

The Politics of Disconnective Media: Unraveling the Materiality of Discourses on Disconnectivity

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Abstract

The commodification of disconnection has attracted growing scholarly attention. Previous research highlighted the instrumentalisation of disconnection for productivity, self-governance, and healthy life. Researchers have also explored the politics of the “products” used for disconnecting, such as smartphone applications and offline commodities. Yet, current studies generally neglect to connect digital disconnection’s symbolic and material dimensions. In this article, we critically examine the discourses of what we call “disconnective media,” the products (hardware and software) that offer disconnection from digital devices. To explain how discourses and products find a basis in material and social structures, we deploy a discourse-theoretical analysis grounded in a Marxist materialist approach to neoliberalism and the materiality of discourse. We critically analyse six disconnective media and focus on these key dimensions: justifications (why to disconnect), time/space (when/where to disconnect), devices/platforms (which devices are appropriate to disconnect from), and class (who is addressed to disconnect). Findings show that digital technologies in the workplace have been naturalised, whereas phones and social media remain problematic. Leisure time is constructed with a set of obligations to use time meaningfully and improve the self, while work time is presented through a scientific work management mindset that promotes efficiency. Disconnective media advocate the ideal image of healthy, efficient workers. This study stresses the importance of investigating disconnection concerning commodified labour and neoliberalism’s material consequences.

Keywords

digital detox; digital disconnection; disconnection; labour; leisure; materiality of disconnection; media

1. Introduction

In the last decade, we have witnessed the efforts and calls to withdraw and refuse the use of digital devices and services. Digital detox bloggers write about how and why to reduce the time spent using digital devices and platforms by giving advice and underlining the benefits of detoxing. Business entrepreneurs offer digital free services, such as a Wi-Fi-free café, and off-grid holidays. Tech firms encourage employees to take retreats (Fish, 2017), and some companies apply digital detox in the workplace (Guyard & Kaun, 2018). While digital media use has increased over time, a growing body of criticism directed at screen time has given rise to new lifestyles/subjectivities and digital wellness industries attempting to address the issue of isolated digital use (Valasek, 2022). Digital disconnection has become mainstream today, creating expertise such as detox writers and organisers, digital wellness advocates, and unplugging apps and devices. As Syvertsen (2020) pointed out, many forms of anti-media activism have existed, but there is no historical parallel to today's discourses on limiting personal media use. According to her, disconnection and digital detox represent a historical milestone: "a shift in emphasis from improving the media to improving the user" (Syvertsen, 2020, p. 73). This shift points out the neoliberal politics that make the individual agents responsible for their doings and un-doings.

On the one hand, while advice literature and digital products offer their solutions to remedy the problem of overuse, there has been a criticism that these products and services also reinforce the discourse of individual responsibilities (Jorge et al., 2022; Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020). On the other hand, there is also a contrast between responsibilities and the promotion of solutions, as disconnection commodities present their solutions without assigning powerful agency to individuals (Valasek, 2022). However, scholars primarily criticise discourses on disconnectivity, arguing that "fetishising individual choice and agency ignores the entrenched ubiquity of contemporary digital technologies" (Feldman, 2021, p. 107). Although disconnection is a relatively new phenomenon, considerable research has been conducted. Yet, there has been little research on the materialist ontology of digital disconnection, while more attention has been given to individual choices and discursive constructions. This study examines new products of disconnection in terms of commodification and instrumentalisation of disconnection from a Marxist materialist perspective.

2. Disconnective Media

One of the well-known solutions technologists offer for disconnection is to use another technological innovation, such as smartphone apps designed to limit the time spent on the screen (Beattie, 2020). For example, Apple and Google's digital well-being apps are claimed to protect users from overuse. Morozov (2013) calls such efforts "technological solutionism," a mindset that considers the internet and technological innovation as the only solution for societal problems. This approach presents paradoxes and contradictions as it requires a connection to disconnect (Hesselberth, 2018; Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019). Natale and Treré (2020) point out the irony of these new devices that are "presented as an antidote to our dependency from digital devices and platforms" (p. 627) while they are in the same way carried out around and attached to the body. Valasek (2022) states that digital well-being apps (or productivity/detox apps) are also nudges. Digital nudges, as a techno-solutionism, appear to be one of the defining characteristics of neoliberalism; people are given choices, but how these choices are framed by experts and those in power more broadly has illustrative effects (Valasek, 2022).

Previously, products of disconnection have been called “disconnection commodities” (Karppi et al., 2021), “technologies of avoidance” (Plaut, 2015), and “technologies of the Self” adapted from Foucault’s theory of governmentalities (Beattie, 2020). We introduce the term “disconnective media” to comparatively explain these technologies in relation to connective media. The term disconnective media combines disconnectivity and media, corresponding with the umbrella term “digital disconnection.” Therefore, we suggest that “disconnective media” is more comprehensive and appropriate for conceptualising new media products. Because these technologies are disconnective, they are designed to play an active role in disconnecting the connected devices and blocking specific apps. In other words, they turn the connective media into a disconnective one. Furthermore, some products are inherently disconnective, such as fake phones without digital functions. We define disconnective media with a holistic approach concerning any form of the product, either software or hardware, that plays a mediator role in practising digital disconnection. Another aim is to establish precise terminology for digital disconnection that moves beyond traditional labels like “old media” and “new media,” which are still prevalent in disconnection literature. Instead of framing media as simply old or new, we propose the terms “connective” and “disconnective” media technologies. The term “disconnective media” is particularly versatile, encompassing both established and emerging media technologies.

3. Instrumentalisation, Commodification, and Depoliticisation

Previous research has demonstrated how disconnection has been instrumentalised for productivity (Fish, 2017), and well-being (Syvertsen, 2020); depoliticised as a responsabilisation of individuals (Hesselberth, 2018; Moe & Madsen, 2021); and commodified as conspicuous non-consumption (Portwood-Stacer, 2013) and as new products (Karppi et al., 2021).

The responsabilisation of individuals has been a fundamental aspect of modern governance and behavioural management techniques. The emergence of new ethics of self-development has led to significant demand for individual reliability and responsibility (Sørensen & Christiansen, 2012). These politics have created, shaped, and governed modern humans as “good citizens.” Within discourses of disconnectivity, being a good citizen entails being a good digital user (Beattie, 2020). Regarding the commodification of disconnection, the products and services of disconnection promote self-control to manage their time and use it wisely, especially for professionals (Van Bruyssel et al., 2023).

The capitalist ideology guides the idea of wellness as a method for boosting productivity, assumptively on behalf of employers and employees. For instance, Smith and Puczkó (2015) suggest that many employers realise the benefits of reducing workplace stress by offering their workers wellness weekends, spa visits, afternoon naps, etc. Also, workers have long been expected to spend their off-work time wisely for a productive tomorrow (Nooney, 2021). This is an extension of work ethics to after-work hours. In neoliberalism, alterations to and regulations regarding the body are considered essential for job performance rather than remunerated components (Moore, 2018). Moreover, these practices run the risk of evolving into the most intrusive and intimate managerial strategies, which obfuscate affectivity and conceal the anxiety and oppression of precarity (Moore, 2018). Productivity, especially in commodified labour, is an output benefiting the employer rather than the employee. In this regard, all other outcomes of disconnection, such as well-being and self-management, are usually a precondition of productivity. Time management is also a matter of governable spaces and time. The invention of factory and work discipline has brought new

techniques for cutting up times to manage productive subjects (Rose, 1999). This can best be seen in the adverts of disconnective media—a strong message of self-control over time (Jorge et al., 2022).

4. Digital Disconnection Beyond Discursive Construction

While investigating discursive constructions can unfold many aspects of digital disconnections, it remains limited to only relative and imaginary aspects. Discourse analysis can provide how digital disconnection appears and is framed, but it does not explain why it appears in one way without a theoretical analysis. Although some calls have been made to investigate the materiality of disconnection (Kania-Lundholm, 2021), it has remained relatively understudied regarding empirical research. Moreover, there has been criticism that social studies, particularly media studies, have been too constructivist and ignored materiality and material conditions (Cloud, 2005; P. Jones, 2004). This is a concern because the matter is being replaced with language, culture, and all other semiotics (Barad, 2003). Critical realists explain how discourse has limitations and the material world exists outside of discourse, but discourse and the material world also have casual interactions. They suggest that “discourses, discursive practices, are in continual causal interaction with the material world,” and practices affect the world, and “the world itself is causally efficacious on practices” (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 13).

Another important consideration is that Marxist scholars consider changes in social practice/discourse regarding the changes in the mode of production, from feudal and family-based work to industrialisation and capitalist mode of production (Thompson, 2017). According to Thompson, time as measurement generates a relationship in which employees realise the distinction between their time and their employers, who must effectively utilise their employees’ time and ensure it is not squandered. Thus, time becomes a measurement of money, not a task which is no longer passed but spent. This resembles Max Weber’s explanation of instrumental rationality, the operative principle of maximising the value in modern civilisation, which illustrates how to design ways to complete tasks faster while eliminating wasteful and empty time (Bauman, 2013). Therefore, the negative framing of wasteful time and laziness is not just a matter of discourse but is rooted in material “circumstances that allow such a construction of this category” (Lanci, 2020, p. 98). While some scholars acknowledge that disconnection brings new moral obligations, particularly concerning work (Fast, 2021), we should also highlight how these obligations are bound to material conditions. Self-tracking devices exemplify how use and non-use aim for self-improvement and productive labour. The quantified self emerges as self-governing and a scientific work management method, similar to the justifications we witnessed in the disconnection discourse (Moore, 2018). Thus, there is a need to understand how both use and non-use are instrumentalised for capitalist productivity and profit making. Furthermore, disconnective media and disconnection discourse/practices can be meaningful in techno-material conditions. As Kania-Lundholm (2021, p. 25) points out, all social practices, such as work and leisure, are embedded in “the materiality and temporality of sociotechnical infrastructures.” For example, different material conditions, such as poor communication infrastructures, can differently shape discourses/practices on disconnectivity (Bozan & Tréré, 2024). Except, what has always been said as a paradox of disconnection is that disconnection applications require connection, but indeed, all discourses and practices of disconnection emerge as a result of the wide availability and accessibility of new technologies. Acknowledging the importance of the materiality of media technologies can reveal the impossibility of disconnection since the mass occupation of digital technologies is beyond human agency, and the choice to disconnect is highly rooted in privileges and precarious conditions (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2022).

To understand the relationship between discourses on disconnectivity and another social phenomenon, we also consider the Marxist concept of “social totality.” This would provide a better understanding of which practices and aspects of disconnection are natural and which practices of connection, on the other hand, are problematic. Particularly, it can explain why time and space of disconnection are important to underline, as well as the problematisation of devices; as Marx states, “the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life (Marx, 1859, preface, p. 2). According to Eagleton (1997), Marx argues that social, political, and all major historical changes are determined by conflicts of material production. Marx explains how the very abstract forms of life are rooted in the material world and, indeed, the material activity of humans: “The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life” (Marx, 2000, preface, p. 6). It is also evident in Marxist materialism that the ideas (discourses) are the products of the dominant material relations of productions, not randomly produced ideas, but very dependent on the social conditions and class structure:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx, 2000, part 1, p. 6)

This includes an examination beyond text and a look at which context the text is produced, including the material changes in production forces, from the industrial workforce to computer-based economies. Marx considers economic relations to be the core of material conditions defined in totality (Marx, 1859). Therefore, agency and structures are embedded in material conditions in the Marxist materialist conception of history. We suggest that disconnection studies should not be under isolation, and instead, we aim to address how the discourses of digital disconnection are interrelated to other phenomena, especially labour and economic realms, rather than only ideas, discourses, and representations. As Valasek (2022) points out, reading much of the literature on happiness and well-being is unnecessary to see a clear economic drive for self-care and productivity.

Nevertheless, this article takes discourses into significant consideration but does not consider discursive structures as prior ontological realities over materiality. Hence, a materialist approach to discourse analysis, especially one focused on material social reality, can contribute to disconnection studies with new explorations. In other words, it can reveal the conditions in the first place, enabling such phenomenon to penetrate some aspects of life over others, such as work over leisure. This is also because digital disconnection cannot be separated from the economic realms as Kania-Lundholm (2021) explains, it should concern “the conditions of power and labour in digital capitalism” but also the ideological mechanism of capitalism, especially “productivity, efficiency, and profit-making” (p. 28).

5. Methodology

This study investigates disconnective media with a sample of six products’ websites and blogs: three are only software, one is software and hardware, and two are only hardware (Table 1). The sample selection is based on Google Search results using the keywords “digital disconnection products” and “digital detox products.” Most

Table 1. List of disconnective media products.

Name of disconnective media	Type of media	Functions
RescueTime	Software	Blocking websites, providing statistics for productivity
Freedom	Software	Blocking websites and mobile applications
Offtime	Software	Blocking mobile applications
Unpluq	Software/hardware	Key for phone, app blocker
NoPhone	Hardware	Fake phones (made of plastic or silicon)
The Lockbox	Hardware	Lockbox for smartphones

of the products were found in the digital detox blog articles, even though only two appeared directly in search results. In addition, we sought to find a variation of the products and their relevance in this variation.

To explain how discourses and products find a basis in material social structures, we deploy a discourse analysis grounded in a Marxist materialist approach to neoliberalism and the materiality of media (Cloud, 1994; Dourish & Mazmanian, 2013). We focus on the critical analysis of disconnective media websites and blogs and examine these four key aspects: justifications (why to disconnect), time/space (when/where to disconnect), devices/platforms (which devices are appropriate to disconnect from), and class (who is addressed to disconnect).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) itself integrates some materialist features. As Fairclough points out: “The discursive constitution of society does not emanate from a free play of ideas in people’s heads but from a social practice which is firmly rooted in and oriented to real, material, social structures” (1992, p. 66). However, although CDA scholars have materialist approaches, the CDA has been a highly constructivist method (P. Jones, 2004). Thus, we propose a Marxist materialist approach to CDA, which includes a discourse analysis and critically interprets how such discourses are rooted in today’s material conditions. The resulting research questions are the following:

RQ1: How do disconnective media commodify and instrumentalise digital disconnection?

RQ2: How do discourses of disconnective media reflect the social, material reality?

RQ1 concerns the commodification of disconnectivity in the form of new products and RQ2 investigates the relationships between commodifying discourses and social material reality.

5.1. Four Mainframes and Sub-Questions

Regarding the justification (why to disconnect), our primary aim is to explore the narratives surrounding disconnection from two perspectives. First, our analysis identifies how the issue of connectivity is problematised and how disconnection is framed as a solution, justifying the need to disconnect. Second, we seek to uncover the link between this framing of disconnection and the current era of productivity.

Next, concerning the time and space framing (when and where to disconnect?), we analyse the texts and images associated with disconnective media to investigate the contexts in which disconnection is embraced,

such as in leisure versus labour settings or in workplaces versus retreat camps. In other words, we examine depictions of non-use within specific temporal and spatial frameworks. To analyse these narratives, we focus on the circumstances that challenge the value of connection and the suggestions that emphasise or celebrate the success of disconnective practices. This analysis includes various indicators, such as the choice of imagery and the settings where disconnection occurs.

Thirdly, as for the devices and platforms (what devices are appropriate to be disconnected from?), this analysis considers the various digital technologies that are both problematised and repurposed. Specifically, we examine the rationale behind the use of disconnective media in work and daily life. One of the key objectives of broadening the scope of digital discourse is to critically challenge the existing narratives that define and frame disconnection in relation to specific technologies. Consequently, the analysis focuses on the selection of devices and platforms within these narratives, particularly those portrayed as problematic.

Finally, regarding class (who is addressed to disconnect?), we analyse how the subjects of disconnection are represented, focusing not on demographic data but on the ways in which both voluntary and enforced disconnection are portrayed. Through materialist discourse analysis and theoretical exploration, we aim to uncover the relationship between commodified labour and the discourse of productivity.

6. Findings

6.1. Why Disconnecting?: Justifications

Productivity discourse is the most common theme among all the products that appear as work management and self-control tools. These products are designed as tools that supervise time management through temporary disconnections. Figure 1 illustrates how RescueTime offers time management to eliminate distractive time and increase efficiency and productivity.

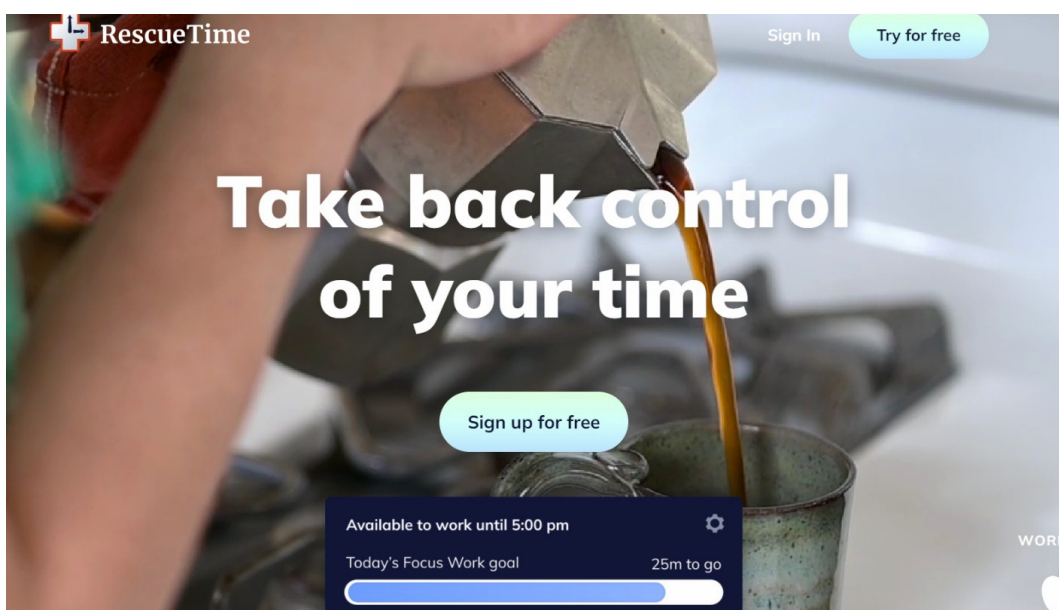


Figure 1. Self-control (RescueTime).

The rationalisation of such disconnection does not always appear directly as productivity and well-being. Instead, it is framed as an inexplicit expression, as seen in the promotion in Figure 2, which states, “features to help you do what you love” (Freedom). While it does not straightforwardly point to labour productivity, the overall context suggests being productive by “doing what you love.” Another example is how individuals may feel unhappy because they perceive themselves as unproductive and struggle to do their best work:

Studies show that every time you check email, a social feed, or respond to a notification, your mind requires 23 minutes of re-focus time to get back on task. It’s a phenomenal cost to our entire workforce and to each of us individually as we strive to do our best work. (Freedom)

This workforce cost is expected to be solved by the workers themselves, which may not improve their outcome as Ebert and Zavarzadeh (2015, p. 154) criticise that for capital, the workers should perceive “higher levels of their own exploitation as positive social improvements.” Thus, productivity is usually their main motto: “Freedom to be incredibly productive” (Freedom).

Another theme of disconnective media is problematising connectivity through well-being issues. Figure 3 illustrates how connectivity is problematised through the quality of sleep. Although sleep is a biological need, it has been socially structured throughout history. The dominant representation of sleep has changed over time by scientific, medical, and popular forces, such as pathological definitions and commercial and media representations of sleep (Wolf-Meyer, 2012). “Get a good night’s sleep” already has a meaning that connotes appropriate bedtime and early start of the day. The emphasis on sleep is not just a matter of physical health but still a matter of the next working day. According to reports, employee sleep quality has become a significant concern for businesses, costing them millions of dollars (Galewitz, 2020).

The well-being discourse cannot be analysed without the context of productivity and social relations of production. Well-being is mostly a requirement and precondition of productivity. Freedom, for example,

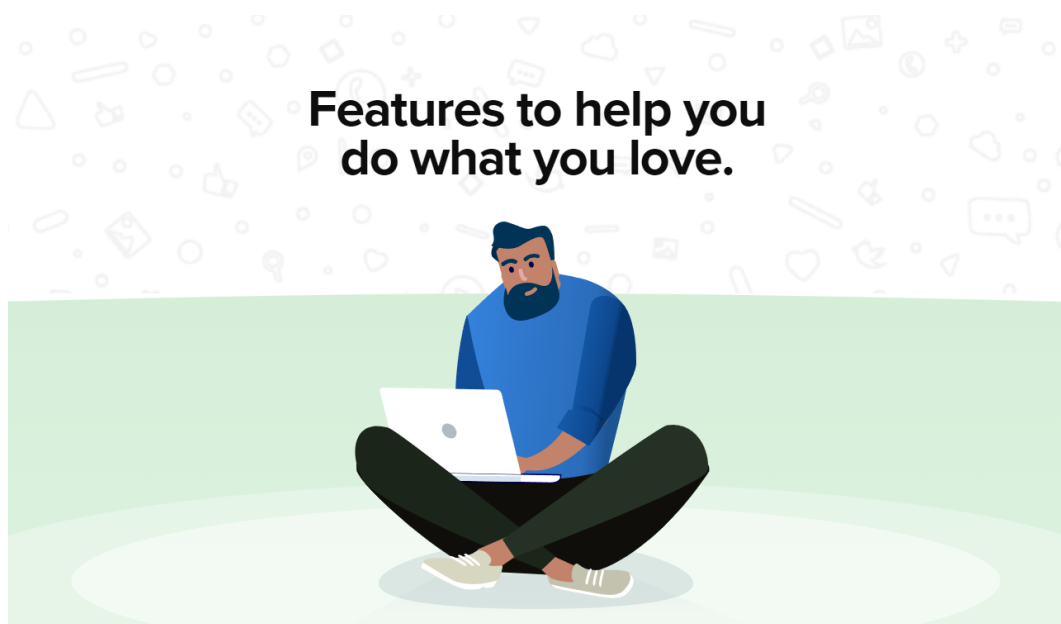


Figure 2. Being productive (Freedom).



Figure 3. Good night's sleep (Unpluq).

explains why well-being matters: “Your health and well-being *matter*. Make yourself a priority and enjoy the professional fulfilment and better quality of life that embracing deep work will bring.”

A considerable difference from self-help literature is that these brands do not advocate ultimate willpower; rather, an incompetent individual must use their products. Offtime indicates this justification: “Most people can’t just switch off their phone, and we provide a much better solution for the issue than others do.” The manifestation of the lack of willpower and justification for using these products is best explained by The Lockbox: “With habit forming behaviours, willpower alone usually is not enough. Pre-commitment has been proven as a much more effective strategy for self-control. By restricting temptation, the device prevents the failures of willpower.” Nevertheless, they do not illustrate digital disconnection as impossible, promoting the idea that it is very doable with some instrumental nudging.

6.2. Where and When to Disconnect?

A significant characteristic of disconnective media is when and where to disconnect. This can be seen best by emphasising sleep quality, distraction, and the depiction of the daily life circle in the visuals.

RescueTime visualises the commitment to daily life routines. Figure 4 depicts disconnection differently during work and off-work hours. Leisure time signifies a disconnected life and portrays a productive worker for the next day. For instance, reading a book before bedtime and drinking morning coffee indicates an organised life. These distinctions in labour and leisure time construction are evident in most apps.

The problematisation of screen time primarily focuses on leisure hours. For example, RescueTime states:

According to the latest Nielsen report, the average American adult spends nearly 10 hours a day looking at screens. While (hopefully) most of that time is happening during work hours, it still leaves a big chunk of after-work time staring at screens.



Figure 4. Productive day cycle (RescueTime).

The use of the adverb “hopefully” underscores the unquestioned role of technology as a production tool and highlights the glorification of work. The app explicitly states that disconnection pertains to leisure time; thus, the concern is optimising outcomes during off-work hours. Similarly, the Freedom app describes how productive deep work extends beyond working hours:

The deep work method is not just about putting in long working hours—It’s also about what you do after the workday is over. Regularly resting your brain will improve the quality of your deep focus, so it’s important to make downtime a priority.

While these products aim to promote disconnection and enhance productivity, they create contradictions. Firstly, self-help literature problematises digital connections using a medical dictionary (Syvertsen, 2020). Meanwhile, disconnective media portrays digital connection in the workplace as harmless and natural but as harmful in leisure contexts. For instance, The Lockbox aims to combat phone addiction and highlights its adverse effects but neglects other devices. Secondly, they reconstruct the legitimacy of work; instead of questioning its legitimacy in leisure settings, leisure becomes a definer of productive work. This illustrates how disconnection is framed differently across time and space, resulting in inconsistencies. Work time signifies dedication to tasks with minimised distractions, advocating for single-tasking and screen usage. Similarly to digital detox rhetoric, disconnective media does not wholly reject technology but promotes goal-oriented and spatiotemporal disconnection.

The discourse on digital disconnection, advocating self-control at work for productivity, may not align with workers’ interests. While it is proposed that “banning tech from the bedroom is the quickest way to prevent devices from disrupting rest-time” (Freedom), it overlooks that digital entertainment serves as rest time for many.

6.3. Which Devices and Platforms?

The third problematisation includes devices and platforms. A typical representation of disconnection is the naturalisation of computer use, while smartphones and social media are the main problems.

Considering these products as tools for productivity aligns with their promises. While they view screens as detrimental to well-being, particularly emphasising the importance of a good night's sleep, the issue lies with smartphones or social media platforms. For example, Figure 5 depicts how the Unplug key disables the smartphone while using the computer, which is deemed acceptable. Some products are exclusively designed to limit or replace smartphone usage, like the NoPhone, marketed as “a fake phone for people addicted to real phones.”

These products promote a work ethic that advocates eliminating any sources of joy, such as gaming or social media browsing, framing any deviation from work as a distraction. Thus, eliminating all distractions is seen as combating laziness, which could be interpreted as a form of joy. The Freedom app exaggerates the consequences of multitasking, claiming it is “40% less productive” and “may even decrease your IQ by 10 points!”

Temporary device-based disconnection during work hours goes beyond self-control; it is seen as implementing scientific work management. Blocking social media apps, the entire internet, and addictive games are all tied to productive labour and efficiency. For instance, the Freedom app's promotional text states: “Whether it's Facebook, ESPN, or YouTube, block an unlimited number of distracting websites so you can focus on what matters.” Here, what matters is not a personal preference but a work task that employees often lack control over. Another slogan used by Freedom is “with Website Exceptions, and you can even block all websites except the ones you need so you can focus on your work,” highlighting how these discourses reflect the realities of work.



Figure 5. Smartphones vs computers (Unplug).

Promoting a single screen and task mirrors features of scientific work management, particularly quantifying workers. Nudge engineers suggest that in cases of a lack of self-control to avoid social media distractions, individuals can utilise “pre-commitment devices” like social media blocking apps, which managers could employ over employees (Valasek, 2022). Figure 6 demonstrates how these technologies function as self-tracking devices for workers to monitor their productive and distracting time, proposing similar features to those used in self-tracking devices.

Avoid distractions and strengthen your focus

When you really need to focus, begin a Focus Session. RescueTime blocks your biggest distractions and reports on how well you focus.



Figure 6. Focus and not waste time (RescueTime).

RescueTime provides data on how time has been used productively and distractions, as shown in Figure 6. This data is based on the type of activity and screen, as it does not problematise all devices. The problematisation of devices clearly can be seen in all the figures.

Productive work is usually constructed as an activity that someone loves. Thus, the argument of disconnective media is built on this embedded assumption that we are trapped unconsciously, which comes from the very nature of these devices: “Social media, shopping, videos, games...these apps and websites are scientifically engineered to keep you hooked and coming back. The cost to your productivity, ability to focus, and general well-being can be staggering. Freedom gives you control” (Freedom).

Workers’ autonomy is granted in such representations; taking control of their time is almost a certain promise.

6.4. Who is Addressed to Disconnect?

This part of the analysis reveals the disconnected subject from a socio-economic point of view of class. The analysis covers the illustration of the targeted subject in the text and visuals and reveals whether this is a working or leisure class. Although these products promise a wide range of consumer benefits, the subject demonstrated in the promotions is mainly a working subject.

Figure 7 demonstrates a partly disconnected subject who must reduce distraction and increase focus and productivity in a discursive and moral view. Figure 8 represents a negative facial impression of the worker distracted by his phone. Feeling sad for not being productive is indeed related to someone’s obligation to be productive. The materiality of discourse comes from the reality of work and survival for those who depend on their labour and have to sell the labour. Thus, discourses can only result in the optimism of employees’ symbolic agency while “they have little or no control over the material conditions of their labour” (Cloud, 2005, p. 515).



Figure 7. Reducing distractions (Unpluq).

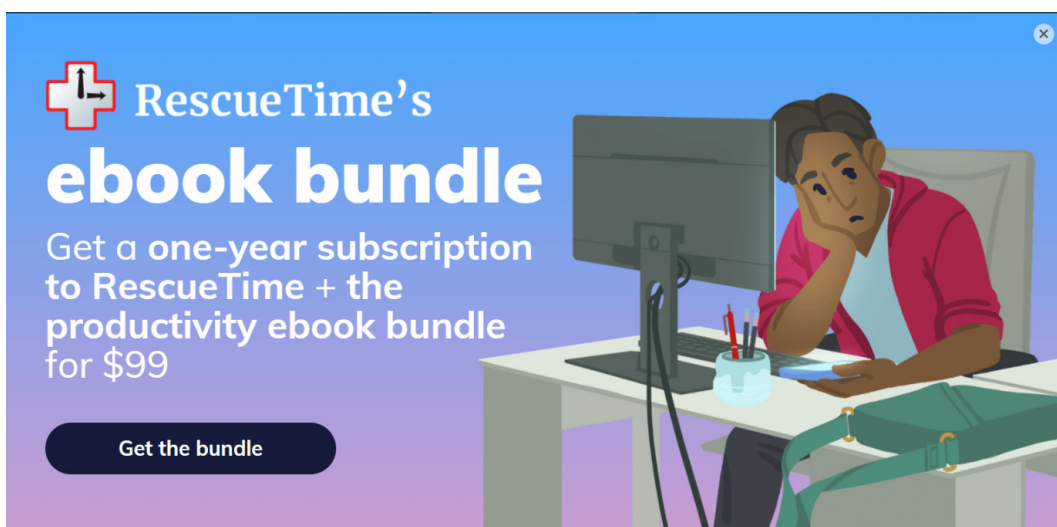


Figure 8. Being productive (RescueTime).

These apps have become a new workplace discipline tool, a tool of command for workers. As Marx (1990) describes, in the early stage of capitalism, supervision works in the name of capital to command the labour process; today, these apps are partly functioning in the same way as they offer team services for businesses. For instance, the Freedom app proposes, “Our Teams package is a simple, cost-effective way to ensure your employees have the best productivity tool on the planet.” It justifies providing multiple justifications for employers to purchase it: “Digital distractions cost your business, freedom gives your team focus, happy, healthy teams are more productive” (Freedom). RescueTime time suggests a productive work and balanced life for work as “It offers real-time insights and guidance to improve your work habits, while simultaneously protecting your personal time and preventing burnout.” The app is mainly designed for workers to monitor their productivity as it visualises productive time for its users. The assumption is that everyone embraces the dedication to work and is ready to leave distractions. It is suggested that people “work deeply, quit social media, embrace boredom, and ditch shallow work” (Freedom).

Although they target the working class, these products and their rhetoric contradict the working class. Cederström and Spicer (2015) find today's well-being practices and discourse contradictory and paradoxical for the working class. They suggest that more coaching sessions mean spending more money, which means more work in return. While people have to pay to use these products, they must work more to afford them, leading to more connectivity.

6.5. Disconnective Media as a Disconnection Commodity

The commodification emerges through the instrumentalisation of disconnection, especially for well-being and productivity. Hence, their functionality is questionable as some are made from plastic and have no function except to mimic an actual phone. Most NoPhone products are made from plastic in the shape and dimension of smartphones. The company also sells imaginary phones. Figure 9 shows that the company sells a pack in an empty place, but there is nothing except air, as they named "NoPhone Air." The company promotes it as "the lightest phone on the market." NoPhone describes the phone as "an invisible phone for people who use their phone too much." In that regard, the commodification of disconnection moved from the material (product) commodity, including digital ones, to a complete discursive commodity.

While all products can be considered discursive commodities, they provide physical or digital goods and justify their use by attempting to make them relevant. This justification varies among products. Unpluq, for instance, manufactures physical products and claims to be "truly different from all other apps." By offering both an app and a physical tag, Unpluq elevates its approach: "Our physical barrier helps you to make a very conscious choice and is designed to break your bad habit loops" Similarly, The Lockbox distinguishes between apps and physical products regarding effective nudging:

We know from experience, they [apps] are way too easy to get around, making them ineffective at creating any real impact on your phone usage. The Lockbox is a physical solution that is guaranteed to change the way you use your phone, once and for all.



Figure 9. NoPhone Air (NoPhone).

RescueTime, however, offers more digital features, particularly self-tracking options. Daily activity is categorised as productive or distracted time, as depicted in Figure 6. Freedom simplifies its features, stating, “Block apps, websites, and the internet,” and offers syncing across devices.

Additionally, Offtime employs more anti-capitalist rhetoric, particularly towards social media platforms and consumerism. It suggests, “In these times we receive constant stimulations from social media, advertising and the need to buy products, among many others.” Ironically, they make these statements to sell another product: their promotional message. In other words, anti-advertising and anti-consumerism become what they criticise, turning discursive resistance into a new form of commodity. While these counter-narratives become commodities themselves, the complaint that “tech companies have been manipulating us to use their products more” (RescueTime) persists.

Unpluq utilises a similar discourse reminiscent of critical data studies, criticising digital capitalism by stating, “We live in the ‘attention economy,’ where your time is taking the place of money.” This argument is common in data studies, but according to Unpluq, users are not products for them, distinguishing themselves from big tech companies:

We are not storing any of your data to sell—You are not the product. At Unpluq, we design products that deliver benefits to the customer with privacy in mind. We want to be different from the big tech companies, where you are the product.

While they address some societal issues stemming from increased connectivity, disconnectivity is primarily reduced to personal preferences, becoming a matter of well-being and productivity for working individuals.

7. Discussion

The analysis of discourses reveals how disconnection is framed and justified, necessitating a theoretical discussion to emphasise its materiality. The pursuit of self-improvement, productivity, and well-being can stem from material and social relations of production rather than mere discursive constructs. While wellness and productivity are ingrained in neoliberal politics, neoliberalism is not solely an ideological shift but bears material consequences, particularly for the working class (Harvey, 2005).

Hence, wellness and productivity are interrelated, with productivity often dependent on a healthy body. Healthy individuals are deemed more employable, performing well on the factory floor, and tackling tasks that strain physical endurance (Bauman, 2013). Discourses surrounding disconnective media underscore workers’ dependence on capital, necessitating the maintenance of a productive and healthy body, as capital relies on labour for reproduction and growth.

Disconnective media problematise connectivity, particularly connective activities that hinder work productivity. The focus on social media platforms and smartphones highlights disconnectivity concerning unproductive time. The problematisation of connectivity may emerge from material conditions necessitating employability in the neoliberal labour market, as Kania-Lundholm (2021) explains how digital disconnection is “both symptoms and responses to the conditions of life and work in digital capitalism” (p. 26). Thus, disconnection arises from various life circumstances, manifesting both as a privilege and an obligation,

deeply rooted in factors such as wealth and commodified labour. It is recognised that disconnection extends beyond individual responsibility and willpower (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). Under neoliberal capitalism, the relentless competition in the labour market, along with new forms of precarity and job insecurity, has introduced an additional layer to the existential challenge of freedom. Some scholars argue that disconnection is a privilege accessible only to those with time and spatial resources, while it remains unattainable for those engaged in essential work (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2022). Ironically, disconnective media mostly works as a productivity and well-being apparatus targeting the working class whose freedom highly depends on their commodified labour. This material dependency on the job market reinforces discursive responsabilisation as individuals are already materially responsible. Therefore, disconnection studies should critically analyse the emergence of individual responsabilisation, self-improvement and self-care, and all other spiritual practices under the material conditions of neoliberalism. As Harvey (2005, p. 40) suggests, no matter how important ideological and cultural aspects are, we must look beyond them to “better identify the material grounding for the construction of consent.” Thus, we should rethink how any problematisation discourse functions in society. For example, Cederström and Spicer (2015, p. 26) explain that “smoking is bad for your health; it is bad for your career too.” Thus, problematising connectivity is not just a marketing strategy of disconnective media but also rooted in material conditions, especially in precarious and insecure neoliberal employment. The conditions which Žižek (2019, p. 40) argues, “Capitalist freedom is...the very form of unfreedom for those who have nothing but their labour force to sell.” Disconnective media thus represent not voluntary disengagement but a discursive obligation rooted in material realities. In that regard, disconnective media also serve as a means of productive labour, which Marx calls “command during the labour process in the name of capital” (Marx, 1990, p. 450). Unlike the early stages of capitalism observed by Marx, supervision in the digital era manifests in various forms, including the deployment of self-tracking technologies in the workplace for productivity and well-being measures. Similarly, disconnective media offer managerial techniques for businesses and individuals to monitor productivity and well-being.

Technological progress is another materiality enabling the discursive construction of dis/connectivity. From the outset, Luddites were fighting over technologies based on socio-economic interests against a “ubiquitous, remote, hierarchical economic force” (S. E. Jones, 2006, p. 35). In modern times, technological advances in infrastructure and the affordability of connection continue to shape the discourse around dis/connection (Bozan & Tréré, 2024), reflecting shifts in traditional work forms to computer-based industries, necessitating productivity and wakefulness for 24-hour work (Barbee et al., 2018). Moreover, as most disconnective media products originate from tech elites, the discourse on dis/connectivity is not independent of material power. As Marx (2000) argues, the ruling ideas of every epoch are the ruling class’s ideas. Therefore, discourses of disconnective media may be shaped by those producing addictive technologies and providing solutions, and ownership of technological infrastructure and the means of production significantly influence the discourses on dis/connectivity.

8. Conclusion

We have demonstrated four frames evident in promotional accounts of these products. Firstly, digital disconnection is mainly justified by well-being and productivity, with productivity as the ultimate goal. These products promote well-being and enhance productivity, exemplified by sleep promotion for a healthy, dynamic worker. Secondly, work and the workplace are central to all problematisations, while leisure is an extension of labour and is obligated to contribute to productive labour. Work time emphasises scientific

work management for efficiency and delaying gratification, while leisure time offers retreat time. Thirdly, workplace digital devices like computers are normalised, while smartphones and social media remain problematic, serving as work efficiency and productivity management instruments. Fourthly, the primary subject in these representations is a working-class subject. Both in texts and images, the represented subject is the working class willing to increase productivity and maintain their well-being.

These products may articulate critical discourse but become commodities, decontextualising disconnection from the political realm and framing it as an individual matter. While some products critique data and surveillance, they quantify users' media use, exploiting their data. Jorge et al. (2022) note that built-in digital well-being tools expand insight into user data, perpetuating connectivity. Despite anti-datafication rhetoric, these products can collect more data on user usage patterns, commodifying digital disconnection.

Disconnective media assume individuals control boundaries between work and leisure. However, it does not promote strong individual willpower and agency, as the solutions are embedded in their products. Finally, this study shows how discourses constantly interact with material conditions by shaping new technologies and resulting from social and material reality. Discourses on disconnectivity are embedded in material structures, particularly social relations of production, focusing on labour quality and work efficiency, inevitably tied to commodified labour and neoliberal insecurities that enforce new obligations.

This article makes several contributions. First, it offers a Marxist analysis of discourses, critically engaging with the theory to reveal the interrelations between discursive constructions and material (socio-economic) realities. Second, the article examines how material conditions shape discourses of disconnectivity, considering differences in space, time, and devices. Third, it extends the discussion of digital disconnection by framing it not only as a privilege but also as a moral obligation (Fast, 2021) rooted in material circumstances, particularly for those engaged in commodified labour. While this study concentrates on disconnection research, future research could apply similar methodological approaches to other areas of social science.

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Conflict of Interests

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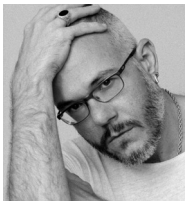
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