that it is imperative to conceive digital environmental justice as a form of material accountability that resists racial capitalism and extractive digital economies and is committed to both human and non-human life, without privileging one over the other.

Beyond Disconnection

Throughout this book, we re-conceptualised digital disengagement in ways that move beyond current debates within the field of Disconnection Studies, which approaches the subject as mostly about disengaging from social media platforms, and primarily as consisting of individual practices and experiences of disconnection. For example, as we explored in Chapters 2 and 3 in relation to the ways in which the digital forces interaction from the user – whether the ‘user’ is a citizen or an educational subject – in very particular and predetermined ways, both engagement and disengagement are shaped by the *social mediatisation* of digital life. This is not just a practice of communicating via social media, but a technology of commodification, forced connectivity and the obfuscation of political and economic power. Social mediatisation, as we showed, creeps in through the informality of the vernacular language of ‘friending’, ‘liking’ and ‘following’, now used not only by individual users but by state bodies and governmental services. It enters our life through the micro-celebrity logic of online performance and self-promotion, now shaping university teaching and learning. It cements its presence through the corporate logic of never-ending quantification and tracking, where governmentality and surveillance capitalism are now consistently masquerading as performances and measurers of care, success and knowledge.

In addition, we argued that most research on the topic of disconnection and opt-out so far focuses on human agency, individual human rights and human practices, rarely considering disconnection through the lens of power and politics, and rarely considering the agency of the technologies themselves. As we highlighted throughout the book, these technologies inhabit multiple networked ecosystems of digitality and platform synchronicity that are simultaneously heavily regulated and open to loopholes and violations. To address this complexity, we explored digital disengagement and opt-out as a field of legal, socio-political and technical contestations. We argued that neither individual choices nor legal frameworks protecting individual rights are enough to understand and challenge the horizons of opt-out as they change and evolve. Instead, we need to pay attention to the power and agency of the technologies themselves; their discriminatory design; their networked data behaviours within various techno-social ecologies; their global circulation that often moves through legislative loopholes; and their ‘black-boxed’ nature, where automated decisions are often hard to understand and audit, and even harder to challenge.

Today, data is aggregated, analysed and kept by multiple (yet interconnected) databases, locally and globally; algorithms determine decisions regardless of whether one agreed to be algorithmically analysed or not; and ‘smart things’ are everywhere, and always already networked. In such a context, while digital technologies are often presented as individually empowering, as absolutely necessary, and as the best solutions to all problems, one’s options of escaping the digital – in shared, private, as well as in public spaces, in education and health-care, in public services and border controls – are narrowing, or are becoming incredibly time-consuming and difficult. For example, withdrawing one’s data collected by apps demands navigating legal documents, such as various privacy policies by not just apps but also the third parties they work with; filling forms; submitting requests; checking progress; and verifying which data is still kept, where and for how long. Digital disengagement thus becomes a self-generated burden. To ease the process, the same burdensome digital technologies come to the rescue, by offering more digital tools, enabling one to be ‘consciously digital’ (Dedyukhina 2015), to ‘digitally declutter’ (Graham-Smith 2017), to track one’s screen time or one’s spyware and so on. In some respect, it may seem that there is literally no digital disengagement without digital solutionism. Furthermore, it appears that being able to detangle oneself from the world of networked digitality and datafication is impossible. Returning to Karppi’s warning, voiced over a decade ago, regarding the impossibility of Facebook suicide (2011), this book calls attention to how the corporatised, neoliberal world of digital connectivity and platform-based services traffics not merely in data, but in data doubles. Ghosts, phantom subjects, digital golems – their diligent digital labour continues to serve the economy whether their human subjects want them to or not, or rather, precisely when their subjects have left, having digitally disengaged. Or died. In other words, although short breaks from digitality are both encouraged and commodified, actual opt-outs are both hard to imagine and difficult to execute.

In the Introduction, we argued that digital disengagement is inherently paradoxical and operates as an elastic continuum. In this final chapter, we further consider how paradoxes of digital disengagement relate to questions of co-optation and resistance, culture and economy, power and powerlessness. We then show that the elastic continuum of digital disengagement shrinks and expands spaces and times of digitality and refusal according to privilege – both predetermined and acquired. Digital disengagement itself becomes a capital, intertwined with structures of temporality, sovereignty and freedom. As we consider the unequal distribution of digital disengagement, we argue that it is imperative to shift the discussion from the universal notions of connection/disconnection to the politically specific and contextualised, and from individual opportunities and practices to collective accountability and digital justice. We conclude this book by looking at what might remain when, or if, we leave the digital behind, and what kind of collective opt-out buttons can offer us alternative futures.

Revisiting Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement: Resistance, Compulsory Connectivity and Co-optation

In their discussion of mediated political action, Casemajor et al. write about the paradox of online non-participation as a form of resistance. They note that '[a] conclusive exit from the digital spheres entirely, in an ultimate bid to resist surveillance or capture, might also pre-emptively deny any possibility of an internal engagement which might positively configure technologies toward desirable forms of participation' (2015, 863). Such a stance is one that often forms the basis for critiques against digital disengagement in its broad range of manifestations, from temporary disconnections to long-term or permanent deletion of accounts, from sabotage of platforms to collective days of unplugging, all of which are seen as a missed opportunity to engage *differently* with the digital, transforming its pitfalls. Concerns about 'missing out' on more promising forms of digital participation, or on the opportunities to change digital cultures from within are often linked to a more philosophical question of 'what form of free will can be exercised by not participating' (Casemajor et al. 2015, 864). At the heart of such an approach, however, lies the naturalisation of engagement as digital, which is precisely what our book is challenging. Our critical reading of how digital technologies are repeatedly conflated with sociality, social participation and even resistance, are offered here to dismantle assumptions about the inherently positive potentiality of digital technologies.

Beyond concern with missing an opportunity to resist the digital from within, digital disengagement operates through another paradox: the impossibility to disconnect beyond the digital; or rather, a circular return to it. As Hesselberth has aptly noted, the paradox of disconnectivity is that it does not exist without connectivity (2018, 1995). This is what van Dijck (2013) called the normative 'culture of connectivity', where even disconnection itself is practiced through a form of connection; and what Meijas, in his critical discussion of the sociality of digital networks has coined 'nodocentrism' – a 'pervasive application of the network as a model or template for organising society' (2013, 9). But the key aspect of the circular return, as we have shown, is not just about a cultural/social expectation to connect, rather, it is the digital labour (Fuchs 2014; Scholz 2013) involved in online performances of disconnection. The self-promoting disengager who returns online to tell the story of having unplugged, is providing free content for the website which promotes disengagement. User generated content (e.g., selfies, stories, comments, testimonies, pledges) on such websites mean that digital disengagement is not only a temporary technopractice, from which one has to come back and report, it is also a resource, a labour force whose ongoing work is essential to sustaining the very world of digitality one is trying to oppose. With no selfies, stories, comments and pledges, there would be no followers, no sharers and no visitors to these websites. Without the social media users – even those talking relentlessly about the need to leave – there is no data that feeds platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017; Codagnone et al. 2018).

It is by understanding digital disengagement as embedded in the capitalist, neoliberal and data hungry mode of digital communication as dependent on users/prosumers' (Ritzer 2015; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) ongoing labour of data and content generation that another paradox becomes clearer: the persistent co-optation of digital withdrawal into circuits of digitality and digital dependency, precisely by the very digital structures one is trying to leave. The co-optation of disengagement into digital solutionism cements our reliance on the digital, not merely to 'solve' every possible problem, but specifically to address problems brought on by the digital itself. At the same time, a reliance on digital solutions co-exists with the process of rapid shrinkage of opt-out spaces, as all our chapters have demonstrated. This makes compulsory digitality and digital dependency persuasive, pervasive and evasive, turning opt-out into a commodity, a capital and a privilege. As part of the process, the very idea of 'disengagement' is becoming naturalised as necessarily digital. Due to the all-encompassing digital processes discussed in this book – from platformisation, social mediatisation to datafication – disengagement from any social, economic, political and cultural sphere becomes inevitably and increasingly about *digital* disengagement. We thus argue that it is necessary to dismantle and destabilise the very notion of digital disengagement and opt-out itself, and to question what forms of inequalities arise from their own paradoxical digital reliance. Such issues bring us back, full circle, to a concept we introduced at the beginning of this book: digital disengagement as an elastic continuum.

An Elastic Continuum Revisited: Expanding and Shrinking Possibilities of Opt-Out

As we discussed in the Introduction, digital disengagement is not necessarily dichotomous – connected/disconnected or networked/unnetworked. Nor is it unidirectional – engaged and then disengaged; opted in and then out. Rather, digital disengagement is an elastic continuum that encompasses a broad range of contexts, practices, motivations and affordances. Many of these are addressed extensively in current scholarship on disconnection and opt-out: leaving to return, abandoning one platform but migrating to another, establishing time limits on device use, or even reorganising the presence of the digital in one's life. The wealth of empirical studies on disconnective practices that has mushroomed in recent years attests to the complexity and flexibility of our relationship with technologies, where engagement and disengagement are structured, but not fully determined, by the technological.¹ The elasticity of digital

¹ Arriving independently at similar conclusions, in her overview of scholarship on disconnection and refusal, Hesselberth argues that 'the gesture toward disconnectivity is not so much about the refusal or dislike of "technology," but rather "operates as an affirmative force that holds the capacity for transformation" (Rossiter 2004, 21)' (2018, 2007: citation in original).

disengagement is multi-dimensional because each instance of disengagement is located at various points of time and space, linking our off- and on-line practices to various socio-technical environments and platform architectures, always in relation to multiple human and non-human actors.

The seeming dichotomy of co-optation and refusal is elastic, too. As we demonstrated throughout this book, practices of digital disengagement are never absolute – in fact, digitality relies upon on them *not* to be so, to ensure a ‘return’ to the digital – and almost always rely on a partial, co-opted and/or negotiated act of refusal. One of the questions brought up by this partiality is whether such an opt-out is ever effective. For example, we seriously considered – and doubted – forms of partial digital disengagement in Chapter 6, when discussing environmental concerns and alternative practices in the digital industry. Can these forms of partial refusal, embedded in ideas of corporate responsibility, sustainable business and fair labour, offer any real alternatives to the environmental and human extractivism of digital capitalism? Or are they complicit in sustaining it, by making it appear better and thereby masking its violence? Similarly, in considering challenges to digital public services in Chapter 2, we pointed out that even the alternatives such as algorithmic accountability bear complicity in accepting and reaffirming the use of digital technologies by governments and corporations.

The elastic continuum, here, is not merely one of degrees of refusal – how much time was spent off-line, how much e-waste was reduced, or how transparent can and should algorithmic decision-making be. Rather, it is about the condition where protest, resistance, compliance and co-optation co-exist, often in ways that are not immediately apparent. For example, in Chapters 4 and 5, we explored the cyclic double-bind of the labourer-consumer in various examples of digital detox and appified management of one’s ‘digital time’. We showed that digital disengagement is less about either/or, on/off or opt out/opt in dualisms, but instead, is embedded within socio-cultural, financial and infrastructural systems of digital seduction and oppression. A digital detox is an elastic expansion of compulsory connectivity, seductively allowing a temporary escape from its grip. It is tempting for it simultaneously promises a break from the oppressive world of digital work, and a transformative return to it. The elasticity is what allows break outs and returns to remain cyclic, forming an infinitely self-perpetuating loop. *This* is the trap of digital solutionism, as it ensures the cycle of digital engagement-disengagement-re-engagement is forever repeated and anchored firmly in obligatory digitality.

The elasticity of digitality and digital disengagement has become particularly apparent in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has laid bare the magnitude of existing social inequalities with regards to both connection and disconnection – as earlier scholars in the field remind us, it takes privilege to opt out (Portwood-Stacer 2014; Marwick 2011; Scholz 2013). New pandemic digitalities have made visible the previously less noticeable *economy* of digital disengagement by bringing into focus the question of resources – financial, spatial and temporal – needed to opt out. Digital disengagement might *appear* free – indeed, a digital detox app

might be 'free' (notwithstanding how we 'pay' with our own user and personal data), or the time we decide to spend 'unplugged' from the internet might be 'free'. However, in order to exercise that freedom, the digital disengager needs the appropriate and expendable resources, firstly, to create a space-time of opt-out without serious financial and social repercussions; and secondly, have the means to delegate the otherwise unattended labour – digital or otherwise – to other people and/or objects. Without such resources an opt-out is impossible. It is here that Wajcman's work on the 'acceleration of life in digital capitalism' (Wajcman 2015) is particularly useful, when she places time sovereignty – one's ability to choose how to allocate time – at the centre of social justice. Wajcman reminds us that the experience of time pressure is not determined by the technology itself, and thus is not solvable by means of a digital detox or a reduction of screen time. Rather, an individual must be 'time rich' (Wajcman 2015) – a temporal capital that is in a direct relationship with the economic one: if you can pay for a service then you have the time to use that service of digital disengagement.

The capitalisation of digital disengagement was exacerbated during the pandemic when lockdowns and other social distancing measures were introduced to contain the spread of Covid-19. The relations between temporal (and spatial) sovereignty, (in)justice and life and death became more apparent than ever; in the words of Chan, 'the race towards digital productivity during the pandemic was buoyed by new and existing structures of labour inequality' (2020, 13.5). Who had the spatio-temporal and practical means to choose to 'stay home to save lives,' as the UK public information campaign put it? Who, on the other hand, was burdened with more digital labour outside of the safe confines of the home? Those most 'digitally overworked' and 'Zoom fatigued' – and thus most loudly seeking a relief from the digital – were also the more privileged, able to remain at home, safely shielded from the virus, while continuing to work and maintain financial stability. By contrast, the precarious workers and platform labourers, who are disproportionately racialised minorities and migrants (Aouragh et al. 2020), had neither safety from the virus, nor the time or ability to disengage from the digital, on which their livelihood depended. Their dependency on apps and platforms did not offer the same advantages that digital connectivity brought to those staying at home, whether in the form of access to digital education for children, or online leisure and wellbeing activities that had mushroomed since the start of the pandemic. And the institutional and corporate remedies to digital saturation – and more specifically to the digital saturation of temporality – added insult to injury. It was only because of the pandemic, when remote working and excessive digitality began affecting office workers and senior managers on a sudden and massive scale, that various accessibility solutions, and health and wellbeing services, emerged (including those addressing the need to reduce and regulate screen time). Few, if any of these solutions and services were available before the pandemic to support precarious, low paid workers and platform labourers.

As the first year of the pandemic made explicit, the continuum of digital disengagement cannot be analysed universally without attention to privilege and marginality, social power/powerlessness and oppression. It is privilege that can make the elasticity of disengagement more *flexible and malleable*, offering respite from compulsory digitality. It is privilege that can transform disconnection into *more free time*. Without resources and social power, the elasticity is far less forgiving – in fact, it can be deadly. For some, the continuum of digital disengagement can be a path to creative flexibility and potentiality. But for others, it is an evasive, yet powerful and infinitely adaptable trap. This is because connectivity's violent hold has limitless capacity to masquerade, escaping regulation and accountability in a world where injustice, discrimination and exploitation are married to compulsory digitality.

Opt-Out as a Path Towards Collective Justice

The social, political, economic, legal and cultural structures of compulsory digitality – from 'digital by default' policies to the social pressure to participate in online sociality – may only ever allow partial opt-outs. These can even stretch elastically into entire 'cultures of disconnectivity' and 'disconnection as lifestyle politics' (Kaun and Treré 2020); and develop whole markets of 'dis-connective commodities' (Karppi et al. 2021). But what about systemic exits? Throughout the book we have argued that one of the few ways in which we can attempt to systemically denaturalise the digital is by centralising collective digital justice and developing alternatives from below – as, for instance, the example of digital self-defence activism, discussed in Chapter 2 in the context of the systemic bias of discriminatory tech and racialised surveillance. We have shown that, while supporting digital freedom and safety, the logic of digital self-defence is radically different from that of cybersecurity – working from below rather than from above, and prioritising non-hierarchical, non-militarised solidarity.

In recent years, we are seeing more and more examples of such bottom-up organising, offering opt-out as a form of protest by those most disempowered, rather than as a form of commodity for the privileged. Many of these emerge in the sphere of gig work, such as Deliveroo couriers and Uber drivers, where oppression is built into, and operates through, constant connectivity (Scholz 2016). Indeed, many gig workers are using the idea of logging out as a form of resistance. It is a tool that is equally powerful and difficult to execute collectively, due to gig workers' structural isolation: when they work for an algorithm, it is nearly impossible to meet other drivers and unionise. Some find creative ways around the system's digital cruelty, as for example described by Woodcock (2017) in his ethnography of Deliveroo and Uber drivers, who, by placing food orders via the app or by ordering rides, were able to meet up with other drivers and couriers. During the Deliveroo workers strike in London in 2016, which was supported by Uber drivers, 'log out' was the protestors' actual

chant on their spontaneous picket line. Woodcock, an activist academic and ethnographer of gig economy and workers' resistance, described the chant as 'the "gig economy" equivalent of downing tools' (Woodcock 2017, n.p.).

Logging out can be more than just a chant. Many Uber drivers, for example, try to log out to await a surge in price – and can even do so collectively to artificially inflate fees by creating a 'lack' of drivers, which then automatically signals higher demand and higher prices. Uber, in turn, defines such log outs as 'fraud' in its 'Community Guidelines', and automatically punishes anyone logging out during shifts. Defining logging out as a violation of contract and a basis for dismissal makes it a worker's right and places it at the centre of the fight for justice in the platform economy. Uber's 'robo-firing' – an algorithmic process which does not disclose which data is being collected and used by the platform about its workers – was collectively challenged by drivers from the UK and the Netherlands (Bernal 2020). This was one of several cases where employment law and data protection laws, such as GDPR, were deployed to push back against workplace digitality and digital oppression. Tactical refusal, selective engagement and defection are indeed becoming key tools of the 'uber-worked and underpaid' gig workers (Scholz 2016).

Equally important is the organised resistance by those who are developing, building and managing such digital tools of oppression. One beautiful example of such resistance is a solidarity of US based tech workers who published their 'neveragain' pledge in the early days of Trump's administration:

We, the undersigned, are employees of tech organizations and companies based in the United States. We are engineers, designers, business executives, and others whose jobs include managing or processing data about people. We are choosing to stand in solidarity with Muslim Americans, immigrants, and all people whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by the incoming administration's proposed data collection policies. We refuse to build a database of people based on their Constitutionally-protected religious beliefs. We refuse to facilitate mass deportations of people the government believes to be undesirable (Neveragain.tech n.d.).

Further details of their pledge include the refusal 'to participate in the creation of databases of identifying information for the United States government to target individuals based on race, religion, or national origin'; advocacy to minimise the collection and retention of data that 'would facilitate ethnic or religious targeting' and scale back existing attempts to do so; seeking legal processes and support for the vulnerable; and, when unable to prevent unethical practices, speaking out and whistleblowing.

Actions such as this are key to understanding the responsibilities of those who are privileged and empowered by the digital economy and are complicit in

its operation. While the possibilities of disengagement and refusal are rapidly shrinking for those most vulnerable to digital violence, a refusal to build and sustain tools of digital oppression is more important than ever. Furthermore, a pledge by tech activists also reminds us, that while digital oppression persists, refusal and disconnection, even when done collectively, are not enough. It is within this context that we need to understand, embrace and support activist, policy, legal and academic initiatives that address digital injustice structurally and collectively, via a range of frameworks for data sovereignty, data justice and digital abolition. Work emerging in this area is all-encompassing, weaving together everyday struggles and multi-layered analysis; culture and economy; research and coalition building.

For example, in the context of Indigenous sovereignty and settler colonialism, the use of data emerges as one of the key sites of struggle against informational imperialism and digital colonialism (Kukutai and Taylor 2016; Mann et al. 2019), leading to projects such as a policy framework of Indigenous Data Sovereignty (Walter et al. 2020), or Indigenous Data Sovereignty software (Indigenous Innovation 2020). Some of these initiatives focus on technology development and use, for example the principles of FAIR: findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable; and CARE: collective benefit, authority to control, responsibility and ethics (Indigenous Innovation 2020). Others address the architecture of colonial policymaking and education, within which the Indigenous Data Sovereignty emerges, and develop principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty as a way of centring Indigenous knowledges and communities, using data in good, rather than harmful, ways (Kukutai and Cormack 2020; Lovett et al. 2020; Walter et al. 2020).

Unlike the notion of sovereignty, other work has emerged that centres the idea of abolition. For instance, in his book, *Goodbye iSlave: A Manifesto for Digital Abolition*, Qiu focuses on 'digital abolition' in Asia and globally, as a proposed move against Apple's exploitative conditions of labour which, he argues, are akin to slavery (Qiu, 2016). Consisting of workers' resistance, alternative gadget production (such as Fairphone), digital education as well as programmed disconnected time, digital abolition as Qiu envisions it is simultaneously resisting the murderously degrading working conditions of iPhone assembly lines in China; the environmental and social costs of mining in Congo; hazardous e-waste processing in Bangladesh; and mindless global consumerism, compulsory connectivity and digital dependency. Drawing on the actual history and legacy of slavery in the US, rather than on slavery as a metaphor, Benjamin powerfully lays out 'abolitionist tools' for 'the New Jim Code' – a digital/data/code incarnation of centuries-long US anti-Blackness (Benjamin 2019). Benjamin's digital abolitionism is about centring Black lives, building solidarity through digital defence, avoidance and the dismantlement of racist tech. It draws on grassroot research whilst also supporting resistance and empowerment through algorithmic accountability and electronic scrutiny. At the same

time, digital abolitionism, for Benjamin, is about reclaiming digital tools *for* social justice, and *for* Black lives, including a ‘justice-oriented, emancipatory approach to data production, analysis, and public engagement as part of the broader movement for Black lives’ (2019, 192).

The initiatives for digital sovereignty, on one hand, and digital abolition, on the other, strive to protect and empower those most vulnerable to the violences of the digital, be those the material conditions of digital production and work, cultural and environmental theft, or algorithmic racialisation. Crucially, they also make us particularly attentive to geopolitical, historical and contextual specificities of struggles for digital justice, against both individualised frameworks for digital rights, and universal notions of digital freedoms, which ignore the interrelatedness of the digital with other forms of oppression and injustice.

Future Pathways Beyond Digital Inevitability

Our intervention into the world of compulsory digitality joins the current landscape of critical digital scholarship in considering questions relating to digital technologies in relation to structural violence; data and social injustice; labour exploitation; the corporatisation of knowledge; diminishing freedoms; and environmental degradation. What our book aims to add is a paradigmatic re-orientation and a shift in perspective that is not merely critical of the digital per se but calls for undoing the normalisation and naturalisation of digitality and digital inevitability. We use the notion of inevitability here to describe a frame of thinking where ‘the fact of the future being digital is predetermined, fully accepted and rarely challenged, and so the only matters debatable are strategies of achieving justice in distributing digital resources and access’ (Kuntsman 2021, 75). We are not diminishing the crucial efforts for digital accessibility, digital self-defence and digital abolition. As we have argued throughout the book, these efforts are pivotal in sustaining *collective* digital justice that centre the disenfranchised and marginalised, digitally and otherwise (Benjamin 2019; Gangadharan 2020), while simultaneously being attentive to ways in which digital tools, technologies and data can be key for liberation. And yet, as we are finishing this book, we end it with another question: what can be imagined *beyond* the digital?

The digital has become so internet-centric and so naturalised that we seem to no longer be able to conceptualise – let alone even challenge – its normativity without, paradoxically, using the digital. Whether Uber drivers engage in collective resistance through mass log-outs, internet communities engage in collective ‘unplugging’ days, or even our own book title which refers to ‘the opt-out button’: our practices, languages and metaphors of digital resistance in themselves are so deeply ingrained within the digital, there seems to be very little scope for imagining and actualising opt-out beyond the digital structures

that define our lives. The question then is, how can we even begin to undo this? Is our future indeed inevitably digital?

One approach would be to embrace these digital tools of digital disengagement. From hacktivists and cyberpunks to algorithm jammers, digital civil disobedience has a long history of resistance from 'within', where the figure of the 'politically-minded hacker' has been one presented as a digital alternative (Scholz 2016, 152). In this sense, digital subversion in itself is arguably a form of digital disengagement; not necessarily a disengagement from the digital, but a disengagement between the digital from social, economic and ideological infrastructures of governmentality, control and power. However, singular acts of digital rebellion are still temporary – albeit disruptive – and point towards the tensions between individualised data rights and collective data justice. Indeed, as Scholz (2016) questions in relation to hacktivist practices: 'where are the massive occupations of far out-of-the-way data centers?' (Scholz 2016, 152). In other words, digital disengagement needs to be realised collectively from both outside *and* within the tech corporations that regulate and control the very digital structures that perpetuate and monetise digital engagement. These issues relate back to our conceptualisation of the elasticity of the continuum of digital disengagement, and the need to think further about collective, viable and more permanent solutions.

It is at this point we also make one final intervention. Throughout this book, we have problematised society's propensity for digital solutionism, critiquing the ways in which the digital is problematised only as a symptom, rather than the cause. However, we now would like to go one step further and question digital solutionism itself: do we need a solution? Can there be 'a solution'? 'Finding a solution', whether this is digital or non-digital, is to conceptualise digitality dichotomously (problem/solution; digital/non-digital) and to ignore the elasticity and complexity of opt-out and disengagement. In this sense, this book is not offering solutions: we are not advocating 'living off grid' without devices or Wi-Fi; nor are we throwing up our hands in the air in resignation, succumbing to digital inevitability and its troubles ('just live with it').

Instead, we are calling for the decoupling, denaturalisation and destabilisation of the digital as the starting and ending point for all. We do not need to reject scientific progress, or ignore the usefulness of digital media and technologies where it creates new access, opportunities and solidarity tools for those fighting oppression. But what we do need is a fundamental change of perspective in how we think about digital technologies as a synonym of desired futurity. Each time we imagine or plan a future, instead of considering digital solutions as the default option, we should undo the metonymic connection between 'futures' and 'digital'. Rather than asking, how should a particular new technology, device or platform be designed, governed and used, we should ask instead: what are its consequences? Where are the possible ways out of this digital plan for those whom it may not fit? And most importantly, what are the alternatives?

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