

“No media, less life?” – Employing forced disruption to investigate online media disconnection

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INTRODUCTION

‘The lady at the other end of the line is obviously irritated and annoyed rather than friendly she tells me to ‘check online for our stock and offerings’. As I am sure that my, voluntary attempt to online abstinence, would only confuse her more, I just say ‘I can’t, I have no Internet’. A prompt ‘What do you mean, you have no internet? How old are you?’ follows. Great! Not having Internet access is associated with a certain (rather advanced) age.’ (Anja)

This quote is an example from the empirical material that we have conducted in order to investigate absence, disconnection and non-usage of digital online communication in mediatized worlds. Through the very cruel method of forced disruption, young adults were asked to remain offline for a week and document their experiences they made and the reactions they encountered during the period of disconnection in a communication diary.

Current scholarship of media life (Deuze, 2012), mediatized worlds (Hepp, 2010; Krotz & Hepp, 2012) and culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013) investigates media ubiquity in all spheres of society. In the context of this scholarship usage of new media technologies and possibilities are assumed as a presupposition for working and living in the media society or even seen as ‘the indispensable grammar of modern life’ (Wills, 1999, p. 10). Implicit to such assumptions is often a subtle idea of steady progression of possibilities and chances for connectivity and participation, considered as inherent to the advent of new communication technologies. Furthermore research is characterized by a tendency to regard (media) participation as ‘necessarily beneficial’ (Carpentier, 2009, p. 411). In that sense non-users would nothing but profit if they finally started to participate: A worthy, meaningful and fulfilling life – a good life – in the media society is seen as closely linked to free and self-determined, capable participation in mediated

communication. Media usage thus becomes cultural capital (Tondeur et al., 2010; Couldry, 2003). Consequently abstention from media communication is regularly seen with a ‘clinical-eye’ (Selwyn, 2003, p.) and discussed as quasi-pathological, deviant behavior and in terms of how hindrances for participation could be diminished and access to new media could be warranted to a wide population. Media disconnection beyond digital divide and reloaded knowledge gap-discussions in disguise of a usage gap (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2013) is, however, rarely addressed in current debates on mediatization.

While research focuses strongly on what people do when they engage in mediated communication and how this affects their everyday conduct of life, the following paper is an attempt to investigate specific forms of disconnection in conjunction with connection enabled by media. More specifically the focus is on the dis-/engagement with online media platforms. We do so without using a deficit-framework for disconnection and without conceptualizing participation as natural or normal state, whereas no media would indicate a less life. We argue that in order to investigate nowadays mediatized worlds in depth, they are to be considered as offering multilayered experiences, disconnection being one of them. Therefore abstention from mediated (online) communication needs to be included as a legitimate stance towards media communication and absence (in contrast to participation) and non-usage have to be acknowledged and investigated. In times when media are mundane fellows that are considered to be disappearing from our consciousness due to their omnipresence; when media usage is habitualized and therefore invisible, looking at disconnections rather than exclusively connection enables us to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to live in an age ‘supersaturated with media flows’ (Couldry 2013, p. 3). At the same time, it helps to remind us of the effects of exclusion when normalizing specific kinds of media usage, while alienating others.

By using forced disruption of the daily stream of online engagement as a method, we discuss how online disconnection can contribute to understanding media participation and its role in the everyday lives of young

adults who are broadly considered as being prone to online media usage. As the role of mediated communication becomes invisible to those engaged with it due to the omnipresent and ever-presence of media, forcing the young adults to disconnect from their online communication rituals and routines provided a suitable strategy to make the disappearing importance, function and role of media communication visible again. The findings presented here are results of a pilot project in preparation of a more comprehensive study on the communicative life-worlds of 'true' online abstainers.

The material for this study was conducted in three steps. Firstly, the participants – first and second year university students - were asked to document their media and communication practices, regardless whether online or offline, during one week. At this stage they were also asked to document their media devices, understood as owned and regularly accessible devices. Secondly, they had to abstain from using the Internet for one week completely. During this week of abstinence they reflected about difficulties and changes they noticed in their everyday lives. Furthermore they had to consider strategies of compensation and substitution they applied in their communicative practices. The third and last part of the project comprised an essay writing exercise, where the participants drew some general conclusions about their week off-line.

MEDIA DISCONNECTION IN MEDIATIZED WORLDS

The forced disconnection experiment provided clues for understanding what the non-/participation in online communication meant for our study participants and how it affected them. Especially the experiences of collateral participation, the indirect effects of living in a mediatized society brought clear indication that a dichotomous perspective on use and non-/use lacks complexity. Modes, rituals, habits and implications of use and likewise the absence of them, helps us to understand their significance. By making visible the role and normalization of specific media use in the everyday, we get valuable clues where to look for the peculiarities of non-users everyday. Use and non-use should then accordingly not be framed as normality or abnormality, but as integral yet different parts of media life.

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