

# Going cold turkey!

## *An autoethnographic exploration of digital disengagement*

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### **Abstract**

As the dust of society-wide digitalisation settles, the search for meaningful technological encounters is becoming more urgent. While the Nordic countries embrace digitalisation, recent concerns regarding technology overuse have been gaining increased attention. This tendency is exemplified in practices of limiting digital use, called digital disengagement – an apparent paradox in Nordic societies where digital is the dominant paradigm. In this article, we explore the emergence of disconnection-centred devices called “dumbphones”, which cater to individuals wishing to escape hyperconnected lifestyles. Drawing on a new materialist perspective, we present a content analysis of dumbphones’ advertising material, followed by a collaborative autoethnographic study in which we replace our smartphones with dumbphones. We critically weigh the promises of the dumbphones against the actual experience of digital disengagement in Sweden. Our findings illustrate a struggle with digital technologies, even despite their absence, due to emerging workarounds and societal expectations of use.

**Keywords:** digital disengagement, digital detox, dumbphone, autoethnography, new materialism

### **Introduction**

The October 2018 number of *The New Yorker* opens with a White Light Festival advertisement in a two-page spread depicting a dancer caught in motion by the camera. With torso bent backwards, arms extended, eyes half-closed, and surrounded by blurry fellow-dancers, the image creates a sense of elegant movement. The title reads *Unplug to Reconnect* with lettering dominating even the festival’s title, followed by the information:

When we started the White Light Festival ten years ago, we could never have predicted the integral role new technologies now play in our lives. And yet despite our hyper-connectedness, now more than ever we rely on the power of art to foster moments of both self-expression and common understanding.

(White Light Festival, 2019: 1)

The advertisement addresses audiences living in societies where digital use is the norm. In this regard, Northern European countries rank high, with 97 per cent Internet

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penetration rate (Johnson, 2021). Such statistics paint a flattering image of a modern Nordic society where the digitally literate citizen is well-informed, productive, and efficient. The United Nations has long recognised Internet access as a fundamental human right (United Nations General Assembly, 2011), and the European Union has actively promoted a view of society-wide digitalisation, stating that “further action is needed to ensure ubiquitous and high-speed access to broadband, as well as digital literacy and competences for all citizens and consumers” (Maciejewski & Gouardères, 2019). However, recent concerns regarding the effects of intense digital use are increasingly emerging. For example, information overload brought by constant connectivity was shown to be an issue for individuals who not only reap the benefits of Internet connectivity, but are also overburdened by it (Matthes et al., 2020). A first solution to such concerns is the limiting of pervasive technologies that can lead to perceived detrimental effects on the user. In this regard, several benefits have been identified in conjunction to reducing screen time, such as increased creativity and focus (Ward et al., 2017), more meaningful social interactions (Turkle, 2015), better sleep (Huffington, 2016), or increased productivity (Agrawal et al., 2017).

The volitional act of digitally disconnecting in order to increase general well-being has emerged in the last ten years (Syvertsen, 2020) as an increasingly legitimate and popular practice. It has also resulted in both mainstream and academic texts such as articles, books, services, and products that target an audience increasingly reflective about the personal use of digital technologies. Examples include guides to disconnecting (Duran, 2016; Friedman, 2018), books investigating the harmful effects of digital devices (Goodin, 2017; Newport, 2020), digital disconnection camps offered to adults (Huet, 2014), digital aids for limiting and monitoring screen time such as apps incentivising users to use their phones less (Gonzales, 2018), or newly designed phones where the lack of features and Internet connection is a selling point (Agarwal, 2019). In other words, while connectivity is a fundamental right in the digital society, disconnection from digital technologies is emerging as an increasingly popular and commodified practice.

As the dust of society-wide digitalisation has begun to settle, the search for meaningful technological encounters has become more urgent, as well as the pursuit for authentic experiences (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019; Turkle, 2007). The central protagonist in this narrative is the smartphone, a symbol of digitalisation. The smartphone’s ubiquity is testimony to its popularity and usefulness; however, there are increased signs of fatigue and longing for a predigital time when our attention was not such hard currency. Such a tendency is not to be understood as a move towards a society *without* digital technology, but rather a shift from a dominant paradigm of the digital towards a post-digitalisation where old technologies are repurposed for current needs (Cramer, 2015). Additionally, old and new technologies merge, resulting in hybridised versions that blur the dichotomy between analogue and digital, such an example being the popularly named dumbphone (Thorén et al., 2019).

Against the previously presented backdrop, we explore in this article the practice of limiting digital use through the adoption of contemporary, newly-designed versions of the dumbphone, a basic mobile phone promising its users the regaining of agency over their digital use by offering limited functionality and redirecting the user to cultivate a meaningful connection. We use the concept of *digital disengagement* (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2016; 2019) to refer to the overarching practice of taking a reflexive stand in relation to

technology and limiting its use. Furthermore, we use the concept of *digital detox*, defined as a digital break under a limited period in which technology is either selectively not used or altogether refrained from in a planned and strategic manner (Syvertsen, 2020). Thus, we ask how the digital detox is articulated through the newly designed “dumb-phones” and what digital disengagement can reveal about Swedish society.

### *Previous research*

The recent phenomenon of digital rejection has been captured under different names, such as digital disconnection (Treré et al., 2020), digital detox (Syvertsen, 2020), digital disengagement (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2016; 2019), or unplugging (Morris & Cravens Pickens, 2017). In particular, the concept of digital detox emerged as a popular choice to refer to “a periodic disconnection from social or online media, or strategies to reduce digital media involvement” (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019: 1). Furthermore, digital detox studies show how such practices emerge through and from discourses on digital fasting, further shaping and legitimising the practice of digital disconnection (Li et al., 2018; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019). Scholars also aimed to understand the motivations behind limiting digital use and its outcomes; such studies have covered Internet disconnection (Kaun & Schwarzenegger, 2014), social media rejection (Baumer et al., 2013, 2015b), smartphone disconnection (Wilcockson et al., 2019), or disconnection mediated by digital detox applications (Schmuck, 2020).

Notably, Kuntsman and Miyake (2019: 4) propose the term digital disengagement as “a proactive form of citizenship which consciously resists, refuses and pushes against the current move towards the digital default”. Furthermore, the authors illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon and the concept by noting that “disengagement is a continuum and, as such, the way to the outside of the digital is seldom unidirectional, and rarely straightforward” (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019: 909). Thus, digital disengagement denotes an encompassing term for a variety of practices of limiting digital use, while digital detox refers to the specific protocol through which it is conducted, for example, using digital detox apps, a specific period, in an individual or collective manner, and so on.

Several scholars have highlighted the relevance and need for more research on volitional technology non-use (Baumer et al., 2015a; Satchell & Dourish, 2009). Such calls for more research approaching technology non-use as an informed act, rather than as a deficit, have been answered with a particular focus on digital detox practices in the past ten years (Syvertsen, 2020), their importance underlined by Kania-Lundholm (2018: para. 3), who notes that “in particular, thinking critically about online disconnection is important in order to understand, among others, how and who holds the power to define how should we live with technology”. Such power struggles regarding digital disengagement continue to be largely anthropocentrically explored, with a focus on the (non)user and often ignoring technology’s own agency.

Although the Nordic societies constitute an interesting case for the further understanding of digital disengagement because of their high digital diffusion, few works focus on this specific region; one of the few that does is Syvertsen and colleagues (2019) in the context of Norway. Although digital detox practices are becoming popular in Sweden – evident in the emerging self-help literature on this topic (TT, 2018) – this has not been previously articulated in academic work. It is, thus, our ambition in this article to

advance the understanding of the digital detox experience in a Swedish context. We do so by employing a new materialist theoretical lens described in the following section.

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is informed by new materialism, a collective term for a series of theories focusing on the entanglement of the material and the social. Fox and Alldred (2017) offer a general characterisation of new materialism as being a monistic ontology that rejects anthropocentrism. Focusing on new materialism's emphasis on the sociomaterial entanglement, theoretical physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad developed the concept of intra-action (Barad, 2007), thus rejecting the more commonly used concept of *inter*-action of two or more separate units. Instead, *intra*-action draws attention to the togetherness and entanglement of the respective components, "signifying the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (Barad, 2007: 33). Furthermore, Barad (2007) highlights the unavoidable part of the researcher in the research process, noting the importance of accounting for the choices made at the theoretical and methodological level, conceptualised as "agential cuts".

The entanglement of material and social is a common characteristic of new materialist theories, but perhaps most pragmatically operationalised by philosopher and theorist Manuel DeLanda through his work on assemblage theory. Building on the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and French psychoanalyst and political activist Félix Guattari, DeLanda conceptualises assemblages as specific configurations of dynamic and continuously changing components which are highly context dependent (DeLanda, 2006). For DeLanda, assemblages are composed of material components (e.g., bodies, rooms, touchscreens, etc.) and expressive components (e.g., feelings, values, skills, etc.) which, when coming together, result in emergent properties. The assemblages' emergent properties are greater than the sum of their parts and are affected by the change of their components (DeLanda, 2016). For example, the purchase of a smartphone might be an emergent property of an assemblage composed of material components (the desired physical object, the quality of the materials, its shape, etc.) and expressive components (brand preference, identity, peer-pressure, etc). It is the togetherness of the components that results in specific capacities of the assemblage, and while assemblages might be homogenous at first, this can change together with their configurations. Such changes can have profound ramification on the homogeneity of the assemblage, leading to their *territorialisation*, meaning a stable and well-functioning assemblage, or *de-territorialisation* – that is, a possible collapse or a situation where particular components can be detached, entering other assemblages (DeLanda, 2006). Thus, what is most important is not the mere description of the assemblage composition, but what these configurations do.

Political theorist Jane Bennett expresses similar ideas in her work, coining the concept of vital materialism, or vibrant matter, through which she argues for a careful conceptualisation of the relationships between human and non-human agents (Bennett, 2010). Matter is made vibrant by its property called "thing power", defined as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett, 2010: 6).

The specific theoretical tools that new materialism offers are of use precisely because of their emphasis on the entanglement of social and material. Within the context of digi-

tal disengagement, we find it to be counter-intuitive to only focus on material or social components of the assemblage of digital detox practices, as attention is brought on the absence of not only the material, but also on the social. Furthermore, we also underline the contribution of a digital detox practice articulation that includes human, non-human, material, and discursive components by looking at the effects of such specific configurations within the hyper-digitalised Swedish society. More explicitly, we are not interested in understanding the mere absence of digital devices, but aim instead to articulate what is made visible through their absence. Thus, Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action is of use to conceptualise the material and social components intertwined in practices of digital disengagement, while DeLanda's (2006) assemblage theory's vocabulary helps illustrate the dynamic of such practices. Lastly, Bennett's (2010) concept of vibrant matter helps conceptualise what is made visible by undergoing a digital detox. Lastly, we also employ a methodology compatible with new materialism, which is described in the following section.

## Research design

As our aim is to capitalise on new materialism's character of considering the intra-actions of both human and non-human components, we focus on one of the most popularly used digital detox mediators – the dumbphone. We use as an entry point the advertisements of three leading dumbphones currently existing on the market, namely the Light Phone, Punkt's MP01, and the new Nokia3310. We are initially aiming to understand what such products promise regarding the digital detox experience. Additionally, we conduct a collaborative autoethnography of our own experience of a digital detox during which we replace our smartphones with dumbphones. The rationale behind using these two types of datasets (see Table 1) is to be able to critically juxtapose the promises that the dumbphones make and the experience of digital disengagement in the context of the digitalised Swedish society.

**Table 1** *Dumbphone advertisements and autoethnographic digital detox*

Dataset	Source	Data collection method	Notes
Dumbphone advertisement	Light Phone Nokia 3310 Punkt MP01	Manual data extraction	Screen captures of all official material regarding the dumbphones.
Digital detox	Individual experiences of smartphone disengagement	Collaborative autoethnography	Individual diaries detailing digital detox experience.

*Comments:* All advertisements were accessed 14 November 2017 (from Light, n.d.; Nokia, n.d.; Punkt, n.d.).

### *Thematic content analysis*

Content analysis is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). Qualitative content analysis is viewed as a flexible research methodology that allows for the collection of data material in the form of texts, visuals, or a combination of both, such as content found on websites (White & Marsh, 2006). For the first step, we conducted a thematic

content analysis aiming at scrutinising the advertisement material existent on three examples of dumbphones used in digital detox practices. The rationale for this approach is that, as dumbphones emerge as one of the most popularly used objects in conjunction to digital detox practices (Hosie, 2018), their official advertisements function as signifiers of the place they occupy within digital disengagement discourses. Accordingly, we first collected the dumbphones' official advertising material, analysed it through a thematic approach where we inductively coded the data identifying emerging themes, and finally discussing the findings in conjunction to our experience of a digital detox.

For the collection of the advertisement materials, we chose the official websites of the selected dumbphones (see Light, n.d.; Nokia, n.d.; Punkt, n.d.), as we wanted to restrict our understanding of the devices to their intended message. In the case where other products were present, only the material including the dumbphones was collected.

### *Collaborative autoethnography*

Autoethnography is a method where researchers use self-reflection in order to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. As an ethnographic method, autoethnography constitutes both a method and a result, allowing researchers to enter the field and become both participants and observers, the results often constituting rich and evocative descriptions of particular social contexts (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Autoethnography's main critique is an assumed lack of rigor and subjectivity regarding the researcher's own experience, which can result in biased data. However, scholars have responded to such critiques by pointing out that autoethnography does not stand at odds with science, as emotional and subjective accounts can be reached through rigorous work, enriching understandings of particular topics (Ellis et al., 2011), theoretically engaging with embodied experiences without silencing the body (Davies & Gannon, 2006), or showing that high quality can be achieved through rigorous and transparent planning (Schultze, 2000). Furthermore, autoethnography is a method particularly compatible with a new materialist ontology that considers the researcher as an active component of the research process, unavoidably affecting it by the agential cuts made in the research assemblage (Fox & Alldred, 2014). Thus, we positioned ourselves at the centre of the research design in order to gain a first-hand experience of digital disengagement practices and make visible feelings and sensorial perceptions which are notoriously difficult to access through interviews, observations, or other classical qualitative methods.

On the topic of digital disengagement, some studies have shown the value of autoethnographic accounts where the researchers themselves have used the method to advance knowledge in this area by showing the effects of limiting the use of digital devices such as smartphones (Lucero, 2018), or illustrating the method's capabilities to be of particular use in investigating technology absence (Ghita, 2019). In the present study, we adopted a collaborative autoethnography method, as we wanted to experience digital disengagement first-hand. In this sense, we followed the definition of collaborative autoethnography as "a qualitative research method in which researchers work in a community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyse and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of socio-cultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data" (Chang et al., 2016: 24).

In planning our collaborative autoethnography protocol, we decided on using the new Nokia 3310 dumbphone as replacement for our smartphones. The only devices allowed in the protocol were computers (laptop or stationery). Smartphones were not allowed to be in our possession (not even turned off, and we did not use others' smartphones), or any other mobile Internet devices. The first author's activities during the period included academic work, domestic travel (plane, train, and bus), and social activities. The second author's included academic work, social activities, and family life.

We chose seven days of full-time disconnection (27 November–3 December 2017), as this is a popular timeframe offered by guides on digital disconnection, and consistent with a focused ethnography method which allows for a short immersion in the field (Knoblauch, 2005). We intentionally selected seven days for the study, as we intended to focus on the transitioning experience from a lifestyle of intensively using the smartphone (as is the case for both of us) to the digital detox period. The intention is not for a longitudinal study or for a comparative study, but for an exploratory autoethnographic account of the period in which the change from intense use of the smartphone to its absence is captured as being mediated by the dumbphone as an object of digital disengagement.

We produced our autoethnographic notes individually through written field notes in daily journal entries. We adopted journal note-taking during a period which we considered typical in both private and professional life, and during which one of us travelled domestically. The only mobile phone allowed was the new Nokia 3310, with the only communication features being the making and receiving of phone calls and text messages (SMS). Internet communication was only allowed on computers, and the smartphones were shut off and never in our possession. After the digital detox week, two journals were thus produced, after which we conducted an autoethnographic conversation meeting (Chang et al., 2016) to discuss our reflections and clarify any possible misunderstandings existent in the journals. This conversation was recorded and referred to when unclarities emerged in the following analysis.

We individually coded both the dumbphones' advertising material and our own autoethnographic notes, followed by coding each other's autoethnographic journals for increased reliability (Chang, et al., 2016). We conducted a thematic analysis following Saldaña's (2009) method of first cycle coding, where the data was assigned descriptive keywords, followed by a second cycle coding, where the previous codes were aggregated into themes. In the following sections, we first include the findings of the thematic analysis of the dumbphones' advertising material, followed by the digital detox collaborative autoethnography. For the latter, we choose to employ vignettes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to depict our digital detox experiences.

### **The dumbphone's promise: A thematic content analysis**

The coding process resulted in three main themes, namely simplicity, aesthetics, and robustness. Simplicity is implied the most by the Light Phone, which is presented as a device through which one can avoid overusing technology, a rhetoric reinforced by its motto "designed to be used as little as possible" (Light Phone, n.d). The philosophy behind the Light Phone is that by only allowing phone calls to be made, it is not distracting, in contrast to the smartphone. In comparison, Punkt's MP01 allows for calls and text messages, but equally emphasises the importance of simplicity in its own philoso-

phy. Both the Light Phone and the Punkt MP01 build on ideas that smart technology is becoming too distracting, taking over face-to-face communication. In this regard, the Light Phone is designed to be used as a break from the smartphone, while Punkt's MP01 appeals more to those who want to completely switch from their smartphone or experiment with digital detox periods. Punkt reinforces its message of simplicity as beneficial to one's well-being by including inspirational content for those interested in digital detox, such as relevant literature, guides on developing healthier technology use habits, or holding yearly digital detox challenges where participants are invited to send their reflections of disengagement. The Light Phone's message is that through simplicity we can disengage from the connectivity of the smartphone, gaining boredom and moments of solitude, which can be rewarding (Light, 2016). Punkt's simplicity aims to liberate its users from the distraction brought by the smartphone and thus regain focus. In contrast, the new Nokia 3310 does not participate in the digital disengagement discourse in their official advertisements, which is understandable, as the company also sells smartphones. There are also few allusions to the phone's simplicity, as opposed to Punkt and Light, who build entire brand identities around it. Instead, vibrant colours and dynamic videos populate the official website. Despite this, the new Nokia 3310 has become one of the most popular devices used for digital detoxes, as evident in media publications (Wood, 2017). The convergence point of the Nokia 3310 with digital detox products lies, instead, in the area of aesthetics and robustness.

Regarding its aesthetics, the Nokia 3310 relies heavily on issues on nostalgia evident in its visual design, sounds, and functions. Nostalgia is an available tool for Nokia, since the present device is a reinvention of the original 3310 model, extremely popular in the 2000s. The new Nokia 3310 capitalises on its successful past, its slogan being "the icon is back" (Nokia, n.d). For those interested in an affordable, functional, retro device, the new Nokia 3310 is a good choice, hence the popularity of the phone and its entry in digital disengagement discourses. Its colourful and retro aesthetics make it stand out, while still retaining a simplicity that allows it to maintain its digital detox object status. In contrast, Light Phone maintains minimalist aesthetics in which the grey, business card-sized device is depicted in imagery of nature and urban settings which convey an image of the urban jungle: concrete cities intertwined with palm trees and only the occasional passer-by. Punkt's MP01, also minimalist in its aesthetics, does not aim to disappear as the Light Phone or be overly visible as the new Nokia 3310, but presents itself as a high-quality product that is meant to be minimally but pleasantly used. Punkt's MP01 is often portrayed alone, but also alongside minimalist furniture in clean and open spaces, reinforcing the idea of the device being present but not demanding attention.

Regarding their robustness, the dumbphones all underline the importance of having a reliable device. This is often expressed in opposition to the smartphone's fast-depleting battery and mass-produced materials. Accordingly, Punkt highlights its collaboration with artists for creating unique ringtones, its use of long-lasting and high-quality materials, and long battery life, all legitimising a higher price. The robustness of the device brings together the simple design and its limited functions as a digital detox object, presented as "a stylish, well-crafted mobile phone which focuses on modern simplicity, inside and out. It makes phone calls and sends texts. That's it" (Punkt, n.d). The Light Phone also emphasises the transparency of the manufacturing process. Light includes in-depth information on how the device is manufactured, including information on the factory in

charge of assembly. The new Nokia 3310 highlights its long-lasting battery, presenting it as more than a selling point and also connecting it to its nostalgia element, alluding to a time when batteries were not as quickly depleted: “Remember when you could leave the house without a charger? Well, with the new Nokia 3310 you can” (Nokia, n.d).

The dumbphones’ promises appear to converge in the philosophy that simplicity can lead to increased focus, productivity, and reflection. Furthermore, the lack of connectivity can lead to a certain liberation from pervasive digitalisation. The appeal of adopting a dumbphone lies also in its aesthetic, the devices often being of minimalistic and retro design; here, the new Nokia 3310 stands out through its colourful look, relying heavily on a nostalgic pull towards the iconic original Nokia 3310. Lastly, the promise of robustness in their design transmits the idea that the dumbphones are more reliable, inviting to conversations, and have a longer lifespan. The following section includes vignettes from the autoethnographic field notes of our digital detox experience using the new Nokia 3310.

## **Going cold turkey! Digital detox experiences**

*Author 1: My digital detox struggle is my social circle’s struggle*

Although my close social circle knows that I am not using my smartphone for a week and have limited Internet access, unpredictable challenges also lay ahead of them. As I am used to communicating via texting, I continue to do so on the dumbphone, but it is cumbersome, and my fingers hurt after pushing the buttons. Sustaining a conversation without the smartphone is slow, and friends give up, calling me instead, something we rarely did before. I thought I would communicate via phone calls more, but the phone stays silent and I sometimes worry if it even works. The friends I use social media to chat with have disappeared, almost seeming to only exist in that digital realm.

When travelling, I always used the travel app, which allows me to purchase a ticket and displays the correct bus station timetable. Of course, I cannot use it, so I pay a more expensive price on the bus, creating a queue behind me because of the slowness of the card machine, and feeling guilty when the driver notes “look how many paper receipts! This is not very ecological”.

Going to a market with my friends, I quickly realise that the entrance fee can only be paid with cash or Swish (a popular money transfer smartphone application used in Sweden). As I try to pay with cash, the clerk asks me to instead use Swish, and I reply that I have no smartphone. Several people around look at me with concern, and my friend offers to buy me the ticket using her smartphone.

*Author 2: Cumbersome smartphone replacements*

Expecting, naively, that the dumbphone was going to be the only replacement to the smartphone, I now realise how wrong I was. As my smartphone case is also my wallet, a purchase is made in this sense along with a calendar and a notebook. I often lose one of them, as I cannot remember to always have them all with me. I realise that not being able to log in to my bank account through the app leaves me in the dark regarding my finances, and I call the bank to receive a separate device that would allow me to make payments online by identifying myself without a smartphone application.

I miss listening to music when outside, so I find my old minidisk player and use it instead. I also replaced e-books with physical books, notebooks for note-taking, and soon I must carry a messenger bag to work to keep everything in, something I have not done in a long time.

### *Collective experiences: Removed, yet present, smartphones*

It has happened several times that we felt vibrations or heard ringtones as if our smartphones were next to us. Such sensations induce a state of anxiety but also of reflection: why can we feel the smartphone's presence despite its physical absence? This is reminiscent of phantom pains perceived by people with amputated limbs who can still feel the pain even though the respective limb is not attached anymore. Are our smartphones such an integral part of our everyday lives that our bodies think of them as another limb?

Friends and strangers alike often look at our dumbphones and engage in conversation, reminiscing sometimes about past times when such phones were the norm. We confess that it is not an easy change, as we are almost constantly worried about missed communication in e-mails and on social media.

While outside, with no podcast or music playing anymore, we become more alert and discover new sights: a river in a town visited many times before, and a building along the familiar bus route. How could we have missed these in places which we must have passed so many times before? We note that life is nice without it being always mediated by a screen.

## **A digital detox assemblage**

We began our incursion into digital detox practices by looking at how the dumbphone positions itself as a mediator for digital disengagement and the promises it makes in this regard. Although we expected challenges brought by the absence of the smartphone's efficacy, we also found emerging struggles within the practice of digital detox.

The dumbphones promise a simplicity that is described as increasing productivity and decreasing the stress brought by the information overload enabled by the smartphone. Our experiences, indeed, indicate that the replacement of the smartphone with a dumbphone increases productivity through the elimination of notifications or the possibility of immediate communication and web-surfing. However, the dumbphone's simplicity adds struggles, which we both perceived as notable enough to negatively affect us, leading to feelings of anxiety, frustration, and workarounds. Author 1 struggled with communicating with their friends and family – who were losing patience at the slowness of their communication without the smartphone's chat applications – felt guilty at the forming queue and many paper receipts produced by not using a traveling app when boarding a bus, and further inconvenienced those around by not being able to use a popular money transfer application. These evocative moments prove how digital artifacts can be telling about our current relationship to technology by making visible the feelings they evoke through their use, but also sudden disengagement. Discussing a similar topic in the context of artificial intelligence robots, Turkle (2007: 507) notes that “the questions raised by relational artifacts are not so much about the machine's capabilities but our vulnerabilities”. The act of removing oneself from the digital reach of friends and family is perceived negatively

by them, underlying the self as part of a cultural community (Chang, 2008) with a shared understanding of how communication is mediated, in this case, efficiently and quickly through the smartphone. The absence of the smartphone intra-acts with Swedish society's expectations, leading to increased phone conversations for Author 1, in order to circumvent the slowness of the text-based communication. This indicates that digital detox periods are not merely negotiated between the disconnected and the respective technology, but also affecting others such as friends, family, bus drivers, or fellow passengers, further reinforcing Kuntsman and Miyake's (2016) description of digital disengagement as being multidirectional. Additionally, we also noted the existence of particular social circles exclusively in the realm of the digital and our preferences for text-based communication rather than phone calls, consistent with Turkle (2015), who finds that there is an increase in cases of telephophobia, that is, the fear of talking on the phone.

The dumbphone's simplicity, minimalist aesthetics, and robustness are presented in its advertising as liberating from the distractions of the smartphone, but in our case, also leading to other trajectories of distraction. The greatest struggle for Author 2 was the myriad of emerging replacements of the smartphone's functions. Disk players, physical books, calendars, notebooks, bank identification devices – all manifest their materiality and underline the functional ecosystem contained in the smartphone. Material components thus added to the assemblage of our digital detox emerge in worries of possibly losing some of these objects, leading to even more distractions. As Author 1 notes, fear of missing out adds more anxiety, as worries emerge about missing important digital communications. Thus, the dumbphone's promise of increased focus and decreased distractions is only partially met, challenged by experiences showing that in the early stages of digital detox, the absence of the smartphone is enough to be distracting in its own right.

Although our struggles differ – with Author 1 experiencing difficulties with communicating and Author 2 being overwhelmed by the many replacements of the smartphone – both our experiences converged under what Bennet (2010) calls vibrant matter – sensorial emergent consequences of the absence of the smartphone and increasingly visible environments. We both experienced phantom vibrations and sounds, revealing how intimate such ubiquitous technology is merged with our everyday activities and, in a sense, bodies. Previous studies have explored the emotional attachment between users and their technologies (Cao et al., 2020); our study not only reinforces this, but also shows how the body itself reacts to the sudden removal of the smartphone.

Positive experiences also emerged, such as the increased conversation brought by the sight of the dumbphone. In this regard, the materiality of the dumbphone serves as a signifier for digital disengagement as it is decoded as such by some, exhibiting its thing-power (Bennett, 2010) and providing an opening for more conversation. Equally vibrant becomes the surroundings, which now do not have to compete for attention with the smartphone. A river and a building, both of which had been in familiar places, become suddenly visible, vibrant, emerging through a self-reported increased focus and attention to the surroundings. Thus, through the act of digital disengagement, the knotting together (Bennett, 2010) of the human and the technology is sectioned, making visible what has been previously made invisible by taking for granted digital devices always available under normal circumstances.

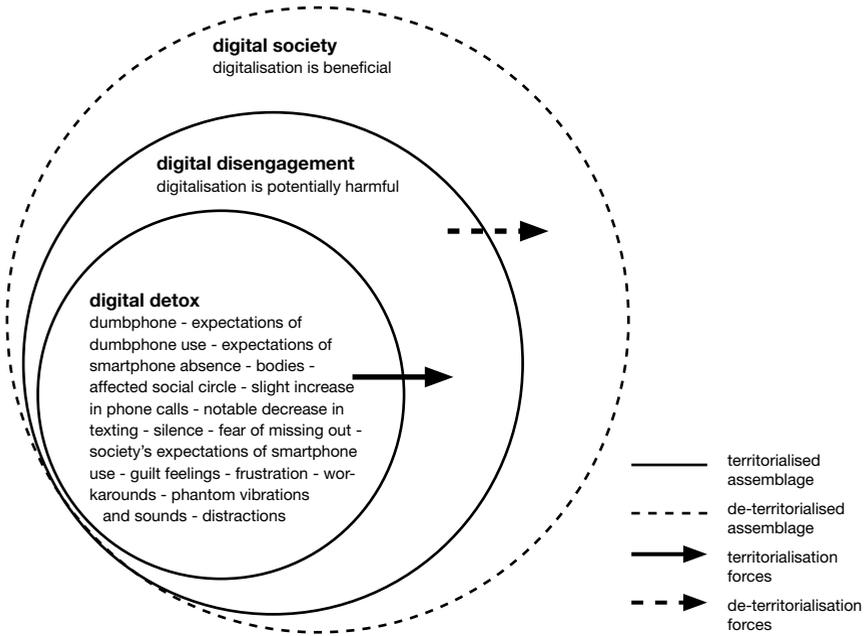
Inspired by Fox and Alldred (2017), we represent the assemblage of our experience of the digital detox as a list of its most prominent components:

dumbphone – expectations of dumbphone use – expectations of smartphone absence – bodies – affected social circle – slight increase in phone calls – notable decrease in texting – silence – fear of missing out – society’s expectations of smartphone use – guilt feelings – frustration – workarounds – phantom vibrations and sounds – distractions

From an assemblage theory perspective, this configuration is not only telling about the human–digital technology relationship, capturing the struggles that emerge through digital disengagement, but also illustrates how material and expressive components are in a constant and dynamic intra-action resulting in emergent properties specific to the Swedish context. For example, components such as society’s expectation of the use of traveling applications or the Swish money transfer application – both of which imply ownership of a smartphone and digital literacy – emerge as existent and deeply rooted in everyday activities. We locate the previous assemblage of our experience of digital detox within the larger context of digital disengagement assemblage that presents such practices as a means of regaining lost agency over the use of technology, postulating that excessive screen time can be harmful. The material and expressive components of the digital detox assemblage are all particular to our subjective experience of undergoing such a practice in Sweden, as two academics, in that particular timeframe. Performed by other individuals in other sociocultural contexts, the assemblage would change its composition and, by extension, its emerging properties. Nonetheless, the value of the subjective and evocative experience of a digital detox is telling of the place such practices occupy within the continuum of digital disengagement. As illustrated in Figure 1, the particular assemblage of our digital detox experience is only one example of such practices located within a larger digital disengagement assemblage. The dumbphone itself is one object of disengagement, and only if decoded as such, thus territorialising the assemblage of digital disengagement that enforces the idea of limiting digital use as beneficial; however, if decoded as an anomaly from the norm of smartphone use (as in the Author 1’s experience, where the lack of smartphone is questioned by surrounding individuals), it de-territorialises the assemblage underlining the limitations of not using a smartphone device in a society where its use is expected.

The digital detox assemblage emerges as territorialised, as it is a homogenous sociomaterial entanglement with set rules, timeframe, and specific aims; it is often presented as such in self-guides and is generally perceived as an act of self-improvement (Syvertsen, 2020). Thus, it further helps territorialise assemblages of digital disengagement by revealing the problematic struggles with technology their users have when said technology is removed. This further reinforces digital disengagement’s claim that technology can be harmful, further legitimising it. The Swedish government has acknowledged practices and ideas related to digital disengagement, for example, through planned legislation for banning smartphones during school hours in elementary schools (Nilsson, 2021). Although governments have previously presented digitalisation in overwhelmingly positive colours – therefore territorialising the digitalised society and leading to high digital technology use in the Nordic region – increasingly popular digital disengagement activities are acting as de-territorialisation forces, leading societies to critically approach digital use.

**Figure 1** Digital detox assemblage within the Swedish society context



*Comments:* The figure shows how the assemblage of our digital detox experience is localised within the larger assemblage of digital disengagement, which in turn is located within the larger assemblage of Swedish society, in which digitalisation is seen as beneficial. Territorialisation forces are shown to be exercised by these assemblages, affecting each other and ultimately changing how digital use is articulated.

What emerges through the mapping of the assemblage composition is that the human component is merely one of many others, entangled in an intra-action which is emergent of particular types of disengagement. Going cold turkey – that is to say, the sudden disengagement from the use of the smartphone – makes visible affordances of the smartphone through its very absence. Such affordances are specific to the particular individuals and their methods of entering digital disengagement practices, but also to the characteristics of their respective societies. Following Kuntsman and Miyake’s (2019) advice, we shifted the focus from the traditional dichotomies between use and non-use, and approached the topic of digital disengagement not as an anomaly, but as a practice that can be productive in advancing knowledge about our relation to technology. Thus, we draw attention to the very human feelings of guilt and frustration made possible by the non-human smartphone device. Furthermore, the assemblage makes visible, through its composition, which includes phantom vibrations and emerging workarounds, the material manifestations of an otherwise absent smartphone. Thus, even though the smartphone is not a material component in the digital detox assemblage, it is difficult to ignore the importance of its absence as an expressive component affecting experiences in tangible ways. As our experiences show, in contrast to the dumbphone’s promises, the smartphone continues to be an active expressive component of the digital detox assemblage, even despite its material removal.

Although similar studies (Brown & Kuss, 2020; Widdicks et al, 2018) have approached this issue, we see a novel contribution in our articulation of digital disengagement as including both human and non-human actors that intra-act to form a

context-specific assemblage emergent of further legitimisation of digital disengagement practices. Furthermore, we also note the importance of further studies to acknowledge and examine the significance of different objects mediating disconnection (e.g., dumbphones, disconnection software, or digital detox retreats).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have applied a new materialist lens for the articulation of digital disengagement practices in the context of Sweden. Asking how the digital detox is articulated through the newly designed dumbphones, and what digital disengagement can reveal about the society of Sweden, we found that the promises made through the dumbphones' advertising were only partially met in our experiences. We agree that the simplicity, aesthetics, and robustness promised are true, but we critically discuss the simplicity's effects of not only avoiding the negative aspects of smartphone use, but also constraining us. Thus, we underline the separate struggles of the adoption of technology designed for digital disengagement, such as the dumbphone, which in the transitional phase can lead to further distractions. Furthermore, we show that instances of digital disengagement construct themselves within an assemblage, where the digital is no longer presented as exclusively positive, and where self-regulation of digital use is acknowledged. The act of going cold turkey – the complete and sudden non-use of our smartphones – has allowed an insight into the taken-for-granted digital use, making visible the insistent presence of the smartphone even when physically removed.

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