



Disentangling: Dangers of digital connectivity and tactics for resistance

Paul C. Adams

Department of Geography and the Environment, University of Texas at Austin

October 1, 2024

 10.6094/grid.2024.002

Expanding digital connectivity and services has become a key political priority. At the same time, digital technologies are contested, raising concerns around inequality, surveillance, exploitation, and exclusion. “Disentangling” refers to the social practices and spatial strategies used to resist these trends by severing digital connections.

Paul Adams is Professor and Director of Urban Studies at the Department of Geography and the Environment at University of Texas at Austin. His current research focuses on sociospatial and political aspects of digital media, digital humanities, and culturally specific understandings of environmental risk and climate change. grid spoke to him about his recent inquiry into practices and strategies of “disentangling”.

Expanding digital connectivity, digitizing administrative interactions, and facilitating participation in digital social and economic worlds are primary political concerns. Yet your recent research engages with strategies to ‘disconnect’ or ‘disentangle’ from the digital. Why?

It’s become a habit to treat digital connectivity as a social good, analogous to water or electricity or roads. If we think about these other kinds of infrastructure there is an extensive literature equating uneven access with a lack of equity and a violation of rights. This interpretation dovetails with arguments about the “right to the city,” that envisions spaces as offering resources and amenities to people, so disconnection is closely tied to exclusion and marginalization. This work has helpfully shown how one’s

location, wealth, race, ethnicity, age, national origin, and gender identity affect access to social goods and create cycles of exclusion. Those who are left out in one way are more likely to be left out in another way, effectively getting pushed to the margins within the multiple “spaces” associated with different types of infrastructure.

We need to be cautious of simply equating digital media with these other sorts of infrastructure that constitute social goods. The reason is that digital media are not simply social goods like the systems providing electricity, water, and mobility. While it’s true that digital media provide information, entertainment, and support various beneficial social and cultural processes, they also do some things that cannot be equated with a social good. Offhand I can think of eight distinct impacts that complicate the picture: (1) they subject people to *surveillance*, (2) they subject people to forms of *covert control*, (3) they *infringe on privacy* and undermine the possibility of maintaining privacy, (4) they *reconfigure privacy* insofar as they erode the processes maintaining separate realms of personal information (medical, financial, professional, legal, etc.), (5) they *transform people into a resource* along with many aspects of their lives, (6) they facilitate *social sorting* through rapid identification of individuals and their automatic exclusion from particular places, (7) they facilitate *social fragmentation* through the creation of politically polarized “echo chambers,” (8) and they *colonize attention*, undermining personal autonomy and creativity throughout the course of daily life.

While it’s analytically helpful to divide out these eight facets of the process, in fact they are all interrelated. For example, surveillance facilitates control, which infringes on privacy, thereby turning people into a resource, and the last process feeds into the colonization of attention, which, in turn, facilitates even more surveillance. This nest of feedback loops means that people are drawn into a surveillant system that increasingly directs their attention in ways that facilitate their manipulation for economic and political purposes. The assumption that access to digital media equates with (autonomous) participation in (benign) digital worlds fails to capture this complexity.

In that case, disentangling would refer to strategies to withdraw from networks of surveillance and manipulation. What is the difference between your use of disentangling as a concept and popular discussions about digital detox – i.e. me shutting off my mobile phone while on a weekend trip?

It seems like the term “digital detox” is based on the idea of a response to addiction—in this case, an addiction to digital media—and therefore is primarily personal. A typical list of the benefits of digital detox focuses on reducing negative emotions such as the fear of missing out, anger over current political events, loneliness because of perceived isolation, and a sense of inadequacy due to comparison of oneself with the carefully curated lives of others. This focus on the personal experience of digital media

use and the personal benefits of reducing or eliminating certain uses reflects somewhat different assumptions and concerns from disentangling. In a nutshell, whereas digital detox implies a self-help approach to a psychological syndrome, what I've been hoping to stress with disentangling is a strategic response to a sociotechnical system. Whereas the cause of the problem addressed in the detox literature is internal to the subject, that is, dependency or addiction, the cause I would hope to draw attention to with disentangling is something external to the subject. This external cause is the digital media's colonization of a widening array of spaces, times, goals and activities associated with daily life.

Whether we're talking about seeking medical care, managing finances, obtaining education, dealing with legal issues, or engaging in socializing and recreation, digital media are increasingly enmeshed in social processes. Therefore, the term "detox" distracts from the inherently political nature of this process of enmeshing. I'm not talking about politics in the sense of overt party politics, though these can be involved, rather I'm talking about the effort to retain personal autonomy within and against a particular kind of governmentality. This particular governmentality involves a set of requirements and obligations that appear technical in nature but in fact reflect the interests of companies, organizations, agencies, and powerful individuals. So, without getting too far into the weeds about the exact nature of disentangling activities, we can summarize disentangling as a set of strategies to maintain autonomy in the face of the external forces of digital governmentality, as opposed to digital detox which is a struggle to achieve internal control over one's compulsions to use digital media.

These coercive sociotechnical relations deserve a bit more explanation. For example, we may be offered a digital service as a convenience, when in fact it entails a sort of offloading of labor onto the consumer like navigating through menus on your phone or computer to find information you need, rather than having an employee available to answer questions. Other times, something that was once a simple transaction ends up requiring a membership of some sort, which seems to offer some special status to the user but in fact solidifies a company's access to each customer via phone or e-mail, making each consumer into a permanent asset for the company. At the same time, digital services ensure that all customers and transactions generate rich data streams that permit the microscopic analysis of how consumption relates to numerous lifestyle and demographic variables. Consumer profiling facilitates marketing and advertising, and also targeted political advertising since particular brands and stores tend to be associated with certain political stances. The consumer profiles at the heart of this project are not static objects, but rather they evolve through time, a fact that motivates efforts not merely to target particular consumer types, but also strategies for cultivating and developing particular habits and subjectivities. All of this fills in the idea of digital media as an entangling system, and the process of entanglement as not merely a symptom

of a person's internal, psychological weakness, but rather a sign of external conditions designed to detect, analyze, and ultimately rework people as consumers and citizens. Such efforts go under the labels "customer analytics" and "customer relationship management" which shade into "voter analytics" and "psychometric profiling." Such efforts also benefit greatly from AI and algorithms in ways that are concealed by intellectual property protections.

Digital media has become essential to communication and social interaction, and by doing so creates strong incentives to get and stay connected. In your characterization, however, this leads further and further towards a system of control and manipulation. What does that mean for the prospect and possibility of disentangling?

Here I'm afraid I'm not terribly optimistic. These elements of digital governmentality are pervasive, taken-for-granted, easily internalized, and quick to multiply. At the same time, the public tends to focus more on how digital technologies enable individual action than on the ways in which they facilitate the monitoring and manipulation of such action. While it is true that in many parts of the world there are still remote communities that lack digital communications because of poverty and lack of infrastructure, I think it's an interesting idea to envision voluntary communities that involve people deliberately returning to a non-digital form of community.

I would like to see such social experiments, though I can imagine they would be plagued by the sorts of problems that plague communes and other "intentional communities." Still, in theory, a non-digital community would be able to offer people non-digital ways of obtaining information, socializing, and engaging in leisure activities, affording a buffer from entanglement, while having a critical mass to maintain economic viability within a larger social sphere that is ever more dependent on digital communications.

In a recent article on disentangling, you also introduce the notion of 'postdigital territoriality' (Adams and Jansson 2023). What does this mean? How does space, or more broadly geography, fit into the picture?

Disentangling is about more than merely turning off or refusing to use certain digital media. It involves a complex array of tactics specific to particular times, places, and situations. This diversity introduces paradoxes related to the binaries that go beyond connected/disconnected, including objective/subjective, present/absent, and valued/devalued. Disentangling involves a range of emerging social practices that range from simply leaving a device behind or putting it out of view, to developing bounded opportunities at particular places and times when we achieve temporary disconnection, to strategically appropriating devices and apps on the basis of their varying levels of in-

trusiveness. It is in recognition of this complexity that we propose the term “postdigital territoriality,” as a way to conceive how people carve out or appropriate bits and pieces within the terrain of daily life. Studying this requires us to recognize *hybrid territories bounded in hybrid ways by hybrid agents*. I’m aware that sounds a complicated and redundant, but let me dig into it a bit more and with luck it will make sense.

An example of a hybrid actor would be a person attending a street protest and attempting to avoid police interference by coordinating with other protestors in real-time through the cell (mobile) phone as a spatial-coordination device. Another hybrid actor would be a drone pilot in a military conflict extending his or her agency through a military drone as a killing device. Yet another would be a parcel service delivery driver whose route is planned by a complex algorithm to minimize travel time or travel distance, and whose progress along the delivery route is monitored in real-time by his or her employers. Finally, we might think of a patient logging into a health information portal to check on the results of a blood test or radiological scan then using the results to decide whether to schedule follow-up visits with medical specialists. These examples include political, military, economic, and medical applications, and the hybrid actors enrolled in digital communications in these different ways develop particular kinds of hybrid agency. Autonomy from digital technology, then, involves disentangling not only from various digital media, but also from specific demands and obligations, including those of politics, armed conflict, work, and even certain kinds of self-care, to name just a few domains. Since human capabilities are augmented in increasingly sophisticated ways through technology, disentangling involves responses to the particular aspects of (hybrid) agency associated with particular (hybrid) networks of obligation, articulated with an individual through particular constellations of (hybrid) media.

The “territoriality” involved is therefore of a completely different order than old-fashioned geographical territoriality that involved fixed, mappable spatial boundaries. Increasingly we inhabit a sort of multi-layered space, where one simultaneously votes within bounded political territories and engages in unbounded networks of political and military action, works within the bounded jurisdiction of a company or agency and enables that company or agency to extend its reach dynamically, goes to a particular health-care clinic or doctor’s office and yet is entangled within a constellation of data flowing between medical specialists, insurance companies, billing services, health-care management companies, and so forth. So spatial boundaries are complicated by networks, mobilities, and flows that cut across geographical boundaries and follow another logic. This shift was noticed in the late 20th century (by Manuel Castells and Saskia Sassen, among others) but what is new in the 21st century is that individuals have adopted novel strategies for insulating themselves from the dilution of their attention and redirection of their personal identity. These strategies are tailored to the attributes of the multi-layered space mentioned a moment ago, in which each

person occupies a unique space defined by geographical coordinates and intervals of time, as well as particular devices and particular affordances (for example “apps” or features) embedded in those devices, and the particular connections to other agents, information, geographical destinations, and so forth. The type of territoriality people enact when carving out space for autonomy within daily life therefore goes far beyond mappable, geographical space, and occupies this multi-layered, dynamic space of communication flows. Not surprisingly, the type of boundary one builds around oneself is not a simple thing like a house or a piece of land; instead it is a “home” built of particular protocols, passwords, codes, and services, and particular situations when one avoids any or all of these.

You've examined strategies and tactics of disentangling in your own research, and, together with André Jansson, published an edited volume on *The Geographies of Digital Disconnection* (Jansson and Adams 2021). Throughout your engagement with the topic, are there cases that particularly fascinated you? For instance because of particularly creative or surprising tactics, exceptional circumstances or unexpected dynamics and consequences?

All of the chapters in our book, *Disentangling: The Geographies of Digital Disconnection*, brought up interesting issues around our efforts to carve out a certain space for autonomy vis-à-vis digital media, but I'll point out four chapters in particular to suggest the range of research avenues associated with disentangling.

First, the chapter by Karin Fast, Johan Lindell and André Jansson addresses the ways in which disconnecting has become a sort of cultural capital (Fast, Lindell, and Jansson 2021). Rather than simply indicating deprivation, which it still does, being disconnected also signifies a sort of affluent habitus. Of course this observation is highly dependent on social context, so the idea of “disconnection as distinction” to adopt their phrase, is most evident in societies where dependence on digital media has become a norm and has become thoroughly implicated in daily obligations and responsibilities, both professional and social. Managing to distance oneself from the more onerous obligations and expectations associated with digital media, if only for a short period or in a certain way, can be perceived as a mark of privilege. This line of research helps situate disentangling within the social processes that signify status, prestige, and social hierarchy.

Pepita Hesselberth's chapter compares three different digital detox retreats that disconnect participants from digital media either partially or completely (Hesselberth 2021). As I've indicated, digital detox is a more subjective and personal angle than disentangling. However, Hesselberth's study reveals digital detox can be a product that is marketed, packaged, sold, and consumed. In this case, we are considering some-

thing objective rather than subjective—a product, and that product is a collaborative creation by the organizers, the setting, and the participants. A traditional experience of community, absent digital media, is becoming scarce and therefore valuable in some parts of the world. Presumably, the scarcer disentangling experiences get, the more valuable (and hence profitable) they will become in various places, and we will be able to explore the geographies of different sorts of retreats and alternative lifestyles associated with disentangling.

Yan Yuan's chapter provides insight into the fascination with analog media in China, a complex of related practices called *Shouzhang* (Yuan 2021). These practices involve devoting time and money to “slow media” and “heirloom” ways of archiving daily life. There are many different styles of journals and accoutrements such as special pens, stickers, stamps, and tape with which users create a personalized media ensemble. Once again, disentangling is commodified, but in a different way. The primary product is time spent creating a tangible record of one's life using analog media, but paradoxically digital media remain essential. *Shouzhang* has an online presence as aficionados go online for to discover, compare, select, and purchase the materials that go into their non-digital media ensemble.

Finally, the chapter I contributed along with Vivie Behrens, Steven Hoelscher, Olga Lavrenova, Heath Robinson, and Yan Yuan, addresses what we call the “paradoxes of disconnected connection” (Adams et al. 2021). At least three paradoxes have already been indicated—being disconnected signifies both low and high social status, subjective experiences of digital detox are objectively real commodities, and disentangling from online life involves accoutrements found online. To these we add the fourth paradox that as people become more dependent on digital connection they learn ways to disconnect as part of remaining connected. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed how digital media were appropriated by the academic community in ways that strategically created a sense of separation, solitude, and privacy. Students “lurked” in online classes, leaving their cameras turned off and appearing on screen only as an empty rectangle, while professors displayed a similar tendency to “lurk” in online meetings. People attended classes and meetings without being appropriately dressed, ate while “in” a class or meeting, cuddled with pets or children, and even took meetings on the road while driving. None of this was particularly good for mutual involvement and collegiality, and academic life suffered as a result. More abstractly, it demonstrated a fourth paradox which is the fact that increasing digital connection leads to tactics for remaining disconnected even while one is connected.

Are there questions about the spatiality of digital entangling and disentangling that you think deserve further attention?

Oh my gosh, virtually everything I've brought up deserves further attention. I worry that all of the strategies of disentangling that I've explored are merely skirmishes in a losing battle. Research is needed above all to figure out how not to lose this battle. In the US and elsewhere we can see the erosion of democratic institutions by networks of powerful companies, media, political parties, and corrupt politicians bent on creating an alternate-reality "bubble." I have no idea how far down that path we will go.

Historically, personal autonomy has been protected by democratic institutions and the guarantees built into constitutions and bills of rights. These mechanisms have worked fairly well to protect people from incursions into their autonomy by companies, government bodies, and other individuals. I'm afraid that these established and traditional mechanisms don't work to protect people from incursions into their autonomy by algorithms that are custom-tailored to play on their neuroses, compulsions, obsessions, and biases. Compulsions become internalized and can no longer be perceived as imposed upon the individual from outside. In some cases, of course, citizens respond to force, the threat of violence (say from the police), and economic constraints through the creative use of digital technologies, but citizenship increasingly involves the navigation of a complicated terrain of digital addiction involving actively encouraged compulsions such as the fear of missing out, the effort to maintain one's (perceived) personal identity, and the capture of attention. When internal compulsions are measured, modeled, and strategically modified, then unfreedom takes a form that was not anticipated by the authors of founding democratic documents. Just as democracy was created through bottom-up, grassroots struggles, I anticipate the importance of disentangling as arising from the everyday strategies by which people maintain or increase autonomy. Thus, the study of disentangling is the first step towards a grassroots response that would more self-consciously protect personal autonomy from the subtle, pervasive types of manipulation endemic to the era of digital media.

References

- Adams, Paul C., Vivie Behrens, Steven Hoelscher, Olga Lavrenova, Heath Robinson, and Yen Yuan. 2021. "Paradoxes of Disconnected Connection." In *Disentangling: The Geographies of Digital Disconnection*, edited by André Jansson and Paul C. Adams, 1st ed., 295–323. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.001.0001>.
- Adams, Paul C., and André Jansson. 2023. "Postdigital Territoriality: Disentangling from Digital Media as a Return to Place." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 113 (3): 658–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2022.2124147>.
- Fast, Karin, Johan Lindell, and André Jansson. 2021. "Disconnection as Distinction A Bourdieusian Study of Where People Withdraw from Digital Media." In *Disentan-*

gling: The Geographies of Digital Disconnection, edited by André Jansson and Paul C. Adams, 1st ed., 61–90. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.001.0001>.

Hesselberth, Pepita. 2021. "Retreat Culture and Therapeutic Disconnection." In *Disentangling: The Geographies of Digital Disconnection*, edited by André Jansson and Paul C. Adams, 1st ed., 253–72. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.001.0001>.

Jansson, André, and Paul C. Adams, eds. 2021. *Disentangling: The Geographies of Digital Disconnection*. 1st ed. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.001.0001>.

Yuan, Yan. 2021. "'Think on Paper, Share Online': Interrogating the Sense of Slowness and Disconnection in the Rise of Shouzhang in China." In *Disentangling: The Geographies of Digital Disconnection*, edited by André Jansson and Paul C. Adams, 1st ed., 189–224. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197571873.001.0001>.



 Licensed under CC-BY 4.0

Permanent link:

<https://gridisnotajournal.de/articles/adams-2024-disentangling>