

# Disconnectivity in a Changing Media and Political Landscape: A Multi-Contextual and Interdisciplinary Lens

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## Abstract

This thematic issue examines disconnectivity in a world where connectivity is often assumed to be the norm. Drawing on multiple areas of research, such as political unfriending, digital disconnection, migration studies, and media censorship, it delves into the complexities of disconnectivity, moving beyond its framing as voluntary choice and individual practice. Collectively, studies in this issue highlight disconnection as a compelled act for self-protection and a collective strategy to tackle systemic problems. By examining enforced and coerced disconnection, they also reveal disconnection’s dual role as control and resistance. Through a multi-contextual and interdisciplinary lens, this issue challenges the normative assumptions implicit in our current understandings of disconnection, and, in doing so, advances the field.

## Keywords

digital disconnection; enforced disconnection; inequality; interpersonal disconnection; political unfriending; power dynamics

## 1. Introduction

In a world of constant connectivity, disconnection has emerged as a critical practice and concept. Over the past decade, two areas of study—political unfriending and digital disconnection—have brought this phenomenon into focus. Research on political unfriending, rooted in the field of political communication, examines behaviors enabled by social media features such as unfriending, unfollowing, blocking, and muting—actions that sever ties between individuals, groups, and ideas. Critique in this area centers on its broader impact on democracy, with concerns that disconnection restricts information flows and diminishes engagement across political and social divides (Bozdağ, 2020; N. A. John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Kim et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2017). Conversely,

digital disconnection research focuses on intentional withdrawal from devices, technologies, and platforms—voluntary non-use of digital media. Concerned primarily with individual well-being, scholars see disconnection as a form of self-care against the relentless demands of hyperconnectivity and as resistance against Silicon Valley capitalism (Albris et al., 2024; Kaun, 2021; Nassen, Vandebosch, et al., 2023; Syvertsen, 2020).

Certainly, these two areas approach disconnection from very different vantage points, yet they converge in three key ways: both frame disconnection as a deliberate choice and individual effort, and anchor their discussions within the normative values dominant in their respective fields. Reflecting on a decade of research, this thematic issue seeks to bridge these perspectives and examine shared underlying assumptions to inform future research in and beyond these fields. As the ever-changing media landscape continues to present new forms and formats of disconnection, it is time to focus on what remains constant: disconnection as both a practice embedded in social-structural constraints and a symptom of systemic issues. In a period of uncertain and contentious politics, shifting cultural and political norms offer an opportunity to reflect on the values and assumptions implicit in our current understandings.

## 2. Is Disconnection a Voluntary Choice?

Disconnection is not passive; it is an active and intentional process. This deliberate nature often leads to the framing of disconnection as voluntary and agentic, driven by individual choice. Digital disconnection research views it as a strategy to reclaim personal well-being and resist the pressure of hyperconnectivity, while political communication research sees it as selective avoidance, prioritizing personal preferences over civic obligations to “hear the other side” (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024; Zhu, 2023). Both put individual choices, and by extension, individual responsibilities at the forefront.

Recent scholarship has challenged the notion that disconnection is entirely voluntary, highlighting constraints such as: social, professional, and political costs; human tendencies like congeniality biases and fear of missing out; digital platform designs; and the neoliberal hegemony of a booming digital disconnection industry (Ross et al., 2024; Zhu, 2023). These constraints are unevenly distributed, often along socio-economic lines and other markers of inequality. For instance, voluntary digital non-use is more accessible to individuals in privileged positions, while marginalized groups tend to unfriend majority members as a response to systemic exclusion (N. John & Agbarya, 2021; Nguyen & Hargittai, 2023; Zhu & Skoric, 2023).

Despite these structural constraints, disconnection is frequently portrayed as an expression of agency. This narrative risks shifting the burden and, implicitly, the blame onto individuals, suggesting that systemic obstacles are challenges to be overcome through personal effort. In response, we propose rethinking disconnection as pseudo-choice—a constrained decision shaped by systemic forces, where the alternative is an unaffordable cost. This highlights the need to see disconnection as a symptom of broader societal issues that demand systemic solutions.

## 3. Is Disconnection an Individual Effort?

The framing of disconnection as a voluntary choice not only places significant emphasis on individual responsibility but also obscures other forms of disconnection that are enforced rather than chosen. Practices

such as internet blackouts, websites and account bans, post deletions, and deliberate slowing down of internet connections serve as instruments to curtail information flow, silence marginalized voices, and restrict political mobilization in, but not limited to, non-democratic regimes (MacKinnon, 2011). In democratic contexts, enforced disconnection such as shadowbanning is also inherent to social media platform governance, disadvantaging non-normative cultural expressions and minority voices (Duffy & Meisner, 2023).

These practices of enforced disconnection, functioning as mechanisms of control and discipline, intersect with individual-level responses. Individuals often preemptively disconnect themselves from risky topics, people, and digital spaces to create “safe spaces” for self-preservation and political communication (Kocer & Bozdağ, 2020; Van Duyn, 2021; Zhu & Skoric, 2023). These intertwined practices of top-down disconnection and bottom-up withdrawal reveal how disconnection as a pseudo, coerced choice operates between repression and covert resistance (Lim, 2020). It underscores the need to understand disconnection beyond individual practice but as a product of power dynamics.

#### **4. What Are the Normative Views Implicit in Our Current Understanding of Disconnection?**

While both fields see disconnection as individual choices, they present contrasting perspectives on its political implications. In political communication, disconnection is often viewed negatively. The emphasis is on individuals’ responsibility to stay informed and engaged for the health of democracy, which often downplays or even blames personal preferences. In this view, the collective democratic good takes precedence over individual choice. In contrast, digital communication research regards disconnection as a civic virtue, focusing on safeguarding personal autonomy and well-being. Here, disconnection is seen as a justified and empowering response to the structural pressures of the digital age.

This contrast reveals that the underlying, often unexamined, normative assumptions shape how we interpret the politics surrounding disconnection. These normative views are not static; rather, they change over time and across different contexts. The rise of digital disconnection, both as a practice and an area of research, reflects a cultural shift in which the digital habits and consumptions considered beneficial in the early days of broadband internet and social media are now being questioned (Albris et al., 2024). Similarly, the recent development in political communication also reflects an emerging cultural logic of self-care, driven by concerns over excessive political disagreement and its potential harm to individual well-being (Barnidge et al., 2023). These shifting norms not only mirror broader societal changes, but highlight the importance of examining disconnection within and across contexts.

Thus, this thematic issue brings together studies from distinct political regimes and cultures such as the US, Belgium, France, China, and India, and diverse fields such as political communication, media studies, migration studies, and journalism. Through this multi-contextual and interdisciplinary lens, we aim to make explicit the normative assumptions implicit in our understanding of disconnection, and, in doing so, move the field forward.

#### **5. Articles in This Thematic Issue**

This thematic issue first presents three studies examining disconnective practices as choices shaped by psychological and structural constraints. Nassen, Karsay, et al. (2024) examine the adoption of disconnection

tools (e.g., screen time trackers, detox apps) to cope with the negative consequences of social media overuse among Flemish adolescents in Belgium. Using a survey study, they reveal that disconnection patterns are embedded within individuals' lived experiences, suggesting developmental stages, gender roles, and well-being as important preconditions of disconnection. Zhang and Shoenberger (2024) focus on the roles of emotions and psychological needs in political unfriending and unfollowing. Through a US population-based survey, they argue that disconnection is an anger response to political disagreement perceived as threats and an emotional regulation strategy to avoid anxiety, and these emotional responses are constrained by individuals' need to belong. Von Nostitz et al. (2024) examine refraining from political use of social media as a salient form of being digitally connected but politically disconnected. Through a survey study after the 2022 French elections, they argue that such disconnection practices are influenced by individuals' digital skills and political interests and shaped by the affordances and culture of social media platforms.

Beyond psychological and structural constraints, disconnection is also shaped by the design of technical tools and discourses surrounding disconnection. Through a feature analysis, N. John (2024) offers a classification of features for tie dissolution on social media platforms. In doing so, he argues that technical features embed values and assumptions into their design, shaping technical outcomes, while also acknowledging that disconnection results from social considerations. Bozan and Tréré (2024) critique the booming digital disconnection industry. Deploying discourse analysis grounded in a Marxist approach, they highlight how the discourse surrounding disconnectivity is rooted in material social structures: It frames disconnection as an obligation for labor quality and work efficiency, thereby reinforcing material power.

As the above studies illustrate that disconnection extends beyond individual choice, the next two studies shift focus to the disconnection effort at a collective level, highlighting that disconnection is a symptom of societal issues that demand systemic solutions. Leyn et al. (2024) explore the institutional conditions of disconnectivity. Drawing on interviews with digital (dis)connection policy-makers in Belgium, they reveal growing advocacy for regulation to reduce the burden on individuals, which however often conflicts with the need to preserve individual autonomy. Bossio et al. (2024) examine journalists' collective practices of disconnection. Based on interviews with journalists in the US and Australia, they highlight that the collective approach to disconnection—achieved through informal sharing of experiences and support and inter-organizational training—can contribute to systemic change in addressing the negative impact arising from organizational demand for online connectivity.

The following studies demonstrate that disconnection is a pseudo-choice, where the alternative is unaffordably risky due to unequal power dynamics. In two migration studies, Minchilli (2024) and Deng and Pridmore (2024) show that migrants, such as Turkish women living in Rome and Hong Kong citizens living in the UK, are compelled to disconnect. Practices such as selective non-use of platforms and groups serve as boundary-making, shaped by the often ambiguous discourse of otherness and the socio-political context underlying their migration experiences. Disconnection is also essential for creating safe spaces for political expressions, given their inherent ties to their homeland and the diffuse control enabled by digital connectivity. In the context of online dating, Šiša (2024) examines ghosting as a form of disconnection. Through interviews with Tinder users in Ljubljana, she shows that users resort to ghosting for self-protection, driven by vulnerability in the face of information overload on an intensely demanding online platform and a perceived lack of safety and authenticity in online connections.

The concluding two articles turn our attention to enforced disconnection as a tool for controlling information and suppressing dissent. Madapathi (2024) presents a case study on internet blackouts during the farmer's protests in India, illustrating how the internet shutdown imposed by authorities shaped political activism and reinforced inequality, and how various involved groups resisted the communicative restrictions. Based on interviews with internet users in China, He et al. (2024) demonstrate how, in the face of a sophisticated censorship program that disconnects individuals from connective actions, ordinary citizens navigate these threats through innovative tactics of connection, while elites use the enforced disconnection as a protective shield to evade public scrutiny.

Taken together, this thematic issue delves into the complexities of disconnectivity, moving beyond its framing as a voluntary choice and individual practice. It highlights disconnection as a compelled act for self-protection and a collective strategy to challenge systemic structures. By examining enforced and coerced disconnection, the articles reveal disconnection's dual role as control and resistance. Through interdisciplinary perspectives and diverse contexts and methodologies, this issue advances understanding of disconnection's broader implications and shapes future research directions.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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