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Unburdening the (Dis)Connected Individual? A Digital Disconnection Policy Paradox in Flanders (Belgium)

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Abstract

The concept of digital disconnection, which refers to limiting digital media use for the sake of one's well-being, has gained prominence in scholarly and public debates. Compared to a burgeoning digital disconnection industry that commodifies individuals' struggles with constant connectivity, the development of evidence-based disconnection policies and regulations that support individuals to maintain digital well-being lags behind. The absence of digital disconnection policy may partly be due to a lack of studies investigating the contextual and institutional conditions in which policies and regulations are designed, implemented, and received. The few studies that do shed light on these conditions show that politicians' and policymakers' responses to digitalization involve discourses of individual responsibilization. Building on these insights, our study draws from in-depth interviews with 21 experts from organizations in Flanders (Belgium) who are responsible for digital well-being and digital disconnection across work, school, and family contexts. In particular, we have explored their perspectives on the challenges of constructing and implementing digital disconnection policies and regulations. Overall, the experts' discourses reveal a conflict between striving for autonomy and the need for regulations concerning digital disconnection. This conflict leads to a digital disconnection policy paradox in which experts advocate for collective disconnection initiatives but ultimately resort to solutions on an individual level. We discuss the implications of our findings for the scholarly field of digital disconnection as well as for media policymakers.

Keywords

agency; digital disconnection; digital well-being; digitalization; media policy; neoliberalism; regulations; responsibilization

1. Introduction

Digitalization has profoundly impacted how people navigate everyday life in the work, school, and family environment (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). Notwithstanding the benefits afforded by ubiquitous digital connectivity, concerns have grown over the negative consequences of being permanently connected (Nassen et al., 2023). In particular, the resulting always-on society has been linked to various detrimental outcomes, including (relational) stress, reduced attention, and burnout (Syvertsen, 2020; Vanden Abeele, 2020; Vorderer et al., 2016).

The phenomenon of digital disconnection has emerged as an agentic response against these negative repercussions (Karsay & Vandenbosch, 2021). As a concept, digital disconnection refers to the myriad ways in which limits can be (voluntarily) placed on digital connectivity to improve individuals' overall productivity and well-being (Nassen et al., 2023). Examples of individual digital disconnection practices are placing limits on one's screen time (Karppi et al., 2021), changing the colors of one's phone to grayscale (Dekker & Baumgartner, 2023), and—temporarily—removing social media applications (Nguyen, 2023). Next to these individual strategies, however, digital disconnection can also be organized at the group or institutional level; for instance, through formal or informal rule-setting in social groups and organizations where people work, learn, and live together (Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2024).

In recent years, a digital well-being industry has bloomed (Van Bruyssel et al., 2023). Especially products and services that support *individuals* in their digital disconnection have gained a strong foothold in this rapidly emerging new economy (Beattie, 2020; Enli & Syvertsen, 2021; Jorge et al., 2022). Compared to the speed of the industry response towards individual disconnection, however, the development of policies and regulations at the organizational and institutional level has lagged behind (Enli & Fast, 2023). At the time of writing this article, for instance, the basic notion of people having the right not to use the internet remains underdeveloped in legislation, even though such a right could be interpreted from the existing human rights framework (Kloza, 2024).

Nonetheless, confronted with the daily reality of individuals struggling with their digital well-being, policymakers and institutions have woken up to the reality of needing to develop and implement policies and (regulatory) initiatives surrounding digital technologies' use and non-use (Kloza, 2024). This awakening aligns with a growing "techlash" characterized by increased skepticism about the impact of digital technologies on the health and well-being of children and adults, prompting greater calls for regulation of digital media in work, school, and family environments (Weiss-Blatt, 2021). In work organizations, for example, the right to disconnect has been legally recognized in several countries, including Belgium, the country where the current study is located (Wood & Shine, 2023). The introduction of this legislative framework has trickled down to the institutional and organizational level, where work organizations and institutions are now required to translate the right to disconnect into their organizational policies and regulations. Similarly, schools are implementing regulatory initiatives to address concerns about digital media's effects on performance and well-being (Gath et al., 2024). For example, the Dutch government has introduced a smartphone ban in schools, a move that has also garnered attention in Belgium. In the family context, public figures like Jonathan Haidt advocate for a higher legal age for social media use (Haidt, 2024), and in France, a presidential study recommended a complete screen time ban for young children (Santi, 2024).

Against the background of these initiatives and calls, which are often heavily debated in the public domain, experts are tasked with developing policies and regulations for their organizations and the stakeholders they serve. This raises questions about how these actors, who often also witness the impact of digitalization in their personal lives, can and should interpret digital disconnection and what challenges and obstacles they face in developing and implementing rules, policies, and regulations to enforce it. Therefore, the current study aims to examine these actors' perceptions and what informs them. Before sharing our findings, however, we first situate our study in the extant literature on digital disconnection.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Well-Being and Disconnection Across Work, School, and Family Contexts

In industrialized societies with advanced technology use, there is evidence of a "connectivity paradox": Individuals report a love–hate relationship with digital media as these technologies grant autonomy while simultaneously leading to loss of control over the time spent on screens and the internet (Vanden Abeele, 2020). Consequently, the concept of digital well-being has gained prominence, which refers to having an optimal balance between connectivity and disconnection so that one benefits from digital media use with minimal drawbacks (Vanden Abeele, 2020). The practice and ideal of digital disconnection, then, is conducive to digital well-being: It can support individuals to achieve the desired balance between the benefits and drawbacks of (dis)connectivity (Nassen et al., 2023).

Both in public and scholarly debates, questions about digital well-being and digital disconnection are often situated within the three primary contexts that structure everyday life: work, school, and family. In the work context, discussions over digital well-being and disconnection often revolve around how digitalization and the related availability norms of contemporary work culture challenge employees' well-being and productivity (Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2022; Kühner et al., 2023). These challenges include digital distractions that interrupt workflow, impede goal progress, create a sense of technological overload, and complicate efforts to maintain a healthy work–life balance (Kühner et al., 2023). The overall consensus is that, although digital connectivity grants employees flexibility, a healthy work-life balance also necessitates disconnection strategies to mitigate its negative impacts.

Similarly, digital technologies pose challenges for both teachers and students in a school context. For example, while educational platforms can increase participation, communication, and evaluation, these technologies can equally adversely affect school–home balance by pressuring students and teachers to be available beyond school hours (Van Steenbergen et al., 2018). Moreover, the presence of smartphones in the school context ignites discussions about the desirability of "phone bans" due to the devices' potential negative effects on academic achievement, mental health, and cyberbullying (Abrahamsson, 2024).

Finally, in the household, parents and children struggle with questions about screen time, posing both opportunities and challenges to the overall well-being of households and the health and well-being of their members. Regarding regulating children's media use, for instance, the extensive scholarship on parental mediation has been investigating the beneficial and detrimental effects of restricting children's screen time for decades (e.g., Lee, 2013). An increasing body of evidence is now also growing about how family members jointly navigate digital media use rules in the household (i.e., also subjecting parents to them; see for example Hiniker et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding the differential nuances within each context, there are obvious parallels between the work, school, and family context, such as the prevailing tensions between autonomy-supporting and autonomy-suppressing practices, which are a common thread within discourses on the importance of digital well-being and digital disconnection (Hesselberth, 2018). Moreover, the unique capacity of digital connectivity to disembed social activities from time and place constraints implies that some of these tensions result from the interplay between contexts; for instance, when a child is cyberbullied at home by classmates, or when work is interrupted by family communication (Castells & Cardoso, 2005). A growing body of research is therefore investigating digital disconnection holistically, as a phenomenon that unfolds across, and sometimes even at the intersection of the work, school, and family context (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024).

In the emerging field of digital disconnection studies, both post-positivist and interpretative-critical research traditions are evident (Ross et al., 2024). The former views non-use primarily as an individual attempt to reclaim control over digital media to improve quality of life. The latter emphasizes the various meanings and power dynamics surrounding digital disconnection by exploring disconnection as an act of resistance to the addictive design of digital technologies, its commodification, and the attribution of responsibility (Ross et al., 2024). What is missing to some extent, is a digital disconnection research strand that focuses on how the above insights are being translated in the development and implementation of organizational and governmental regulations and policies (Enli & Fast, 2023).

2.2. Digital Disconnection: An Individual or Institutional Responsibility?

The extant evidence on digital well-being and digital disconnection is equivocal in arguing that there is an urgent need for policy development and regulation (Enli & Fast, 2023). The digital well-being industry, for one, has been extensively criticized for framing digital well-being through disconnection as an individual responsibility by appealing to neoliberal values such as productivity, autonomy, self-actualization, and self-care (Syvertsen, 2020; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Moreover, it has been found that individuals struggle with self-regulating digital media use, especially vulnerable populations who lack the resources to freely organize their (dis)connectivity (Enli & Fast, 2023). Together, this gives rise to criticism over discourses emphasizing digital disconnection as an individual responsibility, thereby reinforcing inequality by overlooking the many structural forces that may hamper individuals from digitally (dis)connecting (e.g., Fast, 2021; Van Bruyssel et al., 2023; Zuboff, 2019).

To fully empower individuals living in digital societies, it is therefore crucial to examine what can be done beyond the individual, i.e., at the organizational and institutional level, to improve and support digital well-being through digital disconnection (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024). In other words, what can governments, organizations, and institutions do to develop and implement local digital disconnection policies and regulations that offer non-commodified frameworks that unburden individuals and responsibilize stakeholders such as the tech industry (Enli & Fast, 2023; Hesselberth, 2018; Zuboff, 2019)?

When observing the macro-level of the political sphere, scholars studying the institutional conditions of disconnection argue that contemporary policies fail to offer a solid and coherent regulatory response. The study of Enli and Fast (2023), for example, shows that Norwegian politicians elude political responsibility by framing disconnection as an individual and technological problem. Furthermore, Syvertsen (2023)

illustrates that digital detox organizers express a lack of faith in disconnection regulations and are skeptical of policy holding the tech industry responsible. Consequently, the contemporary digital disconnection movement seems to perpetuate individual responsibilization, which refers to the process in which individuals are burdened with self-regulating (dis)connectivity in the context of lacking governance on digitalization (Enli & Fast, 2023).

In between the macro-level of a failing political system and the micro-level of skeptical citizens, however, there is also the meso-level of local organizations and institutions who support and work with individuals on a daily basis as they perform their activities. These organizations include work (union) organizations, schools, and non-profit organizations, which need to respond to concrete questions from their stakeholders concerning how they should organize digital technology use and non-use. To date, there unfortunately remains a dearth of studies that scrutinize digital disconnection regulations and policies at this institutional and meso-level (cf. Enli & Fast, 2023).

We argue that it is paramount to gain a better understanding of how these organizations develop, implement, and receive digital disconnection regulations and policies on the ground. Doing so might advance understanding of the barriers and challenges to developing frameworks that truly unburden the individual when safeguarding digital well-being (Zuboff, 2019). Our study thus addresses this research gap by shedding light on how professionals within work-, school-, and family-oriented organizations with expertise in digital well-being and digital disconnection perceive the contextual and institutional conditions in which (dis)connectivity takes shape.

2.3. The Current Study

We situate this study in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. This Western European country occupies a central position in the governmental workings of the European Union. In terms of national politics, Belgium is characterized by various levels of governance such as the federal state, language-based communities (Flemish, Walloon, and German-speaking), territory-based regions (Flanders, Walloon region, and the Brussel Capital region), and municipalities (Van Audenhove et al., 2018). Although a discussion on the complexities of the Belgian state is beyond the scope of this article, it is essential to acknowledge that these various levels influence policy development regarding digital well-being and digital disconnection. For example, the right to disconnect is a labor law legislated on the federal level, while media policy is under the jurisdiction of the Flemish government. Regardless of these various governmental levels, however, institutions such as schools or workplaces typically have the freedom to autonomously develop policies and regulations (Van Audenhove et al., 2018). Moreover, Flanders is known for having a large and active civil society comprising numerous non-profit organizations that develop and influence policy work (Rochtus, 2023). These organizations play an intermediary role in the democratic process by making citizens' voices heard and weighing in on policy development (Rochtus, 2023).

In this study, we report on in-depth interviews with 21 experts in Flanders responsible for developing and implementing digital disconnection guidelines, policies, and regulations, both for their own organizations, and for the stakeholders that their organizations serve. By recruiting experts who occupy an intermediate position between individuals, organizations, and politics, we build further on and complement the studies of Enli and Fast (2023) and Syvertsen (2023). The interviews aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the experts perceive the impact of digital technologies across work, school, and family contexts?

RQ2: What role and responsibility do these experts assign to individuals, organizations, and governments concerning safeguarding citizens' digital well-being?

RQ3: Which obstacles do the experts encounter when developing and implementing digital disconnection policies and regulations?

3. Methodology

3.1. Recruitment Procedure, Sample, and Ethics

The study is part of a larger research project that examines digital disconnection across work, school, and family contexts, asking questions such as what people do to disconnect, why they disconnect, and for whom and under which conditions disconnection works best. To ensure societal valorization of the project's findings, the project is overseen by a board of Belgian stakeholders from private, non-profit, and governmental organizations who support employees, schools, and families in developing a healthier relationship with digital media. These stakeholders can be considered local experts as they are responsible for designing and implementing digital disconnection policies and initiatives for their own organizations as well as for the citizens they serve (Meuser & Nagel, 2009; Van Audenhove, & Donders, 2019). As such, conducting expert interviews with some of these stakeholders can shed light on the contextual and institutional conditions in which (dis)connectivity occurs (Enli & Fast, 2023).

We recruited participants from the project's stakeholder board. During the recruitment procedure, we aimed to achieve a gender balance among our participants and to include a diversity of organizations. In total, we interviewed 21 experts (11 men, 10 women) from 17 organizations. We sought to avoid overrepresentation of any single type of organization, resulting in an approximately equal number of organizations that are professionally active in the work, school, and family context: Three can be identified as labor union organizations, three as civil knowledge centers, two as semi-public organizations, four as educational organizations, four as technology and telecom organizations, and one as an organization on entrepreneurship. While some organizations are specifically active within one context, most interviewed experts reported that their activities span the work, school, and family context.

The recruited experts were free to decide whether to meet in person or digitally for the interviews. Eventually, five interviews were conducted in-person and 12 interviews were conducted via video conferencing from April 2023 until November 2023. As the participants were recruited from the project's stakeholder board, the experts showed a particular professional interest in the topic of digital well-being and disconnection. Most were already preoccupied with developing and implementing policies before the interviews took place. Although it is especially valuable to gain insight into how these stakeholders are confronted with obstacles to digital disconnection policy, their perspectives might not be representative of the broader population. On average, the interviews lasted 65 minutes. The study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board of Ghent University. In order to protect the identities of our participants, we used pseudonyms throughout the manuscript and refrained from naming the organizations.

3.2. Research Instrument and Analysis

Prior to conducting the interviews, we constructed an interview guide supporting a semi-structured interview. This guide was structured according to four main themes. First, we inquired the experts how their organization is active within the work, school, and/or family context, what their roles and responsibilities are, and what motivated them to sign up as stakeholders within the research project. Second, we asked the experts to look back and reflect on the impact of digitalization. From these reflections, we moved on to the topics of digital well-being and digital disconnection. Third, we specifically focused on the various initiatives and policies being implemented within and beyond their organizations, to what extent they thought these initiatives and policies were (in)effective, and whom they saw as responsible for managing (dis)connectivity. Finally, our interviews concluded by asking the experts how we, as researchers, could aid them in developing effective disconnection initiatives and policies.

The data collection took place from April to November 2023. We ended our data collection after the observation that the expert interviews did not bring forth new topics and themes and when we had achieved a balanced representation of different organizations. Next, interviews were transcribed and analyzed in NVivo12, combining an inductive and deductive thematic analysis approach (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2022). In the first round of coding, we developed upper-level codes that corresponded with the topic guide's main themes: impact of digitalization, digital disconnection initiatives and policies, the effectiveness of disconnection, and obstacles to policy. We then inductively added specific lower-level codes based on the transcripts. After discussing patterns and relationships between the codes, we constructed a final code scheme to code the data deductively. In what follows, we report on the main insights derived from this analysis, shedding light on how Flemish experts conceptualize and implement digital disconnection in response to pervasive digitalization.

4. Results

Despite the professional experts being active in highly diverse organizations, our interviews revealed common themes and observations concerning how these professionals perceive and understand digital well-being and digital disconnection, how they see the role and responsibility of their organization, and what challenges and obstacles they face. Below, we share the core insights.

4.1. Digital Well-Being and Digital Disconnection as Urgent Topics

The first theme that we uncovered was that all of the interviewed experts identified digital well-being and digital disconnection as topics that urgently needed to be addressed. This sense of urgency was strongly related to how the experts experienced digitalization over the past decade: Overall, there was an overarching sentiment of "being caught by surprise" and "feeling overwhelmed" by the extent to which digital media have become embedded in everyday life. Several experts used metaphors to express their sense of overwhelm, referring for instance to an "avalanche of ever-growing digitalization waves" over which citizens experience little or no control.

In other words, digitalization was generally considered an unstoppable force happening at an unprecedented speed, to which individuals and organizations are ill-prepared but nonetheless have no choice but to adapt.

The interviewed professionals often expressed concerns about the potential disruptive impact of digital media use within their own work contexts. For example, Ilse, the mental well-being coordinator within a civil knowledge center on health, explained how she perceived people to increasingly experience "change-related stress" due to the rapid pace of digitalization: "It's going unbelievably fast. Citizens just can't keep up because it sometimes happens too fast. Like what will be the next big thing that will be thrown at us?"

Several experts were critical of the role of organizational leadership in this process, perceiving that these concerns were being exacerbated by the fact that digital innovations tend to be implemented top-down. Bart, a labor union representative, for instance, stated: "They [higher management] frame digitalization as an inevitable process that you have to push through to maximize efficiency and flexibility." However, concerns also stemmed from personal observations made in the private sphere of the experts' own families. Reflecting on his own family, for instance, the founder of a serious gaming company, Tony, talked about how family dynamics changed once his oldest daughter received her first smartphone: "It's interesting to see how one more smartphone disrupts everything. Suddenly, we also need to set rules on smartphone use for ourselves to be a good example to her [his daughter]." Together, these observations highlight how digitalization was perceived as a process of change driven mainly by neoliberal logics, yet profoundly impacting the everyday lives of citizens and how they organize their work and family lives.

Against this background of a society that is perceived to undergo relentless digital change, digital well-being and digital disconnection were identified as important emerging concepts that give individuals and organizations a common vocabulary that they can use to grapple with and respond to this change. In their understanding of digital well-being, unsurprisingly, the experts often referenced the always-on society when describing the negative effects of digitalization. They did so by recalling stories of the target populations they work with, reciting research reports, and drawing from their own personal experiences. Matthias, for example, who works as a staff member at a telecom operator, stated that customers increasingly struggle with managing continuous connectivity, while also acknowledging that he himself is "addicted" to being connected 24/7. Nonetheless, there is consensus among the experts that digitalization is not inherently and exclusively negative but also brings numerous benefits. As such, the interviewed professionals implicitly endorsed a conceptual understanding of digital well-being as an optimal balance between positives and negatives, which aligns with scholarly definitions such as that of Vanden Abeele (2020).

In line with this definition as well as other definitions (e.g., Büchi, 2024), the interviewed professionals also acknowledged that there is no universal experience of digital well-being but that this varies widely between individuals, contexts, and organizations. In this regard, an interesting critique of the common understanding of the digital well-being concept was formulated by Bart. According to him, digital well-being is mainly framed as a salient issue for white-collar workers, thereby obscuring the relevance of digital well-being and digital disconnection for those who are performing manual labor, i.e., for blue-collar workers:

> Blue-collar workers do not yet realize how the digital world has been creeping into their jobs, and employers themselves often deny the impact for those workers. But they also have work cell phones which are sometimes even being tracked by the companies. So you also have to protect those, precisely because it's so subtle there.

The professionals' understanding of digital well-being impacted their perspectives on digital disconnection. Overall, our interviews revealed that policies and regulations concerning digital disconnection were relevant

and urgently needed, but that the fast-paced nature of digitalization, as well as the differential experiences with it, also complicated experts' efforts to design and implement them.

This predicament was especially noticeable in educational organizations and how they experienced efforts toward digitalization following the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, schools in Flanders were lagging behind in terms of digital equipment. Hence, the Covid lockdowns proved to be an emergency in which the priority was ensuring that every student could digitally attend distance education. Sarah, a policymaker in an educational civil knowledge center, acknowledged, however, that the government's efforts to equip primary and secondary schools with digital infrastructure somehow came with a complete disregard for the potential repercussions for well-being. Stating how "digital well-being has been an afterthought," Sarah voiced her concerns over the schools' inability to adequately respond to technical and social problems, and to address the questions and worries of teachers, parents, and students about topics such as screen time or availability norms: "But what now? What advice should we give to schools? Because we didn't really think of these implications." In other words, a lack of understanding of how the intervention would impact digital well-being deeply complicated any further development in terms of digital disconnection policies and regulations.

The lack of clear guidelines and policies was not specific to the school context, but was a common thread throughout our interviews with all the professionals. All interviewees saw digital disconnection as a potentially powerful strategy to diminish the negative effects of pervasive digitization, and there was widespread consensus among them that people have been left to their own devices for far too long when managing (dis)connectivity. Laura, policy officer at an edutech organization, made this painfully clear with her critique on the contemporary state of disconnection guidelines and policies:

> There's no clarity or guidelines about how to disconnect. We're also experiencing it for the first time and we can't learn from previous generations how to deal with all these technologies. So, we're going to have to do something at one point. But right now you just have to look out for yourself, for stuff that may be unhealthy. What can I do and what are others doing? I think that's the only thing we can do right now, because I don't know how else to do it either.

4.2. Collective Action, but While Respecting Individual Autonomy and Flexibility

So, what do professionals see as the role and responsibility of their organization? Our interviews revealed that experts generally recognized the need to unburden individuals when managing (dis)connectivity. Yet, given the overarching sentiment that digital well-being and digital disconnection are not an individual responsibility, it was somewhat surprising that they were rather hesitant to accept overarching disconnection policies.

Experts' hesitancy over collective actions to disconnect mainly stemmed from concerns over how such policies could curtail individuals' autonomy and could be insensitive to personal disconnection needs. In this regard, experts emphasized that the flexibility afforded by digitalization is a key benefit. As such, policies and regulatory frameworks should foremost ensure that disconnection policies do not interfere with citizens' ability to organize their everyday digital lives as they see fit. The discrepancy between individualistic norms of autonomy and the observation that citizens struggle with managing (dis)connectivity due to vague guidelines, however, left many experts, such as Tony, conflicted over their organization's role and responsibility:

> The work context and educational environments actually require clear rules and nobody is able to offer those today and you can feel the frustration because we don't know how to implement good policies. But on the other hand, I don't think that it should be imposed because there are many people who love to work hybrid and who really experience advantages because of it. I'm going to pick up my kids from school after this interview and I'm not going to work anymore until 9 pm. I think that kind of autonomy and independence is important.

Given the thin line between autonomy-supportive and autonomy-suppressive disconnection policies, some experts were highly averse to their strict implementation and enforcement. When asked about the role of politicians and the government, they stressed that organizations (and the individuals that form them) should be in control of how they organize digital disconnection guidelines. As such, the interviewed experts think that governmental policies should not go further than decreeing a right to disconnect (as is now part of labor law in Belgium), and that the interpretation of this right should fall on the shoulders of the organization.

Interestingly, in the Belgian labor law, the right to disconnect is actually already interpreted—a point we will return to later. The labor law currently stipulates that employees have the right to be unavailable after working hours except for "emergency situations." Important to note, however, is that organizations themselves have to determine the acceptable hours for being (un)available through digital platforms in collective labor agreements.

Consequently, the experts refrain from formulating concrete normative positions regarding digital disconnection efforts and mostly seem to resort to the implementation of strategies that, ultimately, further emphasize individual responsibilities, albeit with the support of organizational tools and access to a knowledge base. In practice, this means that the organizations across the three contexts provide support by creating "policy tools," encouraging "team agreements," and developing "educational programs and campaigns." These organizational efforts mainly aim to create awareness and to stimulate discussions about digital well-being and digital disconnection.

While the experts believe that these initiatives are the most suitable solution at the moment to support individuals, they are also well aware that these initiatives are less effective in addressing contextual and institutional (dis)connection conditions, and ultimately often re-burden the individual. In the work-oriented semi-public organization of Cara, for example, employees can "book focus time" in which they are allowed to be unavailable for colleagues. While this initiative works for some, Cara notices that some employees find it difficult to set boundaries around their connectivity due to the vagueness of focus time:

> Someone in my team said to me that she finds it difficult to book focus time for herself. She didn't know how much focus time she's allowed to give herself because what's the right balance? So I'm afraid that it's not for everyone.

Moreover, the experts acknowledged that individual disconnection strategies are ultimately only one component of a sustainable solution for citizens' struggles with digitalization. In fact, the professionals reported that they believe in multi-dimensional and multi-level solutions that emphasize the shared responsibility of individuals, groups, organizations, and governments. Reflecting on an ideal situation, the experts desired to have insights based on scientific evidence that would enable them to adopt a more nuanced vision to foster digital well-being on these multiple dimensions and levels:

> It [digital well-being and disconnection] is a much more layered story: There should be education, you should also have some regulations, you should also think about disconnection norms at the group level, and most importantly, you have to develop a vision about disconnection. I think that's the first challenge: What is a nuanced perspective to go with? (Ilse, mental health coordinator)

On an organizational level, business philosopher Martin claimed that there is a tendency to "digitalize for the sake of digitalizing" even when digital media use does not substantially change processes and activities for the better. According to Martin, "digitalization should not be a goal in itself but a means to something better." Relatedly, he also observed that organizations do not always actively involve the people who will be affected by the introduced technologies. Therefore, Martin argues that digitalization should be approached in a more "people-oriented way by, for example, informing employees early on, making clear the 'why,' involving them in pilot projects, and asking them for input."

4.3. Beyond the Individual and the Digital: The Role of Governments and Societies

In the previous section, we have already foreshadowed how experts perceived the role of politicians and the government in enabling digital disconnection policies. When asked whether the government could and should go further in interpreting the right to disconnect, most experts were very weary. HR secretary Cara, for instance, responded that disconnection policies should strengthen resilience rather than impose rules concerning when and how one should disconnect:

> I think that the federal government said at one point like "we're going to block the mail servers after 7 pm." Our reaction was "no we're definitely not going to do that because employees need autonomy." We want to have as few rules as possible because disconnection differs for everyone. Rather, I believe that we must strengthen people's abilities to define boundaries.

This quote also illustrates a more generalized yet substantial distrust in governmental competence to construct adequate digital disconnection policies. On the one hand, some experts like Evelien believe that politicians elude their responsibilities by awaiting whether citizens themselves take action to claim "disconnection rights": "And also politics, I think they [politicians] could have a huge influence [on disconnection policies] but probably this will only happen bottom-up when citizens formulate and communicate a clear opinion on digitalization." On the other hand, experts are pessimistic, believing that if further governmental policies were developed, they would probably not be based on scientific research but rather on the intuitive knowledge of politicians and their departments. A secondary school principal, for example, stated that "the government should create a framework but that framework should be supported by experts who effectively know what they are doing." Consequently, the experts agree on the fact that there should be more research on the effectiveness of digital disconnection in order to call governments to action as well as to construct evidence-based policies in which they can invest their trust:

> Yes, the government should make sure that there is a policy and that they [politicians] are aware of the latest research findings. I think that your project is a first important step because you're a consortium of multiple universities so you can influence policy. You should all go to the politicians and say like "sorry guys but things have to change, it's time to put in some effort because our society is slipping away." (Tony, founder serious gaming company)

The general consensus that governments should not decide on the concrete policies and regulations of organizations, however, did not mean that experts did not see a role for the government in safeguarding its citizens' digital well-being: All experts were highly critical of international technology companies and the so-called addictive designs they implement in their products to "grab our attention" and "make us addicted." If the government has any responsibility, the interviewed experts believed it should be to curb the tech companies through regulation. However, most experts were skeptical of the government's ability and willingness to regulate and limit the power of international technology companies:

> I have my doubts about whether international big tech companies are doing enough; they're also not woven into the fabric of our Flemish society. Dialogue with them is very difficult and when I see what the Flemish supervisory commission does about Google. There is no dialogue whatsoever. (Karel, CEO of an edutech company)

Some experts went even further and openly criticized the lack of political and governmental vision on digitalization, which facilitates processes of individual responsibilization. In particular, Dennis, the general coordinator of a civil expertise center on teenagers' media use, stressed that the focus on individuals should shift towards a critical scrutiny of—the lack of—regulations surrounding digitalization:

> Our answer to everything that goes wrong with digitalization is "we need to make people more aware and resilient." That's really ridiculous in my opinion. That's like saying "regulation in the car industry? Never mind!" No obligations around brake technology, seat belts, and airbags. People just have to drive very carefully. It's an absurd idea to do this in the car industry, but with media and technology we do it this way because we don't really know how else to do it.

In a similar vein, business philosopher Martin criticizes the government for being unable—or even unwilling—to take into account the rapid technological advancements. According to this expert, the government predominantly acts reactively on specific threats and risks related to digital technologies. Instead, he argues, the government should act proactively by designing and implementing future-proof policies: "to base regulations on what is less likely to change [than specific ICTs]: human needs, social contact, autonomy, integrity, privacy, and so on."

Finally, some experts offered a unique perspective on the centrality of "the digital" when dealing with the "always-on society" and disconnection. During the interview with the labor union representative Bart, for instance, he concluded that, more so than digitalization, the sociocultural values in our society inherently glorifying being busy and productive were to blame: "Ask anyone how it's going and they say 'I'm good but busy, I'm very busy.' We live in a society that likes to be busy." Jade, the science communication coordinator of a media literacy knowledge center, similarly reported that our society seems to instill unrealistic availability norms on children and teenagers. In both cases, the experts did not see "the digital" as the main stressor but rather as an extension and amplifier of pre-existing neoliberal structures that place a burden on individuals. These accounts raise the question of whether policymakers and researchers alike overemphasize disconnection strategies that predominantly address "the digital" and, thereby, foreclose interventions on a sociocultural level:

> We don't actually have a shared value framework about disconnection yet as a society, "what do we want and what do we think is important?" We're not going to be able to solve that digital connection

> problem immediately. That requires societal evolution. Our mindset and culture has to change first. (Bart, labor union representative)

5. Conclusion

Our study aimed to investigate the contextual and institutional conditions of (dis)connectivity by reporting on in-depth interviews with 21 Flemish experts in Belgium responsible for shaping and implementing digital disconnection guidelines and policies for their respective organizations and organizational stakeholders. In particular, we have explored how (the right to) disconnection is interpreted by the experts, and which challenges and obstacles they observed in developing regulations to enforce it. Furthermore, we inquired what the experts perceived as the role and responsibility of various actors (individuals, groups, organizations, politicians, and the government) for safeguarding citizens' (digital) well-being.

Overall, the interviews reveal a conflict between autonomy and regulation. On the one hand, our experts' discourses on digital disconnection questioned appointing too much responsibility to individuals and claimed that regulations are needed in light of the fast-paced nature of digitalization. On the other hand, however, the experts stressed that such regulations should maximize the individual's capacity for autonomous decision-making, allowing for choice, personalization, and flexibility. This conflict in the participants' discourses reflects ongoing discussions on the voluntary or involuntary enforcement of digital disconnection (Fast, 2021). While voluntary approaches respect personal freedom, they may not be sufficient to address widespread issues. Conversely, stringent regulations could backfire as these can be experienced as paternalistic and can infringe on personal agency. This might especially be true for individualized societies like Flanders that favor autonomy over regulatory approaches.

However, the current study illustrates that the conflict between autonomy and regulation should be understood as a continuum instead of a binary contraposition. Indeed, the experts seem to advocate for a hybrid approach to digital disconnection policy that reduces the burden on individuals through some degree of involuntary disconnection while still allowing for the personalization of broader regulations. Moreover, the findings suggest that the level of (in)voluntariness may depend on context-specific factors surrounding digital media use and non-use. Finally, the conflict in the experts' discourses might also reflect evolving attitudes regarding the (in)voluntary enforcement of disconnection. As more citizens report difficulties in autonomously managing their (dis)connectivity due to the neoliberal logics underpinning digitalization, the urgency to develop and implement effective digital disconnection regulations is growing. As such, we suggest future research to further address this conflict between autonomy and regulation in at least two ways. First, qualitative research is needed to continuously map whether and how preferences for more autonomy-oriented versus regulatory solutions may be contingent on cultural-contextual and temporal norms, expectations, and problems regarding (dis)connectivity. These insights can help to organize and implement policies and regulations conducive to the specific (cultural) context. Second, media-effect studies hold the potential to test the effects of voluntary, involuntary, and hybrid approaches to digital disconnection on individuals' digital well-being, across and within (organizational) cultures.

Regarding the conflict between autonomy and regulation, we uncovered a *digital disconnection policy paradox* in our participants' accounts. Although the experts seemed to be advocates for regulations at the macro and meso level, they ultimately resorted to solutions on an individual level. Consequently, they tended

to—unwillingly—reinforce narratives of individual responsibilization and, thereby, uphold the dominant neoliberal order underpinning constant connectivity in Flemish society (cf. Enli & Fast, 2023; Syvertsen, 2023). Seemingly being caught within this neoliberal framework, the experts found translating digital disconnection as a collective responsibility into an encompassing regulatory approach challenging. This can be problematic for the further development of policies and regulations as previous research has already shown the limitations and the risks of exclusive self-regulation in the context of digital well-being (Enli & Fast, 2023). In particular, it has been argued that individual agency does not automatically engender individual empowerment, as structural factors over which individuals have little control can complicate one's ability to establish (dis)connectivity effectively (Chib et al., 2022; Van Bruyssel et al., 2023) Therefore, we urge researchers and policymakers alike to hold (big) technology companies accountable, to develop systemic and societal interventions that address not only digital technologies but also larger sociocultural values, and to raise awareness among stakeholders about the unintended consequences of individual-level digital disconnection solutions.

The results of our study should be interpreted with caution as our sample included Flemish stakeholders who are part of the advisory board of a larger project on digital disconnection across work, school, and family contexts. This implies they all had a pre-existing interest in the topic of digital disconnection, making them potentially more informed and opinionated on the subject than the average citizen. Moreover, our findings may not be universally applicable. While they may be relevant to other neoliberal countries in the West, different local policies and cultural attitudes towards digital disconnection as well as differential patterns of digital media use might give rise to specific challenges and opportunities. We also acknowledge that digital disconnection is a socially stratified issue (Enli & Fast, 2023). Our participants, being part of a middle-class population themselves, might be less cognizant of the realities of vulnerable groups in society. Finally, we did not fully engage with the specific theories and concepts pertaining to the work, school, and family context due to the design of our study. While our goal was to uncover commonalities in the challenges organizations face across these contexts, we suggest future research to study the particular nuances of digital disconnection policy in each setting.

Despite these limitations, however, the interviews reveal how digital well-being and digital disconnection are being socially constructed through the perceptions, experiences, and practices of Flemish experts in work, school, and family contexts. We hope that our study inspires policymakers and politicians to take up their responsibilities regarding unburdening and protecting citizens in our digitalized societies. It is important, however, to not contribute to paternalistic technopanics and to not be unmindful of the various benefits afforded by digital media. Nonetheless, in the words of one of our participants, we cannot expect people to achieve digital well-being without policies and regulations that enforce "brakes, seat belts, and airbags" being built into digital technologies. The challenge for the scholarship on digital disconnection now lies in identifying effective, balanced, and multi-dimensional approaches that move beyond individual responsibilization.

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Conflict of Interests

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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