

“Caught in the Net”: Online and Social Media Disappointment and Detox

Abstract Internet was eagerly awaited as a liberation from television. Yet, a decade into the new century, warnings about the negative consequences of online and social media proliferated. Critics claim that social and online media undermine broadly shared values: morality, culture, enlightenment, democracy, community and health. With increasingly ubiquitous media, the chapter argues that it is difficult to propose political measures to restrict media. However, a parallel development is the emergence of self-help guides, websites and confessionals inspiring users to media detox and abstention.

Keywords Media detox · Self-help · Screen-free · Social media · Online media

A MEDIUM OF TRUTH

Internet brought hope to those who loathed television. In *Life After Television* (1992) US economist and investor George Gilder praised “the teleputer” which would have none of the vulgar properties of television, but greatly enhance democracy and community. Television, in contrast was “a tool of tyrants”:

Its overthrow will be a major force for freedom and individuality, culture and morality. That overthrow is at hand (49).

*is used throughout the book to indicate my translation.

Negroponte (1995), Rheingold (1993), Turkle (1995) and others predicted that digitalization would bring human liberation, a genuine public sphere and more creative management of identity. Al Gore, US Vice President from 1993 to 2001, was also a cyber-optimist who in office initiated crucial legislation for expanding the Internet. Gore blamed television for “hollowing-out” American democracy (10), whereas Internet was “perhaps the greatest source of hope”:

An important distinction to make is that the Internet is not just another platform for disseminating the truth. It’s a platform for *pursuing* the truth, and the decentralized creation and distribution of ideas . . . It’s a platform, in other words, for reason (2007, 260).

Not since radio had a media technology been met with such praise for its inherently positive properties (Ch. 2). But not all were convinced. Voices of warning sounded: the Internet could be even worse than television! As Kimberly Young puts it in her 1998 bestseller *Caught in the Net* (13),

Rather than becoming the technological savior of our time, the Internet just might be emerging as the addiction of the millennium, surpassing even TV with its pervasive grip on our minds and souls.

Other warnings targeted the cumulative effects of too many media. “This book originates from an acute feeling that something is about to go wrong,” Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen started the preface of his bestseller *Tyranny of the moment: fast and slow time in the information age** (2001). Eriksen saw online communication as yet another interruption technology undermining concentration and focus. Echoing warnings against print, early mass media and broadcasting (Chs. 2–4) Eriksen claims that we “are in the process of becoming enslaved by the technology that was supposed to liberate us.” Although we have access to more information than before, we are not “better informed” but rather “more confused”* (7).

In this chapter the emphasis is neither predominantly on resistance to new media (Chs. 2 and 3), nor predominantly on mature media (Ch. 4), but on how resistance develops and changes as digital media evolve. The chapter discusses what was at stake for resisters: How were online and social media seen to undermine broadly shared values, and

what were the proposed forms of action? The chapter begins with a discussion of writers and books; a selection of non-fiction bestsellers identifying the Internet, online and social media as a cause of social change to the worse. I present the arguments of writers such as Kimberly Young, Andrew Keen, Nicholas Carr, and Sherry Turkle and relate these to the previously identified concerns for morality, culture, enlightenment, democracy, community and health. From resistance literature, I turn to resistance activities, and predominantly the trend towards media abstention, fasting and detox. Although there are still demands for regulation and restrictions, there is widespread acceptance that social and online media are here to stay, and that one can only handle the negative implications through the twin methods of conversation and self-regulation: controlling consumption and talking about the problems in the public sphere. Also in this chapter, most of the cases and examples are from the US, supplemented with European and Scandinavian examples. With social and online media as global entities, I find no sharp distinction between the type of resistance emerging in the US and Europe; the same forms of activism prevail across borders.

In the previous chapter I distinguished between those who believed that television could be improved and those preferring it to be abolished, but a similar distinction is difficult to draw with online and social media. First, it is more difficult to separate between good and bad aspects of online media as a multitude of devices, products, services and genres are intertwined and interlinked (Creeber and Martin 2009). Resistance is also harder to pinpoint because writers and activists are increasingly self-reflexive and keenly aware of the social stigma of being “against” media and technology. There is much strong polemic against online and social media, but writers still go to great lengths to tell readers that they are not against the detested entities. For example, Andrew Keen, author of *The Cult of the Amateur*, a bestseller with the strong and explicit subtitle: *How the Internet is Killing Our Culture* (2007), turns out not to be against the murdering force after all. In one of several disclaimers, he writes the following:

I am neither antitechnology nor antiprogress. Digital technology is a miraculous thing, giving us the means to globally connect and share knowledge in unprecedented ways. This book certainly couldn't have been completed without e-mail or the Internet, and I'm the last person

to romanticize a past in which we wrote letters by candlelight and had them delivered by Pony Express (184–185).

With online media, many actors voicing concerns are themselves Internet savvy: media professionals, innovators and “techies” who are disappointed with outcome of the digital revolution. These transformations make for an interesting discussion of the status of media resistance in the twenty-first century. In one sense, we are all partly or sometimes resisters trying to avoid invasive services and restrict the role played by ubiquitous media in our lives (see also Karlsen and Syvertsen 2016; Portwood-Stacer 2012). In another sense, there are very few resisters, as few of those voicing dire predictions set out concrete proposals for change.

HEROIN IN SCHOOL MILK

Internet’s history can be traced back to the first computers of the 1940s and attempts to connect computers to each other from the 1960s (Hannemyr 1999, 12–15). In the 1990s, hypertext and World Wide Web became the “killer application” for Internet’s growth into a mainstream media platform (Liestøl 1999, 542). The 1990s was a decade of cyber-optimism, but amidst enthusiasm were public concerns for morality, sexual and violent content (Karlsen 2013). Concerns were raised that children would “fall prey to child molesters hanging out in electronic chat rooms,” a phrase used in a cover story in Time Magazine July 1995 (cited from Sutter 2003, 170). The dangers of the Internet inspired new and revitalized metaphors in media resistance. Frank Cook, a British member of Parliament in 1994 described computer pornography as “tantamount to the injection of heroin into a child’s school milk” (cited from Sutter 2003, 170). Video games were called “murder simulators” (Vitka 2005). Regulation was initiated, such as the amendments in the US *Communications Decency Act of 1996* to protect minors against online pornography (Brisbin 2004, 6) and ratings systems to warn against violent games (Ferguson 2013, 27).

One of the writers who best seized the early concerns was Kimberly Young, in two books with the metaphorical titles *Caught in the net* (1998) and *Tangled in the Web* (2000). Young, a clinical psychologist, warns that Internet might have “harmful consequences that, left undetected and unchecked, could silently run rampant in our schools, our

universities, our offices, our libraries, and our homes” (1998, 11). If you hook your children up with modems,

you may unwittingly be opening the door to marathon chat sessions that lead to declining grades, secret plots to run away with cyberfriend, and a disconnection of family life more destructive than stationing individual TV sets in every room of the house (28).

Young realized she had “hit a nerve” when journalists began to swarm around her at conferences and her observations were reported across the globe (1998, 5–6). What is at stake for Young is mental and physical health: Internet is addictive and Young soon established her own treatment programme inspired by Alcoholics Anonymous (Young 1998, 109). In addition to health, morality and community was also at stake; her books are full of stories of law-abiding citizens spiralling into destruction. A typical story in *Tangled in the web* begins like this: “John is a forty-three-year-old engineer living in Maine who considered himself a devotee Christian and a good family man.” Trouble begins when the family buys a computer “for the boys’ education and for John to update the household finances.” Two pages into the story John has lost his job and his marriage, and the FBI takes him away in handcuffs for trading in child pornography (2000, 29–31).

Generically, Young’s books resemble those of Marie Winn who wrote critically about television, both are filled with testimonials and practical advice (Ch. 4). And Winn herself joined the chorus of concern, updating her arguments about negative effects of media. In a 25th anniversary of *The Plug-in-Drug*, subtitled *Television, Computers, And Family Life* (2002) she warns that computers are just as bad as television, they are “hypnotic and addictive” (195), and may lead to more violence and extremism (166). Winn is particularly critical of the teaching profession for diluting its media-critical stance; while teachers saw television “as a *cause* of certain problems” in the 1970s, a new generation, tended to see computers “as a potential *cure* for those same problems,” she notes disappointedly (174).

While teachers were getting enthusiastic, others were getting disappointed. As digital media evolved, writers from other professions, among them media people, “techie” and innovators, began to resist. In international bestsellers published in 2008, 2010 and 2011, Keen, Carr and Turkle describe how the digital revolution is turning society in the wrong direction.

ORWELL AND HUXLEY WERE WRONG! KEEN
AND THE LOSS OF CULTURE

British-born media entrepreneur Andrew Keen describes himself as “a classic example of the immigrant entrepreneur who came to America seeking more economic and cultural freedom” (2008, 37). In 1995 he founded [Audiocafe.com](http://audiocafe.com), a first generation Internet company. In a 2007 bestseller, *The Cult of the Amateur: How the Internet is Killing Our Culture*, Keen describes how he “peddled the original Internet dream,” he “seduced investors” and “almost became rich.” But sometime in 2004, with the emergence of participatory and personalized services, the dream turned sour. Keen was present at an event organized by the O’Reilly consultancy, key ideologue of Web 2.0, where “democratization” was on everyone’s lips (Keen 2008, 11–15, see also O’Reilly 2011). But instead Keen became convinced that services such as *Wikipedia*, *MySpace* and *Youtube* would be “undermining truth, souring civic discourse, and belittling expertise, experience and talent” (15). He says of his conversion:

This, therefore, is no ordinary critique of Silicon Valley. It’s the work of an apostate, and insider now on the outside who has poured out his cup of Kool-Aid and resigned his membership in the cult (11–12).

Keen’s is a classic dystopic tale; Huxley, Bradbury and Orwell are all points of reference in his work (Keen 2008, 2011). But neither of them got the destructive elements exactly right, mostly because they did not foresee the influx of ordinary people into the production circuit. The danger was not an authoritarian state and *The Cult of the Amateur* is not “Brave New World 2.0” as suggested by an acquaintance; instead the technological shift was bringing us “an endless digital forest of mediocrity” (Keen 2008, 2–3).

To Keen, almost everything is at stake. Social and online media destroy morality by encouraging piracy and gambling, narcissism and pornography. Health is at stake as Internet is “altering the shape and chemistry of our brains” and we can expect more “mental disorders such as autism, attention deficit disorder, and hyperactivity” (163). Democracy is undermined by bloggers using “digital media to obfuscate truth and manipulate public opinion” (26). Enlightenment is threatened: where utopians see the overthrow of “dictatorship of expertise,” Keen sees the emergence of

“dictatorship of idiots” (35). Above all, what is at stake is culture. Keen admits to being “an elitist” (2008, xiii), but defends Bob Dylan as much as classical music, network television as much as classical literature. Culture is, what is being produced by professionals, by cultural and media institutions, now “under assault” (7). His comments on television are respectful and nostalgic:

In the golden age of media, revered journalists like Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite were cultural heroes – universally admired, trusted and respected. But in today’s world they would be C-list celebrities, as fewer and fewer of us pay attention to the traditional news media (83).

Alluding to Time Magazine making YOU person of the year in 2006, he concludes with a strong appeal “to protect mainstream media against the cult of the amateur” (204):

So let’s not go down in history as that infamous generation who, intoxicated by the ideal of democratization, killed professional mainstream media. Let’s not be remembered for replacing movies, music and books with YOU! (204–205)

Web 2.0 launched a whole new round of cyber-optimism (see, for example, Benkler 2006; Lessig 2008; Shirky 2010). But more works of disappointment and resistance were beginning to emerge.

DISCOURSE OF DISAPPOINTMENT: CARR AND TURKLE

As a writer and editor, Nicolas Carr had found Web 2.0 “new and liberating.” He became “a social networker and a content generator” (15). But then: “Sometime in 2007, a serpent of doubt slithered into my info-paradise” (16). In yet another enthusiast-turned-sceptic bestseller, *The Shallows: What the internet is doing to our brains*, published in 2010, he observes: “I’m not thinking the way I used to think” (2011, 5–6):

I feel it most strongly when I’m reading. I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article . . . That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two . . . The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.

He has the explanation:

I think I know what's going on. For well over a decade now, I've been spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing and sometimes adding to the great databases of the Internet.

Carr grounds his observations in neuroscience and ideas that the brain is changeable and plastic (27). With electronic media, the pathways in our brains are being “rerouted” (77). We sacrifice mental skills that may be more valuable than the ones we gain (35), and end up with a “ juggler’s brain” (115). With digital communications, a new mode is beginning to take hold, the mode of shallowness: “It’s possible to think deeply while surfing the Net, just as it is possible to think shallowly while reading a book, but that’s not the type of thinking the technology encourages and rewards” (115–116).

What is at stake for Carr is enlightenment, in particular concentration, focus and reading. “For the last five centuries, ever since Gutenberg’s printing press made book reading a popular pursuit, the linear, literary mind has been at the center of art, science, and society,” Carr writes in a sweeping and typical phrase. But now “It may soon be yesterday’s mind” (2011, 10). Carr’s arguments resembles Neil Postman’s critique of television two decades earlier (Ch. 4), but for Carr, previous electric and electronic media are a mere footnote. These media had limited influence because they were “limited by their inability to transmit the written word” (77).

In her 2011 bestseller *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*, Sherry Turkle, writer and professor at MIT, details her digital autobiography; also a journey from hope to scepticism (xiii). She describes how her first book, published in 1984, was hopeful and optimistic on behalf of new technology, in contrast to Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four* celebrated that same year (xi). A second book, published in 1995, also offered “a positive view of new opportunities for exploring identity online” (xi). After that however, “my concerns have grown” (xii). The developments that she finds most disturbing have to do with loss of community and erosion of interpersonal bonds. She is concerned about new types of robots, not just developed to do dangerous jobs but also to be friends, pets and lovers. And she is concerned about ubiquity; that we are always logged on. “I feel witness for a third time to a turning point in our

expectations of technology and ourselves,” she writes, we have come to “expect more from technology and less from each other” (xii).

Turkle notices that people were beginning to prefer “machine-mediated relationships,” teenagers would rather text than talk and adults felt that “real time” events were taking too much time (11). In her description of what is lost, she praises non-media activities and older mass media:

But if you’re spending three, four, or five hours a day in an online game or virtual world (a time commitment that is not unusual), there’s got to be someplace you’re not. And that someplace you’re not is often with your family or friends – sitting around, playing Scrabble face-to-face, taking a walk, watching a movie together in the old-fashioned way (12).

Turkle comments on situations where people are “alone together” and observes metaphorically that “[l]ife in a media bubble has come to seem natural” (16).

Turkle’s main concern is with social disconnection, but the metaphor of “bubble” is also used to express political concerns. Parisier (2011) warns of “filter bubbles” where personalized algorithms prevent users from being confronted with viewpoints they disagree with, and terms like “echo chamber” and “egocasting” (Rosen 2004) describe similar dangers. Evgeny Morozov, who has written several books about the use of online media by authoritarian regimes, use chapter titles inspired by dystopian fiction, such as “Orwell’s Favorite Lolcat” and “The Orwell-Huxley Sandwich has Expired” to discuss modern-day threats to democracy. These terms, metaphors and perspectives pose a potent antidote to cyber-utopian notions of Internet as a platform of reason and truth.

A CALL TO CONVERSE

When Turkle voices her concerns to friends, they shrug and ask “What are you going to do?” (2011, 296). Turkle suggests to begin with simple things such as “Talk to colleagues down the hall, no cell phones at dinner, on the playground, in the car or in company” (296). Although several of her solutions pertain to self-regulation, Turkle warns against framing the problem as “addiction” (293). This would imply that “there is only one solution”:

To combat addiction you have to discard the addicting substance. But we are not going to “get rid” of the Internet. We will not go “cold turkey” or

forbid cell phones to our children. We are not going to stop the music or go back to television as the family hearth (293–294).

Also Young, Winn, Hylland-Eriksen, Keen and Carr declare that they do not wish to get rid of the Internet and are not against online and social media. However, what also unite these writers is the struggle to define a forceful stance; how do you position yourself as a strong critic of online and social media while avoiding to be seen as being against media? It is easy to sympathize with these writers as they get pushed into corners by “the myopia of the digital mob” (Keen 2008, xiv); some are subject to vicious personal attacks, illustrating the difficulty of establishing a media-resistant or technology-resistant position. In long passages in prefaces and postscripts, writers reflect upon the reception of their ideas and express resentment at the labels they are awarded. Despite their forceful language and frequently dystopic predictions, it is interesting to note that most respond to criticism by attempting to place themselves in a centrist position. Carr refers to the continuous debates between “Philistines” vs. “Luddites” (2–3), but position himself outside this dichotomy (Chs. 1 and 4). Keen is irritated that he is called a Luddite (xiv) and describes himself as a “pragmatist” (196). In an afterword to the Paperback Edition, Morozov reflects on the reception of his book and the assumption that he advocates “some kind of cyber-scepticism bordering on cyber-defeatism,” claiming that his position rightly is one of “*cyber-agnosticism*” (336–337). However, he concedes that his stance in his first book “was not crystal clear, hence the preponderance of critical interpretations that put me squarely in the dystopian corner.”

In addition to difficulties in defining a forceful stance, writers struggle with identifying paths of action. Different ideas and suggestions are aired, including proposals for regulation, but, in general, there does not seem to be much hope in political or legal solutions. Instead, the writers are eager to stimulate public talk and conversation. Early in the book Turkle writes “This is the time to begin these conversations, together” (17) and the concluding chapter is called “Necessary Conversations.” Keen states explicitly that he wants to start a “conversation” and encourages readers to “talk about the consequences of today’s user-generated media before it is too late” (xiv). Like the others he is encouraged by the response: “I think I have succeeded, both in America and all over the world.” Since the book came out (xv):

I’ve been fortunate to talk with many thousands of people who, like me, are deeply worried and confused about the economic, cultural, and ethical

consequences of our user-generated media revolution. The digital mob might hate me, but many others – teachers, recording engineers, politicians, musicians, librarians, parents, publishers, graphic artists, intellectual property lawyers, filmmakers, media entrepreneurs, and other professionals – are on my side.

Also Carr is encouraged by various forms of talk and conversation. He tells of loneliness in writing *The Shallows*, it felt like paddling a small and empty boat “against a very strong tide” (225). But the book became a bestseller, letters and emails poured in, other books emerged. He states hopefully: “A backlash against the Net, it seems, is under way” (2011, 225) and “Some kind of rebellion seems in order” (227). However, as to what kind of rebellion, he turns poetic rather than political. The last sentences in the afterword are the following:

We may be wary of what our devices are doing to us, but we’re using them more than ever. And yet, history tells us, it’s only against such powerful cultural currents that countercultural movements take shape. As I said, it’s a small boat. But there’s still plenty of room inside. Feel free to grab an oar (228).

The appeals to start and take part in conversations, instead of setting out long-term political goals, allude to idealistic notions of dialogue in the public sphere (Habermas 1984). Ironically, it is with social and online media that the spaces for public conversations have most expanded in recent decades; there are endless new opportunities for conversation in blogs, podcasts, social media and online forums. With calls for more conversation, social and online media sceptics find themselves in the paradoxical position of having to rely on the objects of dislike, while at the same time arguing that these should play a less important role.

A MEDIA RESISTANCE RALLY

On the 12th of May, 2012, 40,000 Orthodox Jewish men filled a sport stadium in Queens to protest the Internet’s damaging influence. Desktops, laptops and smartphones posed new challenges to a community that routinely discouraged television ownership (Fitzpatrick 2012). The demand for tickets at the rally was so high that an extra sports

stadium with 20,000 seats was rented. Organizing the event involved “more than 750 buses, a few boats, 28 state agencies” (Stein, 2012). Women could not participate, but could listen to the speeches in Hebrew, English and Yiddish streamed to Orthodox communities around New York (Grynbaum 2012).

Eytan Kobre (2012), a lawyer and spokesperson, describes the motivation for the rally in the *New York Post*, echoing almost all major concerns in media resistance. One big concern was with morality, “the pervasive accessibility of pornography online, which has reached epidemic proportions,” which “debases and objectifies women” and leads to violence. Democracy was at stake as “verbal violence” polluted the societal atmosphere and inflamed aggression. Community was undermined as “we’ve replaced conversation with tweeting and twittering our way through cyberspace.” In a phrase that resonates with centuries of resistance statements, Kobre argued as follows:

No one lives in the moment anymore. No longer are people able to be alone with themselves and comfortable without being connected to other people. Gadgets are supposed to free us, but ironically, they have enslaved us and left us with much less time for ourselves, our families and the things that are important in life.

Also enlightenment, and particularly education, was undermined; Internet was corrupting the brains of students and there was “no research anymore” and “no retention of information.”

The rally was highly unusual in a Western context; invoking memories of demonstrations against early popular media and television (Chs. 2 and 4). But this time there was no political manifesto and no clear demands to regulators and industry. Observers and journalists struggled to make sense of the diverse messages from speakers and participants, was this rally against the Internet or was it “just to make it Kosher,” as one of the participants put it (Miller 2012)? Interviews and news reports from the rally show how also an orthodox religious congregation struggled to find means to act on their media resistance.

On one level, the message was one of self-discipline as members of the congregation were urged to install filters against pornography (Miller 2012). But organizers pointed out that more was needed in order to combat the enormous problems caused by new digital media: “It is fully recognized that this is far, far from the conclusive answer to the problems

the Internet poses – it is merely a first step evidencing our seriousness and resolve to find the best solutions and implement them.” But what would be the second step? Seemingly at loss for a more potent medicine, organizers proposed more of the same – more meetings and conversations. The next step would be gatherings around the country “reaching out to other faiths – and society as a whole” (Kobre 2012).

SELF-HELP AND DETOX

Parallel to the emergence of literature pointing to negative consequences of social and online media in society, there has been a proliferation of talk and conversation about personal forms of regulation and abstention. Media self-help tips are available on many platforms: in media reports, social media, websites, and books with titles such as *Unfriend Yourself: Three days to Discern, Detox and Decide about Social Media* (Tennant 2012; see also, among others, Green 2014; Zane 2014). The values and concerns expressed in these texts echo the general concerns in media resistance, and advice is given as to how one can become a more authentic human being and lead a more valuable life by restricting media engagement.

In media policy studies, the term self-regulation describes the trend whereby media companies increasingly regulate themselves, rather than being regulated by the state (Campbell 1999). However, the term can also describe the development whereby users increasingly have to self-regulate their behaviour so media do not become too invasive. Typically media self-help guides begins by recommending that the user assess the situation and make a plan, before implementing a programme for management of time, space and identity (see Karlsen and Syvertsen 2016). Time-management is often the most important remedy, for example, the self-help book: *Get the F*ck out of Social Media*, Green (2014) suggests:

Instead of totally removing yourself from the internet, try to gradually reduce the time spent online. Start with 20 minutes. The increase to 30, then 45, then an hour or so on... (sic) Strike the right balance between chatting, playing, commenting etc. (How to overcome Social Media Addiction, para 1.)

The advice is strikingly similar to advice regarding smoking, drinking, overeating and other ills, and more detailed advice follow. Users are told

to turn off notifications, remove apps and services, and physically remove screens from sight. Self-help guides also encourage users to instigate deeper life changes to distance themselves from the constant interruptions, narcissism and procrastination encouraged by social and online media. Common advice in media self-help guides reflect concerns for morality (avoid pornography and cybersex), community (spend more time with others, volunteer), democracy (be active in social movements, engage in politics), health (be outdoors and do more exercise) and enlightenment (switch to more learned pastimes). A particularly strong recommendation is to switch electric and electronic media for print, as in *How to Reclaim Your Life from Facebook* (Zane 2014, ch. 6, para 5):

Consider joining a book club where you will get out, meet new people and broaden your knowledge on available literature or specific topics. . . . Reading is also part of educating ourselves and improving our knowledge of any topic, work or professional, hobby or artistic endeavour. Consider reading an opportunity to discover more about the world, about yourself and your fellow citizens.

A change away from a strong media identity will presumably increase your happiness and refocus your attention on what is more important, realizing that “Life is so much more than pixels, bites and likes” (Bratsberg and Moen 2015, 17*) (see also Chs. 4 and 6).

Connected with self-help advice, testimonials and confessionals where individuals share experiences with media detox and abstinence in the public sphere have also proliferated. The testimonies reflect the increasingly porous distinction between popular science and journalism on the one hand, and the relaying of personal experiences on the other, and is part of the influx of self-therapeutic discourse into the public sphere (Madsen 2010, 2014; Illouz 2008). Media detox accounts are published in all formats and involve anything from the strictest to the mildest measures. Blogs and posts on social media describe measures such as “Facebook suicide” and tell how you can “Destroy your carefully constructed virtual image in four easy clicks” (King 2008). Bratsberg and Moen (2015) tells of a digital business developer who chose a meditation retreat in India for her digital detox; she was totally removed from human contact in ten days to learn to be “more present in the moment” (42–43). Some do not aim to quit but go for an extended fast. In *The Verge*, technology writer Paul Miller (2013) explains how he came to do a one-year detox:

In early 2012 I was 26 years old and burnt out. I wanted a break from modern life – the hamster wheel of an email inbox, the constant flood of WWW information which drowned out my sanity. I wanted to escape.

The media detox confessional is also found in book-length accounts. In *The Winter of Our Disconnect: How Three Totally Wired Teenagers (and a Mother Who Slept with Her iPhone) Pulled the Plug on Their Technology and Lived to Tell the Tale* (2010), Susan Maushart reports on her family’s six months media fast. Maushart, a journalist holding a PhD from New York University and dedicating the book to television resister Neil Postman (see Ch. 4), writes in capacity of parent. “Over a period of years,” she writes, “I watched and worried as our media began to function as a force field separating my children from what my son, only half ironically, called RL (Real Life)” (1–2). She observes that the more family members communicated individually, the less they cohered as a family (6), illustrating the concerns of Turkle and others (above). The family’s detox is successful and life changing: the son discovers a hidden musical talent, the youngest daughter begins to sleep regularly and her moodiness improves, the family finds energy for activities such as playing games, reading and cooking, they bond and reconnect. In another book-length report Lars Bratsberg, who works for Google in Norway, reports similar benefits after sixteen days of detox in order to normalize his online media use (Bratsberg and Moen 2015).

Not just family life, also work life is reported to benefit from detox. Agnes Ravatn is a Norwegian acclaimed author, who used six years to write a second novel, due to online procrastination. “Day after day, year after year, I had to realize that I had done nothing else than being on internet and mobile, caught in vastness,” she writes in *Operation self-discipline** (2014) – described as a “self-help book for those who hate self-help books.”* A combination of strict self-regulation and writing about the experience massively improved her life:

Throughout the short year I have worked with this book, my everyday life has indeed been substantially changed to the better, primarily in the area that revolves around work. I will almost say it so strongly that I have been born-again, work wise. Primarily because I finally to a large extent managed to free myself from online newspapers, email checking, and the smartphone. I have simply become an extremist when it comes to internet (86).*

Self-help is often seen as a form of narcissistic self-obsession, but as pointed out by McGee (2005), it can more adequately be seen as a necessary form of labour. In an era of deregulation and increasingly conflicting impulses, you cannot expect others to solve your problems, rather there is cultural accept for expecting you to get a grip (Madsen 2010, 87). Illouz (2008, 243) points out that therapy and self-help works because it offers tools and technologies to manage problems in a complex culture “riddled with contradictory normative imperatives.” And with social and online media you cannot really blame the platforms; as you – yourself – are part of the problem. Much self-help literature makes an effort to shift responsibility from media operators to users, as in Tennant (2012):

When I say, “Facebook tells us lies” or “Facebook makes us promises it doesn’t keep”, I do not mean Facebook the corporation. I mean Facebook the website and the culture we have created around it. More often than not, Facebook allows us to make these promises, and we propagate them (Don’t be a hater, para 4).

While self-help books and confessionals insist that something must be done, they take care not to moralize. It is not a case of us versus you, as Bratsberg and Moen (2015, 17) insists, we are all in the same boat:

This book is not intended to be a nagging-book [kjeftebok] where we talk about how stupid you are, if you never put away the phone or look up from the screen . . . We’ve been there, yes, we are there still to some extent.*

“I’M UNPLUGGING FOR #SCREENFREEWK”

In the previous chapter, I described how organizations such as *White dot* and *TV-Free America* organized short-term TV-boycott in schools, communities and homes. Although many participants may not have agreed, the political goal was to get rid of television (Ch. 4). In the 2000s, *TV-turnoff Week* changed its focus to *Digital Detox Week* or *Screen-Free Week* in many countries, reflecting the proliferation of new media. With the name change came also a political reorientation, as the screen free-movement appeared to sever the link between short-term boycotts and long-term elimination.

In Norway, the Christian media watch organization Family and Media organizes screen-free weeks and describe their ideology on the website (Familie og medier 2012):

There is no doubt: The screens are here to stay. And, as many will agree, that is a good thing. Whether it is at home or at work, there is much benefit and enjoyment in the many media channels. But, as with anything useful and fun, the many screens can get a larger space in everyday life than they deserve. Every year, during Lent, we encourage in you to take a week off from all screens. Turn off and see what happens!*

The US campaign has a similar focus; emphasizing that you can still use devices for work or school, but should try to avoid digital entertainment and screens interfering with family time and meals (Screen-Free Week 2016b).

The disclaimers are familiar from resistance literature: online services are here to stay, and although excessive screen time may be bad for you and your family, elimination is no goal. However, the methods and advice recommended by the screen-free movement also reflect the increasing difficulties with practicing media resistance in the age of ubiquity. A particular problem is how to decide what services to abstain from and which to keep when you are doing media detox. While a television turnoff only required pushing a button, the most ardent also refusing to appear on television to propagate their case, no such limitations exists for the screen-free. Indeed, if you follow on-site advice, you can end up spending a lot of time online, as screen activities are recommended throughout the process of detox, from preparation to debrief.

In the media detox planning phase you are pointed to many sites where you can assess your situation. You can for example take an online test with questions such as *How often do you find that you stay online longer than originally intended?* to find out how big your problem is (Center for Internet Addiction 2009). Several sites also recommend or offer the possibility of testing whether you are able to sit still and stare at a screen for a designed period without touching a keyboard. *Adbusters* digital detox week-preparations begins with the suggestion that you take a “Zen moment”: sixty seconds of staring at the dark screen and “[m]editate about your relationship with the box”

(Adbusters 2015), whereas Bratsberg and Moen (2015) recommend a website where you can check if you manage to stare at the screen and listen to the sound of waves for two full minutes.

Once you have finished screen staring and decided to go offline, there is more online work to do. A Norwegian newspaper describes the efforts of a student who takes part in screen-free week and her struggle to separate acceptable and non-acceptable use (No: downloading music from the Internet, Yes: listen to music already downloaded). She has a long list of chores to do before starting, including “tell people that I’m not available on Facebook so that they can submit necessary information by phone” (Hamerstad and Almelid 2012). During the actual detox there is also a lot of online activity. You can get constant updates on Facebook, you can add your event to an online map and become an endorser for that year’s week online, you can download the turn-off kit and sign an online pledge where you specify what screen-free week means in your case. You are also encouraged to use social media to mobilize:

Spread the Word: Whether you blog, reach out to your local paper, or post to your Facebook page, make sure to let people know you’re going screen-free. You’ll inspire others, start important conversations, and shine a much-needed spotlight on the importance of carving out screen-free time for children. Here are a few sample posts and tweets, and a sample press release to help you get started (2016a).

Sample tweets include “I’m unplugging for #ScreenFreeWk.” “[T]urn off screens and turn on life!” “We’re going screen-free. You can too!” “Celebrate #ScreenFreeWk.”

Once you are done with the detox it is time to plan for long-term changes, a phase which also require online activity, such as downloading tips to screen-proof your home. Finally, you can buy online apps and filters to help you regulate you relationship with media long-term. For example, the app “Freedom” from *Block digital distractions* is marketed with the texts: “If online distractions kill your productivity, Freedom could be the best 10 dollars you’ll ever spend.”

A spokesperson for Family and Media, the Norwegian screen-free coordinator, said in 2006: “This is not a media protest, but a campaign to place the media in a richer perspective” (Mz 2006). From a protest against media, it seems, media turnoff has become, in many instances, just another media activity.

WHAT IS AT STAKE AND WHAT TO DO?

Historical conditions and social forces shape media resistance, and resistance to social and online media differs from both television resistance and resistance to early mass media. Although arguments continue to be value-based, specific concerns and actions differ, reflecting changes in media and society. The chapter shows that moral considerations remain a motive for resisting media; and that sexual content, pornography and violence, as well as narcissism in social media, continues to prompt disbelief and dismay. However, it is interesting to note how moral resistance not necessarily entails an expectation or a demand that the offending content will be restricted and curtailed. The situation reflects the massive changes in media regulation and the overall regulatory context; with the liberalization of media and telecom since the 1990s, many media-critical organizations have shifted attention from regulation to raising awareness (Reading 1999, 175) and campaigners instead lobby for technologies that individuals and households can use to censor themselves (Heins 2007; Guins 2009).

The concern that media destroy culture is also expressed differently with social and online media. While the concern in the early era of mass media was to protect high culture and genuine folk culture, it is increasingly popular culture and the cultural industries that are seen to be threatened. In an era where anyone can produce and distribute cultural products, mainstream mass media culture is defended against the “endless digital forest of mediocrity” (Keen 2008). Particularly interesting is how some critics point to television as a professional and unifying medium in the public sphere, representing higher quality as well as an alternative to the isolating “bubbles” created by social and online media (see also Enli et al. 2013). Established mass media are perceived as means to combat fragmentation and sustaining community, as well as sustaining a level of professionalism and quality in cultural production.

Many writers began as digital enthusiasts, but changed their minds due to negative experiences. More than anything, the sentiments emerging are not panic and fear, but disappointment and distrust. Disappointment is particularly linked with two aspects: that digital media did not improve learning and enlightenment, and did not improve democracy. Digital media are potentially great vehicles for learning, but also vehicles for distraction and procrastination. At the height of the television era, there was great concern for passivity and people becoming “couch potatoes,”

while the most prevalent concerns today is with loss of linearity and a form of hyperactivity, resulting in a “jugglers brain” (Carr 2011). Maybe the strongest assertion made by cyber-enthusiasts was that digital media would enhance democracy; however, Internet did not turn out to be a medium of truth, but could also be used for propaganda and to empower authoritarian regimes. A range of examples, ranging from online surveillance and the emergence of “fake news”, to the failure of much hyped “social media revolutions” in the Middle East, punctured hope that online media would improve democratic conditions.

In the previous chapter (Ch. 4), I distinguished between those who believed that television could be improved and those who saw it as irredeemable, and showed how the anti-television movement chose boycotts as one method to get rid of television. Generically, the literature discussed in this chapter shows great similarities to texts discussed previously; writers issue warnings, cite dystopian fiction, use sweeping statements and strong metaphors, point to Internet and digital media as sources of social change to the worse, impose a sense of urgency and use words like “rebellion” – which should indicate that change was imperative. Although many societal problems are identified, few political solutions are advocated. The writers are highly self-reflexive, and use much space to refute criticism that they are moralists, laggards or luddites. Some still advocate regulation, but the main approach is a combination of self-regulation and starting a conversation. As politics and technologies change, acts and expressions of media resistance may be found in everyday media management and the sharing of experiences.

In this chapter, I have pointed to a proliferation of texts advocating media self-help, detox and fasting. Denial of foodstuffs and self-control is a familiar theme in the modern world; media fasting and detox reflect yet another way for individuals to handle the contradictions of modernity (Giddens 1991; Illouz 2008). With media detox, media resistance has developed its own brand of asceticism, as self-discipline, self-denial and self-restraint are means to achieve media resistance goals (see Adair-Toteff 2015). In contrast to religious fasting, which is meant to bring the subjects closer to God, media fasting, even when advocated by religious groups, appear to be more about becoming a more authentic person. Yet, it is interesting to observe how churches and religious groups manage to blend centuries-old practices with modern media resistance, moving seamlessly from “fasting” to “media fasting”, illuminating again the flexibility of the cause. In addition to improving your

lifestyle and authenticity, media abstention can be used to communicate to others that you are a unique and disciplined human being. Media abstention may function as a marker of identity; a form of “conspicuous non-consumption,” a term derived from the concept of “conspicuous consumption” whereby the leisure class put their wealth on display (Portwood-Stacer 2012).

With the fragmentation and proliferation of resistance, it is difficult to identify specific professions that are more active than others in online and social media resistance, and it is also difficult to identify differences in concerns and methods across national borders. What I have shown as a general characteristic is that many of those protesting are media savvy. Resistance is no longer a clear-cut case of “us” and “them”: of “us” convincing “them” not to use bad media, now resistance, as well as acceptance, is to some extent part of everyone’s toolbox. In an era of ubiquitous media, we all need a measure of resistance, or at least a strategy for self-regulation, to prevent media from being too invasive.

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