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"You Have to Do That for Your Own Sanity": Digital Disconnection as Journalists' Coping and Preventive Strategy in Managing Work and Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

The article draws on the concept of digital disconnection in unpacking the motives, strategies, and perceived obstacles to effective management of risks associated with digital connectedness among journalists, particularly as these relate to optimisation of work and safeguarding well-being to avoid stress and burnout. Semi-structured interviews with British journalists reveal that their approach to digital connection is ambivalent. They consider the efficient access to information and ease of communication enabled by digital technologies both a resource in work as well as contributing to impaired mental health and job performance. Given the latter, journalists report applying a range of, primarily temporary, disconnection strategies to manage work and well-being. These patterns are similar to those observed among other knowledge workers. However, the study also points to several drivers and obstacles to digital disconnection that seem specific to the industry. These drivers include work in hostile social media environments and embeddedness of smartphones in daily work routines. Role conception, overidentification with work, and the lack of understanding and support from peers and employers regarding the need to disconnect have been identified as common obstacles to managing risks from digital connectedness.

Introduction

Digital transformations in journalism, particularly in the past decade, have received much attention from industry and academia alike. This focus on the ways in which journalism is arguably transforming through the adoption of a range of digital technologies seems justified given the ways in which, and the extent to which, journalists' working practices have changed in this period, as well as the wider media operations, especially in countries with high and advanced use of digital technologies. Of particular importance in this regard are the adoption of the use of internet, social media, and smartphones in journalism (Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King 2021). The

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internet allowed global connectedness enabling quick and easy access to information from around the world. The social media added volume to this information load and with its international and around the clock aspects contributed to the 24/7 news cycle. Finally, the smartphone enabled all these processes, as well as information processing, production, and dissemination, to happen almost everywhere and at any time. In line with these developments, interest grew in digital, multi-platform, multimodal, convergent, mobile, social media and other types of journalism enabled by the newly adopted digital technologies. Relatively less attention received the journalist as the labourer in this seemingly ever-changing industry, which is becoming increasingly intertwined with digital technologies, although even early evidence suggested that the digital connectedness may have negative consequences on journalists' well-being (Molyneux 2014; Bossio and Holton 2018). Yet, this line of inquiry remains underexplored, although the research in digital connection, and disconnection as a response to it, is gaining ground.

Digital disconnection in its essence refers to strategic and conscious effort to abstain from the use of digital technologies. This can be a temporary or a permanent choice, and can be manifested in a variety of ways, from refraining to use particular technologies at specific times, to deleting apps or social media accounts and disconnecting from specific digital technologies in a more permanent manner. These practices are considered to be primarily motivated by care for one's well-being, as well as productivity, as it is argued that they primarily arise in resistance to overload and distractions caused by the "always-on connectivity" (Syvertsen and Enli 2020).

This article draws on the concept of digital disconnection in unpacking the motives, strategies, and perceived obstacles to effective management of risks associated with digital connectedness among journalists, particularly as these relate to optimisation of work and safeguarding well-being to avoid stress and burnout. With this, it contributes to scholarship on digital transformations in European journalism by providing an insight into the perceived effects of digital connectedness on journalists as labourers.[1] It also advances the literature concerned with the "disconnection turn in work" as it documents the lived experiences of managing digital connectedness among a group of knowledge workers whose daily work routines are heavily grounded in digital technologies.

Digital Disconnection

Digital disconnection research has flourished in the past decade, particularly in the fields of tourism and leisure, but also work, business and health (Lomborg and Ytre-Arne 2021). With the covid-19 pandemic and the associated rise in the number of workers who engage in remote work supported with digital technologies, there has developed a stronger focus on the disconnection practices, and rights, in the area of work. That said, the issue has been gaining ground before the pandemic as well, particularly in relation to knowledge workers, i.e., those who think for a living and whose work mainly involves managing information via digital tools (Ciolfi and Lockley 2018; Fast 2021; Karlsen and Ytre-Arne 2022; Mirbabaie, Braun, and Marx 2022). In this context, the patterns of use of digital technologies in these professions have started to be seen as occupational hazards affecting workers' well-being, as well as productivity

(Syvertsen and Enli 2020). Indeed, it has been posited since the early days of implementation of digital technologies in workplaces that exposure to, and working with, digital technologies can impact workers' well-being (Salanova and Schaufeli 2000). Research in this field has repeatedly found that the use of digital technologies in work can lead to burnout, and consequently lower job satisfaction and work commitment. In particular, studies have found that the use of digital technologies can result in work overload and work-home conflicts, which cause techno-exhaustion or digital burnout as well as general job burnout (Stawarz et al. 2013; Wright et al. 2014; Maier, Laumer, and Eckhardt 2015; Mellner 2016; Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King 2021). Further, the use of smartphones, email and social media is claimed to foster interruptions and distractions in work, again contributing to work-related stress and burnout (Ter Hoeven, van Zoonen, and Fonner 2016), but also potentially Internet addiction, which involves compulsive use of digital technologies tied to behavioural and mental health issues (Brooks, Longstreet, and Califf 2017).

These considerations of the impact of the use of digital technologies in work have contributed to the so-called "disconnection turn in work," that is, "a turn away from the enduring romanticization of overwork, busyness, and media-induced flexibility" (Fast 2021, 4). In this sense, the practices of disconnection have started to be discussed not only as healthier ways of working, but also living in which there are more opportunities to engage in meaningful and valuable activities that make life better, instead of being constantly distracted by digital technologies (Syvertsen and Enli 2020). It is important to note here that this scholarship is rarely technologically deterministic – it does not aim to portray digital technologies as good or bad, but rather enabling a culture of work in which the "constant connectedness" may contribute to workers experiencing negative effects of work (Day, Scott, and Kelloway 2010).

Three aspects of work tied to digital technologies are seen as particularly ambivalent as they can be seen as both a resource in work, as well as contributing to impaired mental health and job performance. In the first place, digital technologies enable greater *availability* as workers become less tied to a particular workspace. This allows them greater flexibility in work. However, it also creates a (perception of) demand to always be connected and pressure to be available (Mirbabaie, Braun, and Marx 2022; Syvertsen and Enli 2020). The expectation of constant connectedness and availability has been found to be a requirement of some employers (Thomas 2013; Mellner 2016), with research from Canada finding that most studied knowledge workers remained connected after work hours because they felt pressured by their employers to be available (Duxbury et al. 2014). However, other research paints a more complex picture, suggesting that the decision to be constantly connected may stem from an employee's individual considerations, such as their role conception and sense of obligation (Thomas 2013). Whatever the motivation, a representative study of the British working population found that the use of digital technologies for work outside of work hours is linked to increased stress and decreased job and life satisfaction (Fleck, Cox, and Robison 2015; see also Mellner 2016).

Next, digital technologies allow for effective *access to information* gathering, analysis and transfer, making the work process faster and more efficient. That said, the increased access to information can lead to information overload as the information

can be shared in 24/7 cycles, and there are added pressures related to the expectations of greater productivity in these environments (Day, Scott, and Kelloway 2010; Hobsbawm 2018). Finally, digital technologies facilitate *communication* as they provide effective and efficient ways for workers to interact and collaborate. On the other hand, the ease of communication could also lead to temporal overload as digital technologies enable non-stop communication flows (Day, Scott, and Kelloway 2010; Bossio and Holton 2021). For example, colleagues can try to establish contact outside of working hours. Also, in jobs involving work with social media workers are often faced with never ending input from social media audiences. As mentioned, these developments, as well as the responses to them in different forms of disconnection, are considered most relevant for those whose jobs focus on information management via digital tools, i.e., the knowledge workers, such as journalists, academics, marketing and public relations specialists (Ciolfi and Lockley 2018; Fast 2021; Karlsen and Ytre-Arne 2022; Mirbabaie, Braun, and Marx 2022).

Given the evidence about the negative impact of some patterns of digital connectedness in work, there have recently been a range of initiatives aimed at mitigating the risk from these. For example, some employers have introduced policies that support workers' digital disconnection outside of working hours. These include, for example, limiting the access to work email outside of work, implementing software that deletes emails that arrive during non-work hours, and offering mindfulness training to workers that equips them with skills to disconnect from work-related technologies and work (Von Bergen, Bressler, and Proctor 2019). Further recommendations borne from research into effects of digital connectedness suggest employers should have clear availability policies outlining organisational expectations regarding connectedness outside of work hours, assist their workers in recognising the benefits and strain resulting from engagement with digital technologies, and encourage employees to respect their own and others' non-work time (Ninaus et al. 2015; Mellner 2016). On the other hand, there have also been interventions at the legislative level, with some countries deciding to regulate workers' right to disconnect. Such legislation exists in countries such as France and Ireland, and in 2021 the European Parliament passed a resolution that may lead to an EU-wide Directive guaranteeing the workers in the Bloc the right to disconnect outside of work hours, reportedly motivated by the potential health implications of the constant connectedness (Eurofound 2021; Pakes 2021). The right to disconnect commonly gives workers the right not to work outside work hours, not to be penalised for it, and imposes a duty to colleagues to respect it.

And while these initiatives demonstrate growing recognition of potential negative effects of digital connectedness by employers and legislators, it appears that the task of recognising the need for disconnection and employing the practice remains largely the responsibility of workers themselves (Syvertsen and Enli 2020; Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022). As Karlsen and Ytre-Arne (2022, 2174) conclude, "negotiations about digital media technologies come to represent psychological, cultural and social dilemmas that go beyond the individual worker, but are nevertheless experienced as individual cross-pressures to be managed." Existing research suggests that individual disconnection practices are employed as both a coping strategy and a prevention one, aimed at safeguarding health, as well as work performance (Kaun 2021; Moe and Madsen 2021).

Regarding the former, disconnection is aimed at safeguarding one's well-being when it is perceived that the engagement with digital technologies is, or might, impact it. With reference to the latter, disconnection is motivated by the perceived need for optimisation at work by managing distractions enabled by digital technologies. Notably, the disconnection practices reported by workers in these contexts are mainly temporary breaks from digital technologies, although they may be practiced in a consistent manner, with diverse forms of disconnection (Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2022). For example, temporary disconnection strategies may include actions such as using separate devices in work and non-work periods, refraining from use of digital technologies during lunch break, refusal to use work-related technology outside of work hours, and avoiding certain technologies that are seen as distractive and disruptive during work hours (Fleck, Cox, and Robison 2015; Mirbabaie, Braun, and Marx 2022). Interestingly, while the extensive research on news avoidance rarely makes reference to digital disconnection (see, for example, Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020), there is some evidence to suggest this practice too can be seen as a coping strategy in situations of information overload (Song, Jung, and Kim 2017; Villi et al. 2022) and that aimed at safeguarding well-being (Mannell and Meese 2022). More permanent disconnection strategies might include removing certain apps from digital devices, turning off notifications on email and social media, and decisions to remove or not create social media accounts (Karlsen and Ytre-Arne 2022). In any case, it is evident that disconnection is an active and conscious effort to disengage from digital technologies, and often a labour-intensive task (Natale and Treré 2020; Syvertsen 2020).

Digital Disconnection in Journalism

Journalists are one of those workers for whom the job was always potentially happening outside of regular working hours. Particularly for news reporters, work is required when something newsworthy happens, and these off-diary events are regularly unpredictable, happening at all times. However, the rise of digital technologies can be seen to have intensified this aspect of work. The rise of internet and global connectedness, as well as the adoption of smartphones and social media in work routines, has led to 24/7 news cycles with increased technology-enabled need to be the first and the fastest in delivering the news (Örnebring 2010; Harro-Loit and Josephi 2020; Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King 2021).

Alongside the unpredictability of work, journalists in countries with high and advanced use of digital technologies appear to be particularly at risk from effects of digital connectedness also because they are knowledge workers performing in a fully digitised industry meaning that digital technologies are highly integrated in their everyday working practices (Örnebring 2010). These include information gathering, news production, publishing and broadcast, engagement with audiences, and so on (Cohen 2019). It does not surprise, then, that many of the benefits and strains related to the use of digital technologies in work noted earlier have been observed in journalism too. For example, the study of employees in advertising, public relations, and journalism industry in Hong Kong and Austria found that these knowledge workers see digital technologies as facilitating communication and fostering flexibility in work, but

also come with the pressure to be constantly connected and informed, contributing to stress and burnout, and impacting workers' well-being (Ninaus et al. 2015). Similarly to other knowledge workers, there is evidence to suggest that the availability pressure may not stem solely from organisational expectations, but also journalists' personal motivations to remain connected in order to fulfil perceived role requirements (Ninaus et al. 2015)

In addition, digital or online journalists have been found to spend most time in front of screens at work even in the early days of digital journalism (Deuze and Paulussen 2002). Journalists working on all types of platforms are known to be using digital technologies to keep up with news even when they are not in work (Quandt et al. 2006; Molyneux 2014), causing digital and job burnout (Brédart 2017). This issue may be particularly relevant in markets with precarious labour conditions and smaller newsrooms, where there is often at least the perception that news will not get published if one does not "step up" and work outside of work hours, with consequences for the worker and the organisation. Also, it is claimed freelancers are at particular risk from negative effects of constant connectedness. For example, a study of Irish freelancers revealed the feeling of pressure to be constantly connected for fear of missing a story in a highly competitive market (Hayes and Silke 2018). Importantly, Syvertsen (2020, 112) notes that journalism is also characterised by colleagues often not recognising or respecting work – non-work boundaries and contacting their peers "around the clock."

Further, in countries with advanced and high use of digital technologies journalists report significant impact of social media on their work, usually demonstrated by added labour in gathering information, producing content for these platforms, and dealing with audiences (Gulyas 2017; Bossio and Holton 2018; Hanusch et al. 2019). Indeed, the labour of engaging with online audiences, particularly those on social media, is nowadays seen as one of the most stress-inducing aspects of journalists' work (Holton et al. 2021). Studies across the world have repeatedly found that journalists regularly endure online abuse on social media, with women and those working in broadcast, as well as journalists covering specific specialisms, such as politics and sports, being most frequently targeted (Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020; Lezard 2020; Holton et al. 2021; Posetti et al. 2021; Šimunjak and Menke 2022). There is evidence to suggest that this aspect of digital connectedness is particularly worrying as the exposure to and experience of online abuse has a negative impact on journalists' mental health and well-being, as well as their job performance as some self-censor to try to avoid abuse (Holton et al. 2021; Posetti et al. 2021; Pearson and Seglins 2022; Šimunjak 2022b). Hence, there is indication that digital transformations in the industry, and particularly incorporation of smartphones and social media into daily routines, have led to the pressure to be "always on" and connected, as well as contributed to journalists' information overload and exposed them to unprecedented levels of online abuse, affecting their mental health, well-being and work-life balance, and even motivating some to leave the profession altogether (Dean 2019; Bossio and Holton 2018).

Given all this, it is rather surprising how little attention digital disconnection in journalism has received either from industry or academia, particularly as the literature on the digital transformations in journalism is quite prolific. For example, the impact of

the rise of blogging, citizen journalism and social media on journalism have been discussed at length, as have the changes in working practices, forms of journalism and business models that are seen as driven by digital transformations in the industry (Friedrichsen and Kamalipour 2017). The (perceived) effects of the use of digital technologies on journalists as laborers have received relatively less attention. Research in the US found that journalists struggle with the constant connectedness that they see as brought about by the adoption of smartphones in journalism (Molyneux 2014; Dean 2019), yet the issue has not been explored in much detail. Rare research on the topic of digital connection and disconnection in journalism was carried out by Bossio and Holton (2018, 2021) who found that American and Australian journalists employ a range of disconnection strategies in dealing with social media fatigue. These are primarily focused on setting boundaries in work with social media, from using technical tools such as muting and blocking to disconnect from social media audiences, to making decisions about the type of content they post and interactions they are and are not willing to engage in on these platforms. Other research across US newsrooms suggests that journalists would welcome support from employers in managing the effects of digital connectedness, but many perceive even just disconnection outside of work hours as an "impossible" strategy "due to the hectic and 24/7 nature of the news industry" (Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King 2021, 2016).

Beyond these initial insights, we know little about what, if anything, drives journalists' disconnection from digital technologies in the context of their everyday work, which strategies are being employed, and with what perceived outcomes. Also, while existing research sheds some light onto the developments in the US and Australia, the issue remains under-explored in the European markets that are also characterised with advanced and high use of digital technologies in this industry. The aim of this article is to address these two gaps in scholarship.

Research Design

Journalists' disconnection practices are examined through a case study of the United Kingdom. Insight into British journalists' approach to digital connectedness and disconnection is warranted by several factors alongside the need to shed more light onto the situation in the European context. In the first place, the UK has one of the biggest bodies of journalists in Europe, only second to Germany (Eurostat 2020). Further, a global study of journalists across 63 countries found that the work of journalists in the UK is characterised with high time pressures and increasing work hours, which is a trend found among only one third of the sample (Harro-Loit and Josephi 2020). Also, British journalists reportedly perceive that their work has been significantly impacted by social media, one of the latest digital technologies that is seen to be transforming journalism (Hanusch et al. 2019). The importance of digital technologies in British journalists' work is further emphasised by the findings from the covid-19 pandemic, which indicate that digital transformations in this period, including remote work and digital newsgathering, were most commonly seen as stressors (Šimunjak 2022a). Finally, a wider survey of those working remotely in Britain in 2021 showed that two thirds would like to see the "right to disconnect" policy implemented, with

almost every other worker who said their mental health suffered in the pandemic ascribing this at least partly to the (perceived) inability to disconnect (*Two-thirds of UK home workers back a 'Right to Disconnect' and poll shows* 2021). Given the high degree of engagement with digital technologies and perceptions of its impact, studying the British case has the potential to reveal a variety of practices and approaches to working with digital technologies in a context unregulated by the right to disconnect policy.

To explore these practices, the study relies on semi-structured interviews with British journalists covering some aspect of politics and working with social media. The choice of political reporters is motivated by a very intense political period in Britain which saw several General Elections and referendums, Brexit process and the pandemic being covered by political journalists in the past decade. This busy period arguably created additional pressures on journalists to perform in and outside of regular work hours. Political reporters are also those that most commonly face abuse via digital technologies, adding to the stress of the job (Šimunjak 2022b). The sample included those who regularly work with social media as this practice has been identified as one of the key stressors from digital technologies (Binns 2017; Bossio and Holton 2021).

The data has been gathered within a larger project focusing on journalists' emotional labour, i.e., exploring work-related elements that are seen as emotionally challenging and ways in which the arisen emotions are managed. Importantly, disconnection as a practice or a strategy for dealing with digital technologies has not been raised in any of the questions during interviews. Rather, the practice has been induced through thematic analysis (Ayres 2008) in which it was established as one of the common themes that journalists identified as a coping and prevention strategy in dealing with stress, anxiety and burnout. Each interview addressed four key themes: general experiences of emotional labour in journalistic work, emotional labour in work with social media, emotional labour during Covid-19 pandemic, and perceptions of support systems in journalism. Disconnection has been mentioned across all themes, but primarily in relation to the first two when addressing the questions involving causes and consequences of everyday emotional labour, and strategies for its management. The sample of quotes referencing any form of disconnection has been subjected to further coding, which led to establishment of three key themes that are discussed in the findings: the motives for disconnection, the strategies of disconnection, and the issues that arise in the process.

The interviews have been carried out in 2021 via a video conferencing platform and they lasted on average 40 min. In total, 34 interviews were conducted with journalists from 15 media organisations. The sample was mixed in terms of gender, seniority (journalist/reporter, correspondent/senior reporter, editor), years of experience in the industry (early career, mid-career, senior), geographical reach (local and regional, UK-wide, international) and key platforms that journalists produce work for (digital, print, broadcast), reflecting to an extent the workforce in this industry (Spilsbury 2018). Strict research ethics protocols tied to data collection, management and publishing have been followed, as approved by the research ethics committee at the author's organisation (approval number 16175). These included gaining written informed consent from participants, ensuring data has been anonymised in transcription and held in secure spaces, and presenting anonymised accounts in outputs to

protect participants' identities, as is common practice in sensitive qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

Findings

When speaking about their work, interviewed British journalists regularly referred to two digital technologies - smartphones and social media. Interestingly, email as a digital tool has not been mentioned as frequently as might have been expected. The digital technologies were referenced in various parts of journalists daily working routines, and the related digital connectedness was interpreted both as enriching and impoverishing their work and well-being, in line with findings from Austria and Hong Kong (Ninaus et al. 2015). Particular ambivalence was expressed in relation to social media, which has been praised as an effective tool to keep abreast of news, find and contact sources, and share information. However, social media was also described as contributing to temporal and information overload with its constant stream of information, and as a hostile space in which journalists are often faced with abuse and harassment. Similar trends have been observed among journalists in the US and Australia (Bossio and Holton 2018, 2021). The smartphone has been positioned as a tool that enables constant connectedness, allowing journalists flexibility in how and where they perform work, but at the same time hindering their ability to "switch off" and gain balance between work and non-work domains of life. This is consistent with existing research in journalism (Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King 2021), and that focused on other knowledge workers (Thomas 2013; Duxbury et al. 2014; Mellner 2016; Ter Hoeven, van Zoonen, and Fonner 2016)

In this context, British journalists spoke about digital connectedness and related disconnection in terms of their motives to disconnect, strategies they employ, and obstacles they perceive in the process. Regarding motives, disconnection was often described as a preventive and coping strategy in dealing with the temporal and information overload, as well as the pressures related to the perceived need to be constantly connected and available. Journalists regularly positioned it as a practice aimed at two key goals – on the one hand, to safeguard and/or improve their mental health and well-being, and on the other, to manage distractions during work. These two key motivations have been consistently found in related research on digital disconnection (e.g., Kaun 2021; Moe and Madsen 2021). For example, a broadcast journalist described the need to disconnect due to temporal and information overload that occurs both in work and non-work hours in this way:

> I do think it's about sort of, yeah, managing it there on the day and managing it outside of your working time. Cause, obviously, you know, before your shift, you are sort of plugged into the news agenda anyway, when you're at home … So, it's sort of like, you know, 14 or 15-hour days, which is sort of constantly being alert and attuned. It's sort of making sure that, you know, there are certain hours of the day, where you are going to switch off; you are going to take a step back.

Further, journalists reported employing strategies of disconnection in a regular and consistent manner, indicating that these practices are not ad hoc solutions but, at least for some, now embedded into their everyday lives.

Disconnection Strategies

It appears that journalists apply a wide range of disconnection strategies, these often being tied to the use of smartphones and social media, but some going as far as disconnecting from all or most digital devices, usually with an aim of news avoidance to recover from a case of burnout. Some of these disconnection practices might be classed as temporary, while others as more permanent, and observed on a scale from keeping journalists mainly connected, indicating a smaller scale disconnection, to mainly disconnected, signposting a context in which there is little to no engagement with digital technologies (Figure 1). Importantly, these are individually negotiated and applied, so they vary from journalist to journalist.

Temporary disconnection strategies include practices as simple as deciding not to use a particular technology, usually a social media platform, for a period of time, but also techniques such as disconnecting from specific social media conversations by muting them, turning off or physically distancing from work smartphones when not in work; temporarily deleting work-related apps from digital devices during longer periods off work; and sometimes even disconnecting from media content and technologies altogether during annual leave. Some of these, such as turning off notifications and work phones, have been found to be employed by other workers in European countries (Fleck, Cox, and Robison 2015; Mirbabaie, Braun, and Marx 2022).

The conscious decisions not to use digital technologies during work time are associated with both the need to safeguard one's well-being and be more productive. Regarding the former, journalists commented on intentionally not checking social media when they are expecting a backlash based on a story they are publishing, and/
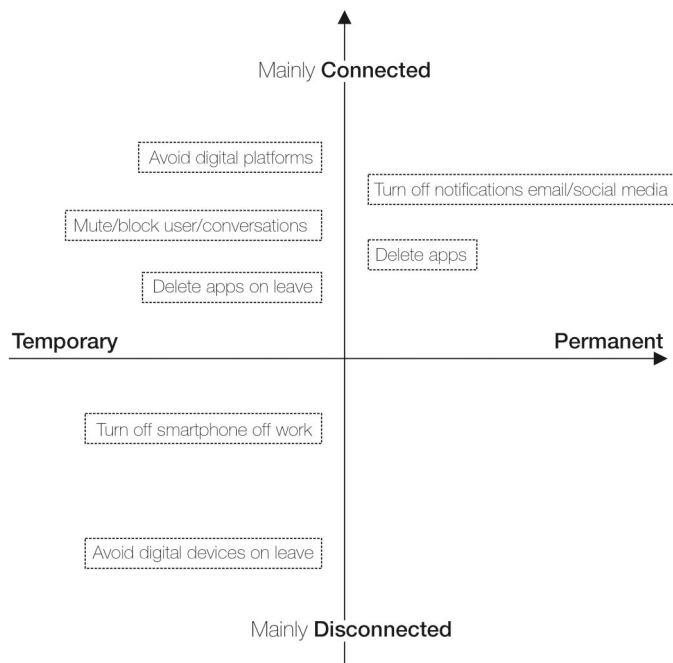

Figure 1. Dimensions of disconnection.

or when they are experiencing online abuse. As to work effectiveness, journalists speak of trying to minimise distractions during work so they can concentrate on producing content. A broadcast journalist described how they use specialist apps to help them partly disconnect from social media while keeping access to information shared there that might be useful in work:

> On a daily level, when you're actually at work, I mean, it's that curation, is about sort of TweetDeck filtering out the noise, following people where it is relevant …

Further, on Twitter specifically, journalists spoke of regularly using the "mute" option in order to disconnect from emotionally challenging situations in which they are faced with abuse, and at times also lively conversations occurring under their tweets which are seen by some as distracting and unproductive to participate in. Using the "block" option to prevent a user from accessing their content has also been mentioned, but far rarer, as it is perceived as a more aggressive disconnection strategy than muting where other users remain unaware that a journalist has disconnected from a conversation or another user. These strategies of managing connectedness on social media are in line with those observed among journalists in the US and Australia (Bossio and Holton 2021; Miller and Lewis 2022). They might also be seen as somewhat particular to journalists as labourers who are regularly exposed to harassment and abuse on social media; potentially also being utilised by other workers with high level social media profiles.

Switching off from work by controlling the use of work smartphones has arisen as a common theme among journalists who spoke of strategies to keep their work and private lives separate and achieve work-life balance. Some journalists have reported turning their smartphones off when not in work, while others create physical distance from them, so the incoming notifications do not impede on their private lives, allowing them the space and time to nurture their well-being and social connections. In the words of a print reporter:

> My company phone, when I finish work, goes on a stand and I don't look at it. And I think you have to do that for your own sanity. […] Giving yourself that brain space away from it, is essential.

It appears that British journalists are well-aware of the negative consequences of constant work-related smartphone use and related availability pressure on their ability to relax and recharge by "switching off," as was found in the case of Swedish workers too (Mellner 2016). Two other temporary disconnection strategies were mentioned in the context of care for well-being and mental health during periods of annual leave. In the first place, deleting work-related apps from phone, particularly Twitter, appears to be a regularly employed strategy aimed to benefit well-being. A broadcast editor described it like this: *When I go on a holiday, I normally delete the Twitter app for a week or two. [Things like these] help to create a bit of perspective and to get a bit of mental distance.* Interestingly, these practices have not been mentioned in previous related studies (e.g., Bossio and Holton 2021; Miller and Lewis 2022).

Some journalists report going even further during holidays and disconnecting from most, if not all, digital technologies, particularly aiming to avoid news content. This strategy, essentially a form of news avoidance, has been described as employed rarely,

but sometimes as the only way to relieve the information and temporal overload that has been experienced over a long period of time. To illustrate, a broadcast editor said:

> I think there are occasions where I completely shut down. Like … Not even every year, but there are occasions where you will take two or three weeks off and I literally just don't look. And I will go back to work and people will be talking about major news events that have happened, and I'm like … [shrugging shoulders] "I don't know." […] I don't want to interact with 24-hour news or the news agenda or what's happening …

As noted, news avoidance research commonly focuses on news users and rarely engages with the concept of digital disconnection. Yet there is some evidence that news avoidance might be motivated by information overload and/or care for one's well-being (Song, Jung, and Kim 2017; Mannell and Meese 2022), which this study supports in the context of labour.

There seems to be less variety of more permanent disconnection strategies being employed, perhaps signalling a lack of options when it comes to choices about not engaging with digital technologies in the industry. This seems in line with perceptions of American journalists who find the workings of the industry at odds with even the simplest forms of disconnection (Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King 2021). However, two permanent strategies have been mentioned regularly – turning off notifications on digital devices or specific apps, and deleting apps from digital devices. Both have been mentioned as strategies aimed at safeguarding well-being and managing distractions. For example, removing notifications from social media has been particularly emphasised by senior journalists with large social media followings, who get inundated by notifications from social media due to a high number of interactions with the content they post. Importantly, these interactions are often characterised by abuse and harassment, creating emotionally challenging situations for journalists experiencing them. A print editor described their journey on Twitter by explaining how they came to turn off notifications after a particularly abusive episode which harmed their mental health, concluding:

> You know, my parents, for example, would periodically call me up and say, 'Oh, darling, are you ok? Just checking in, there's a lot of abuse about something,' and I can honestly say to them, 'Look, mum, I don't … I don't know, I don't read it, I don't see it, so don't worry about me, honestly, because if it's going on, fine, I can ignore it. I'd rather just not know.

Some journalists decide to permanently delete certain apps from their smartphones, often social media ones, as they see them as a distraction that wastes time. This is a practice that has not been mentioned in related research on disconnection. A broadcast editor put it like this:

> I even deleted the app a little while ago. […] Why? First, wasting too much time looking at it. Social media is a massive time waster. If you're not careful. You see people just mindlessly scrolling through it. It's a habit that people have. I try and fight that.

Some journalists spoke about the harmful nature of social media and how they try to protect their well-being by managing the ways in which they use those platforms they see as indispensable for work. Deleting social media apps from phones seemed for some a step towards spending time more productively and meaningfully, while

retaining access to social media as a source of information. A digital editor described their experience like this:

> I can't really avoid it because I have to go on Twitter for my job. But, like, when I'm not at work, then I do try my very best not to go on it. And, actually, just recently I've deleted it from my phone, which is weird because literally my thumb is still going to that app all the time, to open it. It's like it's in built and … So, I'm just going to see how that works out. It's not really practical right now, not to have the app on my phone, but more seeing Twitter as something I log into for work and then can come out of it, otherwise you will be on it all the time.

Permanent disconnection from social media has also been tried by some journalists, but many reported this as problematic as the use of social media in British journalism is nowadays part of its daily working routines. The few journalists who reported disconnecting from social media said that this disconnection brought about more problems than it solved, so they ended up reactivating their accounts. Instead of disconnecting from social media, some journalists report keeping strict boundaries between their professional and private spaces on these platforms, with Facebook and Twitter often being used for work, and disconnected from in off-work periods, and Instagram often being used in a private capacity.

Obstacles to Disconnection

Alongside the above-mentioned example of the perception that permanently disconnecting from social media is wished by many but achieved by few due to embeddedness of these platforms in journalistic practices, several other obstacles to journalists' preferred disconnection strategies have emerged as common themes. In the first place, journalists spoke of the sense of responsibility to be available to cover stories which they feel will not get attention or proper treatment should they be disconnected. This seemed to particularly be the case in smaller and local newsrooms where there is often only one staff member covering a particular beat. The practice of role conception driving digital connectedness seems in line with that observed among journalists in Hong Kong and Austria (Ninaus et al. 2015). A broadcast editor explained how often it is not the organisational pressure that drives journalists to be connected and available, but journalists' role conception, that is, their own sense of obligation and duty:

> So, if I don't look, if I haven't picked up on the message or whatever, nobody else is going to. So, you sort of have to take personal responsibility for that. To ignore something, you have to kind of tell everyone, "I'm going to be incommunicado for two weeks and I'm not, you know …" But you have to kind of reconcile with that and be like, "Okay, this is what I'm doing."

However, organisational pressures on journalists to be connected and available are not to be minimised or overlooked. Indeed, journalists reported that their employers often did not recognise their needs to disconnect nor offered support with this. A print correspondent described the lack of organisational support for managing burnout and stress in this way:

> I haven't ever come across sort of somebody proactively reaching out to say, you know, "Do you need help on this? Do you need support on this? Are you a bit burnt out?" You

> know, it's more likely to be like, "Oh, come on, there's just one more day, can you do this extra piece for us, please?"

Some employers appear to recognise the need for journalists to disconnect from the 24/7 constant connectedness. Examples included offering time off after a particularly busy period or if journalists worked overtime. However, some saw these as platitudes about taking time off to prevent burnout and manage stress. This resonates with the research from the US which found that companies often sent contradictory messages to employees - requiring constant availability, yet promoting work-life balance (Thomas 2013). A broadcast journalist spoke of their frustration with the employer who promoted disconnection as a value but did not create conditions for it:

> All I get from my managers is, "Make sure if you've got a day off, take it off." And half the time … I would say, half my leave that I've taken in the last six months, I've ended up having to work through. And that causes frustration, anger … Because … But it's the job. I can't not work when certain events happen. For example, bloody Downing Street briefings … So, I have an obligation to monitor those and to watch them and to, you know, react to them.

Finally, there was also frustration with the level to which digital technologies are embedded in journalism and its processes, making it difficult for journalists to manage digital connectedness. For example, the smartphone, which can be seen as contributing to the digital transformation in journalism by making information gathering, production and sharing time- and cost-efficient (Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King 2021), is seen by some journalists as a curse as well as a blessing. The former primarily due to smartphone's current centredness in many work practices, meaning that disconnecting from it is a laborious effort. A broadcast editor spoke of it as an obstacle to managing their digital connectedness:

> You always got the bloody … [picks up mobile phone] You know, increasingly everything's to do with the phone. If I want to get on my laptop, on to my employer's email system, especially with the two-step identification, you always need your phone with you.

Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis suggests that British journalists' approaches to digital connection and disconnection are very much in line with the findings from related scholarship, particularly that concerned with other knowledge workers. However, the study also points to several drivers and obstacles to digital disconnection that seem specific to the industry. With regards to the former, British journalists demonstrate similar ambivalence towards the key aspects of digital connectedness as found among workers in other industries and countries (Day, Scott, and Kelloway 2010; Cohen 2019; Dean 2019; Mirbabaie, Braun, and Marx 2022). In particular, they value the efficient and quick access to information, and ease of communication that digital technologies enable. However, they also struggle with the expectations of around the clock availability, sometimes imposed by internal role conceptions and other times by their employers, as well as temporal and information overload, which they see as enabled by digital technologies. Next, their motives for disconnection are often driven by the self-care for their well-being and optimisation of work, as found elsewhere (Kaun 2021; Moe

and Madsen 2021). Finally, in line with observations from other scholars (Karlsen and Ytre-Arne 2022; Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2022; Mirbabaie, Braun, and Marx 2022), their strategies of disconnection are primarily temporary, but several more permanent strategies have been found among the sample too.

And while these findings support the warnings about the potential negative effects of digital connectedness among knowledge workers who rely heavily on digital technologies in work, some of the perceived causes and obstacles to disconnection that journalists spoke about reveal the specific issues in this profession. First, embeddedness of digital technologies in journalism practice in a country with high and advanced use of these technologies does not come as a surprise. However, it is important to note that the incessant reliance on smartphones and social media in journalistic work creates frustration and anxiety, contributing to stress and burnout. This finding supports those from other journalistic contexts and cultures (Ninaus et al. 2015; Bossio and Holton 2021; Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King 2021; Miller and Lewis 2022), suggesting that the issue might be persistent across countries and maybe even inherent to industry in countries with high levels of digitisation. The practice seems to be particularly problematic to those who are already sceptical and/or critical of digital technologies, and in particular social media. For example, those who spoke of concerns about the addictive nature of social media or screens in general, and/or anxiety about being faced with abuse on their outlet's website or social media platforms, expressed dissatisfaction with the perceived need to constantly engage with digital technologies during work and frustration with the perceived inability to disengage from specific digital spaces or technologies more permanently. Given that digital burnout is reportedly linked to Internet addiction (Brooks, Longstreet, and Califf 2017), these concerns seem both valid and urgent to address. The perception of this labour, and the associated emotional labour, can be seen as one of the drivers that motivate journalists to apply individual-level disconnection strategies they see as enabling them to safeguard their well-being and manage distractions in work and private life.

Second, while digital technologies are seen in general to contribute to expectations of greater productivity (Day, Scott, and Kelloway 2010), in journalism this pressure on workers can be seen as exacerbated with the political economy of media industry. Specifically, pressures on workers to produce multi-platform content to tight deadlines enabled by digital technologies are exacerbated by the political economy which sees less workers do more work (Molyneux 2014; Cohen 2019). Coupled with the centrality of digital technologies to their daily work, this context contributes to journalists perceiving the need to be constantly available to perform work which will otherwise not be done, and/or employers expecting journalists to work beyond their role requirements and regular working hours. These obstacles to disconnection, from over-identification with work and ingrained perceptions that work outside of work hours is normal and expected so one must be constantly connected and available for it, to lack of understanding and support from peers and employers regarding the need to disconnect, particularly to benefit their well-being, create an environment in which journalists struggle to disconnect and are left unsupported in seeking and achieving disconnection.

Arguably, this puts the responsibility on journalists themselves to manage risks associated with digital connectedness and leads them to seek individual-level solutions

to issues they perceive with it. This is in line with Syvertsen and Enli's (2020) observations that this management is often perceived as a worker's obligation, as well as previous practices recorded in journalism studies (e.g., Binns 2017; Bossio and Holton 2021; Holton et al. 2021; Miller and Lewis 2022). Employed strategies vary from temporary to permanent, and partial to full disconnection. Permanent and full disconnection does not seem to be an option for journalists whose daily practices are based on the use of digital technologies, in line with the scepticism that American journalists expressed in terms of possibilities to disconnect (Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King 2021). Temporary and full disconnection, taking the form of extreme news avoidance, is also seen as a drastic choice - one that is warranted by impaired well-being and mental health driven by overworking and the inability to regularly detach from workplace, including associated technologies. It is perhaps telling that some journalists find full disconnection from digital technologies as one of the strategies to battle burnout and chronic stress. On the other hand, most commonly mentioned strategies are temporary disconnection practices which are employed on an everyday basis to manage distractions and connectivity that may have a negative impact on well-being, such as being faced with online abuse or engaged in work outside of working hours. Given these have arisen as a common theme in the sample and appear to be applied in a regular and conscious manner, it can be suggested that journalists are very much aware of the potential negative effects of their digital connectedness and actively implement strategies to manage it to optimise work and improve well-being. And while strategies such as turning off notifications on apps, emails and social media, and turning off or distancing from work smartphones, have been noted previously in journalism studies (Bossio and Holton 2021; Snyder, Johnson, and Kozimor-King 2021) and among other knowledge workers (Fleck, Cox, and Robison 2015; Mellner 2016), the management of apps on smartphones as a strategy for dealing with digital connectedness has not been noted before. Similarly, while the research on news avoidance suggests that users may employ this practice to cope with information overload and to safeguard their well-being (Song, Jung, and Kim 2017; Mannell and Meese 2022; Villi et al. 2022), this study suggests that news avoidance, as well as disconnection from apps, could be at least a temporary solution when labourers experience negative effects of digital connectedness, rather than a problem to be solved.

Given this, and in the context of the lack of legally granted right to disconnect, the study can be seen to echo and support recommendations to employers for supporting labourers' digital disconnection, and in this way also their well-being, job satisfaction and job performance (see Ninaus et al. 2015; Mellner 2016; Von Bergen and Bressler 2019). These might include, among others, raising workers' awareness of the benefits and strain of digital connectedness, setting clear and transparent availability policies, and encouraging an organisational culture in which colleagues respect each other's non-work time.

Obviously, the limitation of this study is that it offers a qualitative exploration of one specific journalism industry, that British, which prevents generalised conclusions. However, the motives, strategies, and obstacles to disconnection, as well as its perceived importance, seem to resonate with those observed in other parts of the world (e.g., Bossio and Holton 2021), and hence, warrant further attention from scholars in

unpacking, and perhaps quantifying, these trends in this and related industries. Specifically, targeted studies examining issues with digital connectedness in highly digitised industries are needed, which might reveal macro, mezzo and micro contextual conditions under which issues with digital connectedness arise, as well as their effects, and preferrable and practicable solutions. Indeed, the data presented here, and future research, might support the industry, and perhaps legislators, in seeking solutions that would support journalists' and other affected labourers' efforts to manage their digital connectedness. This seems particularly important in journalism considering the high levels of stress and burnout detected in the industry, which impacts talent recruitment and retention, and consequently, the quality of journalism.

Notes

1. Historically, the term 'labourer' was used to signify a person doing work which was perceived as unskilled. Nowadays, there are ongoing discussions of the distinctions between the terms 'work/er' and 'labour/er' in some disciplines, including the sociology of work. Given the lack of a clear distinction in recent scholarship, and in line with other articles published in this journal, these terms are used interchangeably in this paper to signify members of the workforce and the mental and physical efforts they employ to perform in the profession.

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