

# Media resistance and digital disconnection in Western literature

## *Resistência aos media e desconexão digital na literatura ocidental*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the debate around digital disconnection by discussing resistance, a related and more established concept in media studies. A meta-analysis on the specialized literature highlighted two main trends: a media-centered perspective and a context-centered perspective. Our literature review suggests that these two main approaches are not linear and sequential, but rather cyclical and recursive. That is, they can be understood as waves of constraints. In its conclusion, the paper suggests that disconnection studies would benefit from moving away from an individualistic agency perspective in favor of a more context sensitive approach.

**Keywords:** Resistance, disconnection, connectivity, agency, context

### RESUMO

Este artigo visa contribuir para o debate sobre a desconexão digital por meio do conceito de resistência, um construto relacionado e mais estabelecido nos estudos dos media e da comunicação. Para tal, realizámos uma meta-análise aos artigos científicos que abordam ambos os conceitos e destacamos duas tendências principais: uma perspetiva centrada nos media e uma outra centrada no contexto. A análise da literatura sugere que essas duas tendências principais não são lineares nem sequenciais, mas cíclicas e recursivas. Ou seja, essas tendências podem ser entendidas como relatos de ondas de constrangimentos. Em conclusão, o artigo sugere que os estudos sobre a desconexão se beneficiariam se se afastassem de uma perspetiva assente em uma agência individualista em favor de uma abordagem mais sensível ao contexto.

**Palavras-chave:** Resistência, desconexão, conectividade, agência, contexto

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MODERN SOCIETIES CAN be characterized by an overall increase in the role of digital technologies in several dimensions of life, as the social is increasingly constructed from, and through, technologically mediated communication infrastructures. Media indispensability (Jansson, 2018), concept related to media mobility, connectivity and interactivity, is a key dimension to this process. Perceived as elements that help to build normality in everyday life (Bräuchler & Postill, 2010), the cultural shifts brought by the digital revolution contributed to change social structures, contexts and roles. What once was a given set of rules, demarcated spaces and prescribed roles, became objects of constant negotiation. Media indispensability reinforced the functional dependence on various technological systems and infrastructures, and increased ambiguous feelings among individuals who live in such hyper-connected societies.

The perceived social advantages of digital self-empowerment, freedom and liberation often co-exist with social costs and feelings of anxiety about being always connected. This relates to the fact that due to processes of context collapse (Pagh, 2020), the transitions between activities and spheres of life are shrinking, or even disappearing, as work can continuously be performed while one is commuting from office to home or shifting from professional to family roles—conditions dramatically reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Connectivity, in the digital age, is thus associated with paradoxical experiences of liberation and imprisonment. Such co-existence demands constant negotiation and redefinition of rules and boundaries by the individual with oneself and others—that is, dealing with conflicted dynamics between internalized media practices under the culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2014; Pagh, 2020).

Against this backdrop, we can observe a movement of people from media saturated contexts towards media disengagement, even if only temporarily. Even though media resistance is not a new social phenomenon and is associated with an established research tradition, in the last decade disconnection studies emerged from media resistance research to tackle key issues within the field of media and communication related to the costs of connectivity in the digital age (e.g., Light & Cassidy, 2014; Syvertsen, 2017).

Within this framework, this article seeks to contribute to the debate around digital disconnection by addressing the related and more established concept of resistance. Analyzing resistance to media over time offers an opportunity to shed light on aspects not conceptually covered by the construct of resistance, showing that disconnection may have in a distinctive or unique fashion, which

may contribute to define a research agenda beyond resistance. We also stress the relatedness of these two concepts.

For this purpose, we conducted an interpretative literature review (Eisenhart, 1998) of previous research on media resistance and disconnection, which identified two main trends: a *media-centered perspective* and another one we called *context-centered perspective* on media resistance. Organizing the literature thus offered us an analytical tool to identify the focal points in the theorized media/technology/individuals relation. Bearing in mind, however, that these trends do not reflect a dichotomizing stance as they are porous and may be considered as part of a spectrum. We concluded that these two approaches are not linear and sequential, but rather cyclical and recursive. Each time a new media is introduced into society, one can identify the revival of some 'old' analytical frame, such as the moral panic thesis, even if elaborated in a more complex manner.

Thus, we argue that one should perceive media resistance as waves of constraints, since media resistance, both as a concept and as a practice, is flexible and adaptable. How resistance is elaborated in a specific period may be understood as a symptom of the social debates underway at a particular moment in time—e.g., The United States Capitol attack in January 2021 was associated with Facebook's toxic business model and the dilemmas it produces for democracy (polarization, hate speech, misinformation). Technology discussed as pathology is a recursive topic, and in this sense, resistance is connected to social, political and cultural narratives of collective decline.

Moreover, the last decade saw a conceptual evolution from moral panic to digital disconnection associated with historical and cultural changes. As such, we also question what underlying assumptions, meanings and needs fueled media and communication researchers to engage in an approach that may at a first glance be difficult to set apart from existing media resistance research. Our analysis suggests, as a concluding argument, that the concept of disconnection was adopted for being perceived as a construct structured upon the core values of Western society, one that centers agency and puts the locus of power on the individual.

After outlining our methodological approach in the next section, we provide a theoretical overview of both media resistance and disconnection. We then present our findings and elaborate on the two main trends identified by the literature review, highlighting some of their dominant threads. The article concludes with some reflections about media resistance and disconnection and their relatedness.

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article is a review of previous research published on media resistance and disconnection that seeks to inform a revised agenda for disconnection studies, field that emerged from media resistance research in the last decade. As our main aim is to explore the relations between resistance and disconnection, we focused our searches on the period between 2010-2020, during which communication became digital by default and led to a paradigm shift to digital media and the digitization of traditional media.

We selected the research literature relying on our expertise in the field, but also on a goal-oriented search for articles using specific expressions or keywords, such as “media resistance,” “disconnection,” and “digital detox.” Since this exploratory research sought to present a broadened view of the field, we chose a wide range of journals: from high ranked, Anglo-Saxon contexts to Latin American journals with impact on other cultures, languages, and geographies. Hence, we selected articles in English, Portuguese, and Spanish published in journals based in Europe, North America and Latin America. These included high impact titles that widely publish about digital disconnection—such as *Big Data and Society*, *Convergence*, *Communication Research*, *Digital journalism*, *International Journal of Communication*, *Information Communication and Society*, *Media, Culture & Society*, *New Media & Society*, *Social Media & Society*—and also titles that could give us alternative views and contexts—like *Participations*, **Matrizes**, *Revista México*, and *cuadernos.info*. We adopted this wider-angle approach to contemplate several dimensions; but the group of high-impact journals is the one showing a greater concern with the topic of digital disconnection, reinforcing the Anglo-Saxon perspective.

After collecting data on media resistance and disconnection, we proceeded to an interpretative literature review (Eisenhart, 1998). Rather than conduct a quantitative based and systematic review, we sought to achieve a qualitative insight on how both media resistance and digital disconnection have been conceptualized in the period, languages and geographies under analysis.

In analyzing the literature on media resistance and disconnection we identified two main trends: one which we named *media-centered perspective* and another we called *context-centered perspective*. Organizing the literature thusly offered us an analytical tool to identify pivotal points to media/technology/individuals relations. One, however, must bear in mind that these trends do not reflect a dichotomizing stance and should not be perceived as opposites. Rather, they are porous and may be considered as part of a

spectrum. Although media-centered research does not ignore the wider context in which resistance and disconnection practices and attitudes may occur, it focuses primarily on a specific technology or media content. In turn, the context-centered perspective sees media and technology as nodes in a web of life structures or circumstances that hold an explanatory value to understand both resistance and disconnection as contextualized expressions. When presenting our arguments in the following section, we use examples taken from the articles selected, but we also use other publications when a broader contextualization is needed.

### **MEDIA RESISTANCE AND DISCONNECTION**

The concepts of resistance and avoidance dominated both public debates and media studies discourse during late 20th century. As a concept, media resistance bears many definitions, such as Louise Woodstock's (2014, p. 1986):

“Resistance exists on a complicated continuum of attitudes toward and behaviors of media use, with lack of critical thinking about use and full acceptance of all technologies on one extreme and a completely critical mindset and concomitant disuse of all technologies on the other. Very few people occupy either extreme position.”

This definition conceptualizes media resistance as a continuum in terms of degree, duration, and types of content and technology that are avoided. It also sheds light on the paradox that lies in the gap between cultural meanings around media and actual media experiences. Resistance is a thus practice embodying social imaginaries related to broader values such as morality, health, culture, enlightenment and democracy (Syvertsen, 2017).

In the new millennium, media resistance begun to lose ground to new words and expressions more related to digital media, such as disconnection, digital detox and wellness. ‘Disconnection,’ which dominates currently, means removing or breaking a connection (Light & Cassidy, 2014), whereas ‘digital detox’ expresses various actions and beliefs counteracting media’s ‘toxic’ effects, namely offline phases varying from months to merely hours. Disconnection is also used to describe rules for screen-free steps, lifestyle changes, gradual withdrawal or reduced media diets (Syvertsen, 2017).

In the digital age, everyday routines are profoundly interwoven with mobile media used for a wide variety of activities during free time, working, commuting



or while carrying out other routines. Everyday use of networked media technology has, thus, progressively fostered a socio-cultural climate of questioning the normalization of the digital in one's life (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019, p. 2). This is connected to what Natale & Treré called the *disconnection momentum*: “a particular historical phase where the perception of the saturation with digital technology has reached a climax” (2020, p. 627).

### **Media-centered perspective**

Media-centered research places the explanatory factor of resistance practices in the media itself, whether it be a specific media technology or device, media content, or the relation between media and social change when a new media enters society. Drotner (1999) pioneered the media panic perspective about new media, a trend that evolved to political panic about media trust, technology restraints, and resistance to different media aspects.

Resistance to new technologies pertains to a process of contested social change (Kline, 2003, p. 8), linking, from a social imaginary standpoint, technological progress to technological determinism. Modernity and progress symbolized by “urban technologies” (Kline, 2003, p. 52) such as telephone, radio, automobile and electricity would forever compromise established worldviews, social structures and moral, edifying values based on tradition, repetition, and predictability. As such, resistance is a voluntary act of protection against an imagined change, as Kline's (2003) analysis of US rural farmers' resistance to the telephone and electrification in the first half of the 20th century illustrates.

Later, fear and anxiety of the unknown brought by new technology fueled a resurgence of the moral panic thesis about the unknown virtual world of the internet—perspective that shaped the research agenda in the 1990s and following decade. The internet's framing as a world of deception was fed by real-world fears, such as: online risks related to addiction, social isolation, exposure to strangers, pornography, and other issues related to the lack of Internet governability. In this context, moral panics about media controlling people, especially children and youth—considered as the most vulnerable age group in society—has become a recursive and renewed fear every time a new media emerges (Drotner 1999; Livingstone et al., 2018). Hence, the imposition of technological restraints, such as protecting children from screens and their content, became a relevant topic of research: restraint as a resistance practice explores the anxieties and fears related to how communication technologies—based on mobile and immediate

connection—transform human interaction (Woodstock, 2014, p. 1996). Heavy-use of media technologies may harm one's physical and mental health, and less use is beneficial because it opens space for offline activities, such as playing, reading a print book or having co-present conversations.

### ***Media distrust and the persistent case of news avoidance***

Our interpretative review showed that, in recent years, the moral panic framework has sometimes evolved into political panic about distrust in the news media, and related practices of news avoidance. Woodstock explains news avoidance as a “cocooning strategy” (2014, p. 838) against discomfort produced by negative, depressing or sad news (as other authors in the broader media studies context argue, e.g., Author 3 and other, 2016), or by political disenchantment with politics and journalism, as both are seen as part of a single, untrustworthy system (Palmer & Toff, 2020).

The article analyzed presents this crisis in media credibility as a major explanatory factor of news avoidance, which challenges the civic conceptions of news relevancy for society's democratic well-being. At the country level, countries with polarized and/or unstable political systems show high levels of news avoidance, against low levels of avoidance in more stable and welfare-solid democracies. Regardless of this considerable variation, however, concern over news avoidance has become a global trend “if it means that citizens are not sufficiently equipped to take decisions in elections or referendums” (Newman et al., 2017, p. 40).

Studies highlight that news avoidance is often informed by a general sense of impotence related to a lack of political efficacy (Palmer & Toff, 2020). In this context, people perceive themselves as “having minimal efficacy toward news and politics” (Palmer & Toff, 2020, p.1645). Other article analyzed looked at news resistance and avoidance, showing that people who are unable to deal with an opposed political stance use the news to confirm and reinforce their existing beliefs and attitudes, while blocking out new or challenging information. In this sense, resistance as an ideologically motivated practice leads to both partisan selective exposure and avoidance: the choice of avoiding opposing information by purposefully seeking supportive media only (Stroud & Collier, 2018). As this boost ideological self-identity, it also helps to connect to like-minded individuals (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2014), and consequently widen intolerance to opposing viewpoints. In the US, for instance, during the Trump administration, left-leaning individuals were more likely to avoid news than right-wing people because it had a negative effect on their

mood or increased their sense of impotence, whereas right-wing individuals were more likely to avoid news because they did not trust mainstream news media (Newman et al., 2017).

Several of the articles analyzed also considered individual preferences in order to explain “selectivity” or avoidance as a resistance practice: not wanting to interact with a certain medium, avoiding a particular program type or content. Selective avoidance on social media may also express individual options for political engagement (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Yang et. al., 2017). In an age of growing political polarization in some countries, citizens increasingly and openly dislike their political opponents. Unfriending on social media has become a strategy to avoid coming across certain people or certain kinds of information, serving as a tactic of both political repression and resistance (Bucher, 2020; John & Gal, 2018; Natale & Treré, 2020).

On a more positive note, some studies shed light on a different meaning of news avoidance. Resistance to news can be compatible with civic public engagement (Woodstock 2014, p. 2016). Thus, managing exposure to media and communication technologies is a resistance practice that translates “a greater sense of focus developed by single-tasking” (Woodstock, 2016, p. 405) and may be associated with a counter-narrative of citizenship. Resisting media becomes a coping mechanism to fight against news fatigue and civic disenchantment by creating commitment via different practices of social and political involvement involving “signing petitions, donating money, attending rallies, volunteering in various capacities, starting neighborhood organizations, making lifestyle choices in concert with their politics, and (...) conversing about politics” (Woodstock, 2014, p. 837). Similarly, recently researches have called for the need to refine definitions of news avoidance as to not regard incidental news avoidance as democratically suspect (Palmer & Toff, 2022).

### ***Disconnection and political choices***

Under this media-centered approach we included research that attributes the explanatory factor of resistance practices to the media itself; but as in the digital age no one can escape from a digital record, disconnection can be understood as an actualization of resistance, shifting from the media to connectivity itself. In this context, a thread of studies linking disconnection to political choices emerged from the literature review.

Disconnection studies came to focus on individuals’ strategies to cope with connectivity in the digital age. Problematizing the limits of connection

requires accessing social imaginaries and practices that confer meaning to the act of disconnecting. The ability to disconnect is thus what gives connection meaning. As Light argues (2014, p. 159), “connection cannot exist without disconnection.” Disconnection practices include avoiding digital devices (e.g., smartphones), limiting screen time or abstaining from using specific platforms (e.g., Facebook) or choosing to temporarily opt out, for example in digital detox camps (Bucher, 2020).

Research focusing on social media use, and the multiple continuous choices associated with it (what content to like, share and comment; with whom we aim to create online ties and, conversely, do not want to interact with anymore), illustrates how the contours of connectivity are delimited by what stays outside or by what one disconnects from. In disconnection studies, one way of addressing this kind of limits is by looking at unfriending on Facebook (Light, 2014; Yang et al., 2017; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). In analyzing cancel culture, John and Gal (2018, p. 2982) realized that political unfriending was a way of “regulating the boundaries of the personal public sphere.” This call-out strategy seeks to control who is inside one’s personal public sphere and able to contribute to political discussion, and who is kept apart. As a form of social exclusion, unfriending delineates how, through disconnection, one manages the amount of political disagreement one is willing to or can tolerate.

Alongside such control strategies, as a form of escapism, detox camps can be seen as an example of how disconnection, instead of a threat, became colonized by neoliberal ideology. This explains why Hesselberth (2018) argues that disconnection is not transformative but restorative of the informational capitalism to which the culture of connectivity belongs (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Jorge, 2019).

Personal information in the digital age has become a product of collected, processed, stored, retrieved, bought, and sold data as it is almost impossible to go online, walk in the street, take public transportation, pay with a credit card, or make a phone call without data being captured and thus surveilled (Manokha, 2018). In this vein, recent studies have emphasized what could be called invisible or new types of consequences produced by selective avoidance (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Digital technologies train algorithms to automatically filter out unwanted dissonance and create tightly controlled content ecologies or filter capsules that can lead to further isolating worldviews.

Big data is the foundational component of a new regime that has been integrated into the general operations of contemporary capitalism at every level. Zuboff (2015) named this new economic logic “surveillance capitalism,”



based on monetizing behavioral data by selling access to the real-time flow of daily life to directly influence and modify behavior for profit. Individuals are tied to this system that enables tracking and monitoring user's consumption habits, mobility and private interests. Although people may not immediately grasp how data production works, and the extent or consequences of such data aggregation, personal data modulation occurs in all contexts. Algorithms find any kind of information relevant, be it use or temporarily non-use of any digital device. Indeed, refusing to connect or temporarily opting out is a form of connection: "to an algorithm any form of absence provides important pieces of information" (Bucher, 2020, p. 611). Even those that are technically not connected to the network are not outside of the data-production system.

#### ***Disconnection and health choices***

According to the reviewed literature, interrupting technology use, such as a smartphone or social media, for a specific period of time is another way of addressing the costs of connectivity by emphasizing health issues. High stress and anxiety levels lead several people to want to slow down and switch off from the online world.

This particular disconnection practice offers an opportunity to access other social imaginaries in the digital age, translating a wish to deal with time differently. Communication speeding up related to technological innovation is one of the most measurable forms of acceleration—the temporal structure and the time regime of modern capitalist societies (Rosa, 2013)—associated with further mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), which spawned a new temporality in the current high-speed society. In this context, disconnection is linked to the idea of both suspending time pressures and (re)gaining control over time.

Studies also suggest that digital disconnection is a strategy used when one aims to contemplate other forms of connection or reconnection to the physical world without technological mediations of any kind. Free from the pressures of digital technology, one can "experience a form of superior reconnection to a primordial state of nature" (Natale & Tréré, 2020). If over-connectivity to digital technology is criticized for being toxic and intrusive, non-digital media and offline experiences have now acquired new meanings associated with more genuine, authentic forms of engagement and sociality, i.e., increased interaction with others offline (Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016; Light & Cassidy, 2014; Woodstock, 2014).

Hence, media resistance and disconnection can be seen as a coping mechanism for what one cannot control. Resistance is a practice used to manage anxiety and uncertainty related to a sense of powerlessness produced by media

technology. Jorge (2019) noted that wellbeing is getting increasingly commodified as individuals stress the need and relevance of self-control regarding digital media use. Franks, Chenhall, and Keogh (2018) found that disconnection can be beneficial to health but detrimental to social relations, as they become increasingly bi-dimensional (online and offline at the same time). We thus move on to the second trend identified by the literature review, as the context emerges as a key and central aspect to better understanding the paradoxes within media resistance and, especially, digital disconnection.

### **Context-centered perspective**

This approach discusses the increasing mediatization of life as well as the role of structural and contextual factors in shaping media resistance. In this context, media resistance is tackled in relation to social, cultural, and psychological standpoints, connecting resistance to everyday practices and dynamics. It is also rooted in individual constraints, namely in social forms of subjugation (such as family and socioeconomic pressures) and in active self-decisions (such as the right to be different or to follow a political view on technologies).

Structural and contextual factors shaping media use and resistance are key dimensions to the research included in this second trend. Moreover, resistance comprises a variety of approaches and tools that express a political space of resistance to dominant sources of inequality. Velkova & Kaun (2019, p. 13), for example, have explored the notion of “resistance as repair,” that is, as a strategy for correcting the function of algorithms: “one that does not deny the power of algorithms but operates within their framework, using them for different ends.” In this sense, resistance can signify a political stance against a particular form of social organization structured within the power asymmetries between those who collect and analyze data and those who are subject to such data collection and analysis criteria (van Dijck, 2014; Milan & van der Velden, 2016).

### ***Life cycle and family***

Life cycle, especially negative phases such as unemployment, is a relevant explanatory factor, since economic restraints may create non-voluntary media resistance routines, and temporary disconnection can impair living conditions. In the digital age, where technology ownership and maintenance is pivotal to navigating life, for the most vulnerable in society being able to maintain cell phone access usually comes at the cost of other social (e.g., tensions from



borrowing phones from friends or neighbors) or material resources (e.g., gas money, new shoes for kids). Nonetheless, inability to maintain cell phone access can impact their access to healthcare, job opportunities or social services (e.g., housing, food stamps), in addition to losing social connections (Gonzales et al., 2016).

At the opposite side of the spectrum, one can find resistance strategies to constrain media use (Woodstock, 2016). As a symbol of social capital and an act of distinction (Bourdieu, 1979), resistance can assume that media content dumbs people down. From an affluent position, dosing media use, namely cell phones and social media, is a resistance strategy to limit the presence of technology in one's life (Kaun & Schwarzenegger, 2014; Woodstock, 2016). Space and time without connected screens—digital silence (Beattie & Cassidy, 2020)—emerges as a strategy to increase people's awareness of offline life (Dickinson et al., 2016; Rosenberg, 2019). Family as well as social and psychological variables influence people's relation to media content, such as news consumption habits. Some studies focus on contextual factors (e.g., school curricula), others on uses and gratifications (e.g., surveillance), and others on personality traits (e.g., need for cognition) and orientations related to public affairs (e.g., sense of civic duty) (Valenzuela et al., 2016). Age also shapes news avoidance: younger people are increasingly less interested in public affairs information and in consuming news in general. But as older cohorts (e.g., college students) tend to be the central focus of research, adolescents remain “an understudied demographic in the research on youth and news media” (Valenzuela et al., 2016, p. 3).

### *Civic path*

Despite positive and refreshing findings regarding news avoidance, which can be associated with strong civic interests (Woodstock, 2014; 2016), Palmer & Toff (2020) note that social incentives to be updated has become a less internalized norm. Connection to a “news community” is increasingly less frequent in digital societies. News avoiders often consider that important news will find them, as they are part of a two-step flow of information filtered by personal sources. These people rely on others, often family members, to inform them on what is important to know about (Palmer & Toff, 2020).

Imagination—and, at the same time, user generated content affordability—is opening paths to critique the pervasiveness of communication technologies. Even if often framed as an inevitable consequence of living in a digital world, algorithm pervasiveness gave new meanings to resistance, namely as a reaction

to surveillance (Light, 2014), as a lifestyle choice (Kaun & Treré, 2018)—or more specifically a lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer, 2013)—, or as political activism (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019).

Whether framed as a useful temporary experience or a strategy to tame connectivity, Hesselberth (2018), Jorge (2019) and Treré, Natale, Keightley, and Punathambekar (2020) argue that disconnection is much less transformative than restorative of the data capitalism (Zuboff, 2015; Couldry & Mejias, 2019) that the culture of connectivity is part or an expression of. Research highlights that neoliberal ideology found its way into colonizing disconnection by framing it as a form of escapism that, ultimately, serves the needs of neoliberal ethos. If one considers detox camps, for example, whose participants come from the technological elites, one can understand that “temporary ‘disconnective escape’ reveals itself as another way to increase productivity, and is thus, completely functional to the capitalist status quo” (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 628). The authors continue: “disconnection as a form of critique and sociopolitical change is often deactivated and subsumed by the dynamics of digital capitalism under the innocuous facade of escape in connection to issues of authenticity, mindfulness and nostalgia.”

Similarly, “disconnection-through-engagement” (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 626) signals a set of practices that activate disconnection as critical engagement with digital technologies and platforms. Hybridity, anonymity, and hacking are the main ways to “decommodify disconnection and recast it as a source of collective critique to digital capitalism” (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 626). However, the will to disconnect is not sufficient. It is an act beyond one’s control, since data is shaped (both actively and passively) in conjunction with others and requires digital skills. Consequently, disconnection is profoundly paradoxical in the digital age: as a practice or a critique it is a modality within—and not outside of—the connective culture.

Top-down enforced disconnection from the internet can be an act of political repression (Kaun & Treré, 2018) conducted by illiberal or democratic governments, as the Snowden case illustrates (van Dijck, 2014). This approach has also resumed a moral panic perspective related to big scale surveillance cultures embedded in big data systems. Bottom-up disconnection (e.g., signal jamming), in turn, is practiced as an act of hacking or resistance against state and commercial surveillance or, in a broader sense, a critique and resistance against the paradoxes of digital societies. Surveillance modalities express a critique to a particular form of social organization structured upon the power asymmetries between those who collect and analyze data and those who are subject to such data collection and analysis criteria (Milan & van der Velden,



2016; van Dijck, 2014). Special attention is paid to how state and commercial surveillance exploits individuals without their full knowledge, will or interests.

In this context, this discussion benefits from considering what Treré, Natale, Keightley, and Punathambekar (2020, p. 607) identify as the “universalism of disconnection.” Such approach stemmed from a particular Western-centric perspective, related to privileged educated actors and a discourse that revolves around rich media environments and ensuing problems. Consequently, Treré, Natale, Keightley, and Punathambekar (2020, p. 607) argue, the dis/connectivity research agenda has been “disregarding the ways disconnection is performed and lived in other parts of the world and indeed, among vulnerable minorities within wealthy Western nations.”

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This paper brings contributions to the debate about digital disconnection by discussing resistance, a related and more established concept in media studies. We mainly aimed to identify the main trends within which both concepts have been investigated in media and communication studies by conducting a meta-analysis of media and communication research.

By reviewing the literature on the topic, we identified two main trends: a *media-centered approach* and a *context-centered perspective*. As mentioned previously, both these trends do not reflect a dichotomizing or opposing stance, but should be perceived as part of a spectrum. Hence, despite media-centered studies not ignoring the wider context in which resistance practices and attitudes occur, they focus mainly on a specific technology or media content. In turn, the context-centered perspective looks at media and technology as part of a web of life structures or circumstances that hold an explanatory value to understand resistance and disconnection as expressing a given context.

Framed by changes in the media technology landscape, our literature review suggests that the two main trends identified are not linear and sequential; rather, they are cyclical and recursive in time. If media resistance related media to moral panic anxieties and fears in late 19th century, this framing returned to social discourse in the early years of cinema and television throughout the 20th century. In turn, as we discussed in this paper, the rise of social media platforms has refined rather than disrupted the waves of moral panics, spanning from media resistance to digital disconnection contexts, in fear and ultimate reaction to the unknown and excesses. In the new millennium, the digital as pathology is recurrently surfacing in the public discourse (the “Facebook files” and the

“Facebook Papers” are both an example of this), showing that the historical preoccupation around media is recurrent and rapidly spurs waves of fear and suspicion every time an emergent medium enters society. Thus, we suggest that one should perceive media resistance as waves of constraints.

Moreover, we argue that media resistance, both as a concept and a practice, is flexible and adaptable. How resistance is elaborated in a specific period can be a symptom of certain debates underway in society at a given moment in time. As such, resistance is connected to social, political, and cultural narratives of hope and decline.

We also considered the relatedness between resistance and disconnection, which led us to unveil what underlying assumptions, meanings and needs pushed media and communication researchers to develop a thread of studies that at a first glance is difficult to distinguish from media resistance research.

From a pragmatic standpoint, one could say that the concept of disconnection better explains the digital age’s connective pervasiveness by using its theoretical apparatus to address individuals’ experiences and meanings of connectivity. More polemically, to talk about disconnection rather than resistance could be seen as more of a vocabulary update than an actual distinctive perspective from the one consolidated by resistance studies. We contend, however, that the concept of disconnection constructs a different relation between media/technology and individuals, one that centers agency and places the locus of power on the individual. This approach can be seen as expressing the self-regulation culture inherent to Western society (Syvertsen et al., 2014), in which individuals are perceived as having both the burden and the responsibility to cope with the pressures and tensions of connection.

Regardless of the quantity, diversity, and intensity of disconnection practices one may adopt, and the subjective meanings associated to such practices, the literature on disconnection and daily life clearly tends to center agency. Opting out, for whatever reason, is usually framed as an option controlled by the individual, i.e., as a selective and strategic form of individual agency. Disconnection is associated with self-regulatory practices and acts of individual choice, either for political or well-being reasons. Within this framework, and as suggested by the literature review, one perspective that seems to be missing recursively from disconnection studies is the role played by the individual’s social web in their disconnection experiences (explored elsewhere by Authors 1 and 2, 2022).

In sum, we argue that disconnection studies would benefit from moving away from an individualistic agency approach, centered upon individual choice

and control, to include a critical approach that considers how disconnection, even if initiated by an individual, is shaped by collective possibilities. As Lomborg observes, “individual disconnection is futile” (Lomborg, 2020, p. 304). Next to the narrative of disconnection as an act of self-awareness and self-control lies a different perspective that examines the interplay between the individual and the community in the individualized digital age. An even larger story, however, is necessary to mobilize resistance against platforms’ datafication and colonization of our lives as a collective critical endeavor.

Lastly, issues of the privileged in the Global North and Western societies still dominate the disconnection research agenda. Thus, a more context sensitive approach is needed, one that gives grater room to research practices and meanings given to disconnection in vulnerable contexts and groups living in the Northern hemisphere as well as in the Global South, as experiences shape meaning. This was quite evident during data collection: our analysis included only a few articles on disconnection published in non-Anglo-Saxon journals, stressing that such a narrow approach falls short beyond privilege and individualism. ■

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