Essay

Disconnection: How Measured Separations From Journalistic Norms and Labor Can Help Sustain Journalism

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Abstract

This commentary considers the concept of "disconnection" as a way to understand practices of contemporary digital journalism while advocating for consideration of disconnection as a necessary component of sustainable journalism.

Keywords

connection, digital work, disconnection, engagement, journalism, news, well-being

Connectivity to online audiences and tools have been framed for decades as saviors of journalism. News organizations and their editors have prioritized communication cultures of openness, transparency, and collaboration (Nelson, 2021) to counter issues that have arisen in the industry such as shrinking newsrooms, fragmented audiences, and increasing distribution of misinformation. Academic, industry, and public discussions about journalism on social media emphasize the concept of "engagement" and "connection" through digital and social media platforms with audiences at a near 24/7 pace. Opportunities for engagement and connection have benefited journalism practice, from audience collaboration with journalists to reporting on local issues to major investigative breakthroughs like the Panama Papers. But increased opportunities for connection have deeply impacted the everyday labor of digital work, and more specifically journalism (Gregg, 2013).

An increasing reliance on the popularity and visibility of individual journalists' online personas to bring audience attention to news and organizational branding has come with opportunities for individual visibility. This has proved to be challenging, if not exhausting, for journalists. Despite institutional pressures to blend their personal and professional social media and to "live online," journalists have reported heightened levels of online harassment, longer hours and low remuneration which have led to exhaustion, burnout or journalists leaving the profession altogether, and especially among women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ); and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities who may be leaving

the pro altogether (MacDonald et al., 2016). This drawback may come to fruition with even fuller force if journalists continue to experience greater demands on their mental, emotional, and physical well-being (Holton et al., 2021). A critical intervention must be made into the systemic and cultural issues that are fueling the exhaustion and burnout of journalists. This intervention should begin with measured disconnection. In this essay, we propose a conceptualization of journalistic disconnection as a missing part of journalism's online practice and as a mediating practice and strategy of digital labor that should be welcomed into the journalistic process.

Disconnection practices, including "digital minimalism" (Newport, 2019) and "digital detox" (Syvertsen, 2020), have become part of the popular culture vernacular people use to talk about their uneasy relationship with social media. Disconnection has been referred to as a kind of disconnect from the "cultural logic" of connection so often espoused by social media companies and their algorithmic influence on people's lives (Karppi, 2018). Individuals use disconnection strategies to avoid or mediate the connective affordances of

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social media, between and among websites and in relation to a user's offline experience (Light, 2014). Disconnection tactics include creating private spheres for interaction, using technical boundaries like blocking or muting, micro breaks from digital and social media connections, or turning away from engagement or interaction altogether. Forms of online disconnection have often focused on issues of privacy (Light, 2014), surveillance (Tufekci, 2008), and reluctance or non-use of social media and the maintenance of online profiles after death (Hargittai, 2007). Time management, information overload, and desire for anonymity also impact disconnection strategies in a way that reflects from macro to microstructures of social interactions (Eklund et al., 2021).

Yet, disconnection is not simply a matter of "turning off" online and social media. Disconnection practices and the way they are deployed are bound by the cultural, organizational, and institutional logics framing professional roles and practices. These logics enable and limit the possibilities for connection and disconnection. They do not solve larger problems related to the increasing commodification of online practices and connection. For example, Treré et al. (2020) highlight the profound global inequalities related to access to connection and disconnection showing that connectivity involves those who are materially connected to a network. Thus, disconnection is not universal and needs to be reformulated within specific contexts to provide opportunities for digital futures (Lim, 2020). Those futures continue to be driven by organizational expectations and norms of professional practice that require near-constant connection that challenges individuals to balance, and perhaps exchange, personal time for the professional.

While technical and psycho-social aids promoting disconnection from social and digital media focus on individual responsibility for the impacts of connection, they also contextualize disconnection as disciplining or preparing for subsequent labor (Docherty, 2020). This is problematic in the context of resistance to the challenges engendered by digital capitalism. However, disconnection practices by individual workers who must rely on the connective affordances of social media to perform their professional role rejects notions of disconnection as a "hard break." Instead, they focus on the "mutability" of online connection within certain contexts that may promote sustainability of connection over time (Chia et al., 2021). In other words, incorporating measured disconnection into professional work may enhance the work experience.

Thinking about the mutability of connection and disconnection helps contextualize the everyday practices of individuals professionally required to be online—individuals who might otherwise risk the state of their employment by disconnecting. Disconnection captures something that might otherwise be ignored as negative space. It is not simply the lack of engagement or accidental like not knowing how to use a mobile application or not updating features. Disconnection is also an intentional, directed practice like curating followers

and posts. It has many practices with different goals that are contextual and influenced by several factors. One of the benefits of this perspective is that it allows researchers to see the other side of the coin, illuminating practices that have at times been overlooked in a fervor over engagement (both professionally and among scholars). Most people are living and working *in* media rather than *with* media (Deuze, 2012; Karppi, 2018), so we are increasingly physically and psychologically living through algorithmically influenced, globally and temporally connected digital "realties." Disconnection cannot be a single practice, but rather is several active and random disruptions, disengagements and sometimes even accidents that allow connection to be feasible in certain contexts and more sustainable long-term.

This is important for digital media workers, such as journalists, who are professionally pushed to remain connected with online tools and audiences. For most individuals, total disconnection from online environments is unlikely (Bucher, 2021). Rather than making disconnection the only way to resist the impact of digital communication environments, a view that regards disconnection as final, disconnection can be seen as a pathway for addressing exhaustion and burnout. Disconnection practices need not be a binary of connection, but rather can be part of a continuum of situated practices that engender different relational ways of being with and in online spaces and communities.

Journalistic disconnection is thus about (a) creating intentional spaces for strategic forms of connection and disconnection and (b) recasting journalistic practice within the negotiation of work structures, professional ideologies, and responses to a changing media context. These practices of connection and disconnection could help to uphold the ideals of journalism while protecting journalists.

Research has implicitly and explicitly shown how journalists have used forms of disconnection to mediate organizational social media policies to prevent trolling and harassment (Miller & Lewis, 2020) and to protect themselves from the negative effects of institutional support for professionalized social media practices (Molyneux, 2019; see also Opgenhaffen & d'Haenens, 2015). These impacts have been expressed as frustration with increased affective labor, dissatisfaction with the culture on particular social media platforms, and anxiety about the effects of web metrics and social media use on professional reputation or subjective well-being (Bélair-Gagnon, 2019; Bossio & Holton, 2019; Petre, 2021). Journalists broadly negotiate disconnection according to individual experiences and needs, the latter of which often includes the need to remain employed by following organizational mandates or norms. These negotiations include (a) technologies or platforms, (b) specific platform affordances, (c) access to technologies or resources, (d) time spent, and (e) cultural and social impacts (Light, 2014).

The paradox of social media connection, at least as imparted by news organizations, asks journalists to connect with audiences in social media spaces but to remain

disconnected by removing opinion and personalization from news content. The paradox also extends to source interactions, as journalists are asked to follow sources on social media to gather information while being cautioned to do so in a "balanced" way to avoid the appearance of taking sides. In the face of such tensions, and lacking clear policies or systemic approaches, journalists adopt various forms of coping strategies (Holton et al., 2021).

While journalists integrate their professional sensibilities into online relational practices, they are creating practices in line with visibility and influence cultures. This has meant moving away from traditional journalistic methods of representation and adapting to social and behavioral norms specific to online influence while risking blowback from their employers. Journalists have had to negotiate cultures of visual and textual expression, posting personally intimate content, and engaging in non-journalistic ways with audiences who value authenticity and attention-getting strategies. This can be seen in practices including the use of selfies as a professional self-presentation technique or addressing audiences directly in "real talk" video posts (Bossio, 2021).

These disconnections from journalistic practice do not come with a hard break from digital and social media spaces. Rather, they are part of the epistemology and practice of journalism that is affording journalists means to take measured breaks from professional components adding to anxiety, exhaustion, and burnout. Journalists are expected to connect within online communities using a blend of personal and professional personas. However, for journalists to sustainably navigate this environment requires institutional and organizational support for new forms of connection to audiences, not as experts, but as trusted community service providers. This requires disconnection not only in measured doses from digital and social media spaces, but also from the organizational tenets that continue to create unnecessary tension for journalists.

Alternate forms of connection and disconnection provide journalists options in contexts where social media use is unavoidable. Journalists can attempt to strengthen online and social media connections by aiming to control presence and foster safer spaces for connection. These negotiations can be productive tensions. They highlight how journalism, like most communication practices, reflect on and respond to technological changes as well as the social and cultural changes that emerge alongside them. New organizations have an opportunity to influence policies around connection and disconnection in ways that enhance experiences of journalists and support their longevity in the profession. Forms of disconnection (e.g., encouraging personalization on social media without looming and unclear retribution, allowing for micro breaks from social media, offering days off that break the 24/7 expectation of journalism, etc.) could help here. They could also be oriented toward giving news organizations more stability by providing journalists with tools to make them more productive, effective, and potentially happier.

Within connections fostered by journalists' use of social media, there is room for individual resistance and to more nuanced responses that recast the everyday practices of journalism, whether these might be technological, organizational, or individual limits placed on connection, or to mediate connection practices for journalism overall. While it is unlikely that these practices will lead to larger structural change, we argue that forms of disconnection from recalcitrant policies as well as online labor should be routinized and normalized within media organizations and in journalists' own practices in and approaches to journalism.

Disconnection as conceptualized here is not final. It is not a single stroke through which journalists remove themselves from journalism. Rather, it is a space to develop skills and practices that better ensure safe, sustainable, and productive online connection. It is an interconnection of influence on practice between users, platforms, and institutions. Journalists may have already individually developed such skills and practices, and news organizations may now put their support behind them through systemic changes. This, or face the consequences of a paradoxical practice that is increasingly pushing journalists into exhaustion and burnout with a death knell ultimatum. Disconnection is therefore a toolbox of options that journalists can exercise and that may help journalists to vent pressure that might otherwise lead to anxiety, overloaded stress, and burnout. And while journalists can afford to exit the profession for employment in more reflexive and responsive industries, journalism cannot afford the exit of those who hold it up (see Bossio, Bélair-Gagnon, Molyneux & Holton, forthcoming).

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