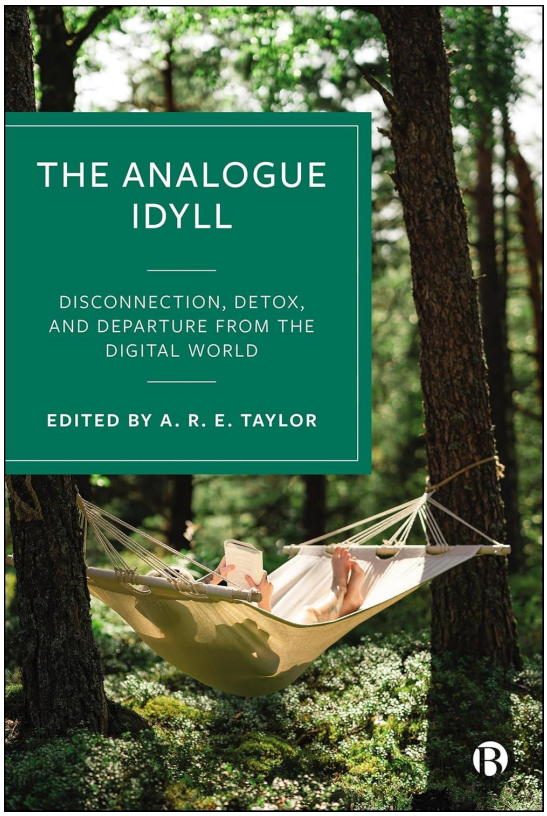
The Analogue Idyll (Preview)

Disconnection, Detox, and Departure from the Digital World

A.R.E. Taylor



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A.R.E. Taylor

Introduction

Once upon a time, before the internet, before social media, and before smartphones, there existed an analogue world where people lived slower, simpler, and healthier lives. In this golden age, free from the addictions, distractions, and harms of digital culture, people were more in tune with nature. Their lives were less mediated, their personal relationships more authentic and fulfilling. People knew each other and talked to each other. They had *real* conversations face-to-face that were richer and more meaningful than the trivial and superficial interactions exchanged via social media or messaging apps. Without the constant notifications and pings of digital devices, people were less stressed and distracted, and could concentrate more deeply on the things that mattered. They spent their childhoods offline – outdoors in the 'real world' – not cooped up inside, endlessly scrolling on a glowing screen. They could identify trees, plants, and birds. They didn't have SatNavs. They knew how to map-read and embraced the possibility of getting lost, and the opportunity for discovery that enabled. People weren't tracked and profiled by big data corporations. They had privacy when they listened to their vinyl records, watched movies shot on *real* film with friends in the cinema, or purchased their weekly shopping with cash from their thriving local market or brick-and-mortar grocery store.

This is the analogue idyll: a compelling narrative that we increasingly encounter in contemporary culture that celebrates the virtues of analogue technologies and offline experiences. In popular expressions of the analogue idyll, digital technologies are presented as addictive, unnatural, unhealthy, and harmful. The analogue, by contrast, is presented as the remedy for our digital ailment.

If digital connectivity was once celebrated for its emancipatory potential (Castells, 1996), today it is being blamed for a proliferating array of societal ills (Turkle 2011, 2015; McChesney, 2013; van Dijck, 2013). Disinformation and fake news. Toxic viewpoints amplified by algorithmic filter bubbles. Social media and smartphone 'addiction'. Binge-watching and brain rot. Doom scrolling. Cyberbullying. Dwindling attention spans. Relentless data-based surveillance ('dataveillance'). Targeted political adver-

tising. Internet scams and data breaches. Discourses about the negative impacts of constant connectivity on human health and wellbeing are proliferating in public life and the mass media. Social media platforms have sat at the centre of numerous moral panics (exacerbated by documentaries like *The Social Dilemma* [2020]), with some critics even suggesting that these platforms need 'warning labels' (Gerken, 2024). Digital discontent intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many forms of social life were rerouted online, leading to a surge in utilization of digital technologies and backlash against them (Tai, Xiao, and He, 2021; Treré, 2021; Kuntsman, Martin, and Miyake, 2023). According to a 2025 survey carried out by the British Standards Institution (BSI, 2025), 47 per cent of young people aged between 16 and 21 would prefer to grow up in a world without internet. The survey also found that 68 per cent of respondents felt worse about themselves after spending time online. The rising tide of digital disillusionment was captured in 2018 when the word 'techlash' – a portmanteau of 'technology' and 'backlash', referring to a growing distrust of big tech companies – was shortlisted for the Oxford English Dictionary's 'Word of the Year'.

Amid this digital backlash there has been growing interest in – and celebration of – analogue media technologies and offline or 'IRL' ('in real life') experiences. Sales of vinyl records are the highest they have been in 30 years, with vinyl reportedly outselling streaming subscriptions (Titcomb, 2022) and independent record shops experiencing a major resurgence (Evitts and Trenholm, 2024) (Figure 1.1). Printed books are outselling eBooks, and Gen Z are apparently turning to libraries to escape the 'oversaturation and noise' of the digital world (Mac Donnell, 2024; see also Sweney, 2020). The jigsaw puzzle and boardgame industries are thriving (Sweney, 2021; Thorén, 2021; Kviat, 2024). Audio cassette production has been rejuvenated, and new cassette players are being brought to market (Ledsom, 2020; Savage, 2021). Polaroid has re-launched its line of instant film cameras, while Kodak is releasing its first new super 8 film camera in decades. Celluloid filmmaking is experiencing a resurgence, with an increasing number of films being shot on 35 mm and 70 mm (IMAX). Promotional campaigns for these productions often emphasize the immersive experience of watching the film in a cinema, aiming to draw audiences away from digital streaming platforms and encourage them to head offline, back into movie theatres (the timespace of the cinema itself is being reframed by some theatre owners as a temporary 'digital detox' where audiences switch off their mobile phones and disconnect from the distractions of the digital world). Typewriter repair shops are opening. Postcards are making a comeback (Skopeliti, 2024). Artists are engaging with analogue printing and production methods, creating handcrafted zines, posters, and other paper-based ephemera (Crocket, 2024; Seedlings Studio, 2024). The renewed popularity of handmade goods and craft production has been linked to a broader cultural desire for 'the material, the tactile, the analogue' in a digital age (Luckman, 2013: 251). Sales of Moleskine notebooks are soaring, with 'good old fashioned' pen and paper increasingly perceived as a way to avoid smartphones and remain focused and creative (Yuan, 2021; Allen, 2024). Paper-based offices are making a comeback as workflow managers attribute productivity declines to

employees' digital overload from continuous emails and notifications (Newport, 2021: 249; Taylor et al, 2026). According to one workplace productivity report, 96 per cent of officer workers in the United States prefer to work with hard copies over digital versions (Paper and Packaging, 2019). Paper is also being positioned as a solution to digital problems such as cyberattacks and data loss. Amid a growing number of large-scale cyberattacks disrupting the operations of major corporations, firms are being told that contingency plans should be backed up on paper in case they become inaccessible during a cyberattack (Tidy, 2025). Art projects like Kenneth Goldsmith's 'Printing out the Internet' (2013) and Michael Mandiberg's 'Print Wikipedia' (2015) underscore the fragility of digital storage media and suggest that, despite popular narratives that present digitization as technological 'progress', analogue formats like paper and microfilm remain better suited for long-term preservation. Even the protagonists in top-grossing blockbusters are celebrating the affordances of analogue media.[1]

Figure 1.1: Riverman Records, an independent record store in Oxford (UK)

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[1] In the 2022 'whodunit' film *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*, tech billionaire Miles Bron (played by Edward Norton) doesn't own a mobile phone and insists on using an old fax machine, exclaiming that 'there's something about analogue'.

This fascination with the analogue is further evidenced by the rising popularity of digital detox retreats and device-free public spaces, which promise to provide over-connected users with respite from the frenzied anxieties that come with 'always on' digital lifestyles (Fish, 2017; Sutton, 2017, 2020; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020; Pennington, 2021). By creating offline spaces where the internet is not accessible or users are not allowed to use their digital devices, digital detox businesses strategically construct 'analogue' oases free from digital noise and distraction (Stäheli and Stoltenberg, 2024). Cafes, pubs, and night clubs are banning smartphones or establishing laptop-free and 'Wi-Fi-free' ('No-Fi') zones with the hope of rekindling vanishing forms of pre-digital sociality, and, in the process, conveniently reducing the number of laptop-using customers occupying tables for lengthy periods of time (Figure 1.2) (The Guardian 2024; Kviat, this volume). Samuel Smith's – a UK brewery which operates over 200 pubs – prohibits mobile phones, laptops, Kindles, TVs, and even electronic payments in their establishments. On their website they promote their pubs as 'havens from the digital world' (Samuel Smith's, 2021). Celebrities are also cashing in on the digital detox trend, with footballer Cristiano Ronaldo opening a club in Madrid where mobile phones are banned (Monroe, 2025). In 2015, a photo of a sign in a London cafe that read 'We do not have WiFi ... Talk to each other. Pretend it's 1995' went viral (Ewen, 2020). The sign struck a chord with many, inspiring other cafes to adopt similar positions. Lack of Wi-Fi (or restricted Wi-Fi) was reframed as an asset rather than a limitation – offering customers an opportunity to disconnect from digital pressures and reconnect with one another. The sign has since been widely reproduced, spawning multiple copies, with various versions now available for purchase online. The virality of this image is reflective of a wider nostalgia for forms of social interaction and spontaneous encounters that many imagine *used* to take place in cafes, as idealized in 1990s sitcoms like *Friends* (1994–2004), but have declined in the digital era, as customers sit isolated on their smartphones and laptops. As literary critic John Freeman (2009: 99) observes, 'Whereas once cafés were filled with people talking to one another or reading books or newspapers, now you will find people sitting alone before the glowing screen of their laptop, typing emails, working on documents'.

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Popular modes of critiquing digital culture often express concern that social media and smartphones have eroded 'face-to-face' or 'in-person' conversation, resulting in superficial and inauthentic interactions.[2] For this reason, dating apps are in decline

[2] Curiously, the terms 'face-to-face' and 'in-person' are now often used to describe offline interactions, when it would be more accurate to simply use the term 'offline'. When we meet online via a video call, we are still technically conversing face-to-face (hence the name of Apple's video calling app 'FaceTime') and we are still technically meeting 'in-person' (can we meet someone 'out-of-person'?). The common use of 'face-to-face' and 'in-person' to describe offline meetings is a good example of how everyday language constructs the digital as disembodied and dematerialized.

Figure 1.2: The Blue Bell is a cash-only pub in York (UK) and asks patrons not to converse on their mobile phones on the premises
Source: The Blue Bell, York

as people head offline in search of a 'more authentic way to find connections' (Macdonald, 2025). 'Logging off' clubs have also been established that run 'IRL events to reconnect with yourself and others' (loggingoffclub, 2025). Self-help books about 'digital exhaustion' (Leonardi, 2025) and 'digital minimalism' (Newport, 2019) aim to help over-connected users take control of the addictive design logics of social media platforms and smartphones. With a whole range of products and services now targeting digital disconnection, the analogue has become big business.

New markets have also emerged for 'dumb' digital devices that are not connected to the internet (in contrast to devices that are rendered 'smart' through internet access) (Bearne, 2022). In May 2024, Nokia launched a reconfigured version of their famous 3210 feature phone, which was originally released in 1999. The phone has no app functionality and an extremely low-spec camera, which, according to the press release, encourages users to 'return to simpler times' and 'get back to reality' (HMD, 2024a). Released by the phone manufacturer HMD (which stands for 'Human Mobile Devices'), the focus of the phone, we are told, is on 'conversations' rather than the 'likes and shares' of social media culture (HMD, 2024b). Even though the phone is technically a digital device, HMD nevertheless promote it as 'a solution for a digital detox in a world where almost four in ten (38%) of 16–24 years olds worry they spend too much time on their smartphone' (HMD, 2024a). Video games players are also heading offline, opting to play retro games without the stress that can come with online gaming (Banfield-Nwachi, 2025). Though not strictly analogue, the revival of these offline digital technologies is part of a larger economy dedicated to internet disconnection that has now surfaced.

This interest in analogue media and offline experiences has not gone unnoticed. Many journalists have now penned columns about the 'vinyl revival' or charted the 'return' of various analogue media technologies. Marketing strategists and trend analysts have developed insight papers about the turn to the offline in experience-orientated consumerism, which revolves around brick-and-mortar stores and immersive, multisensory experiences (GEP, 2024). In 2016, journalist David Sax mapped the rising popularity of all-things analogue in his book, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*, which became an international bestseller. Media and cultural studies scholars have also explored the growing appeal of analogue technologies (Luckman, 2013; Cramer, 2014; Niemeyer, 2014; Wieghorst, 2021) and the different ways that users unplug, opt out, disengage, and abstain from using digital technologies or online services (Casemajor et al, 2015; Brennen, 2019; Kuntsman and Miyazaki, 2019; Natale and Treré, 2020; Fast, 2021; Helsper, 2021; Lomborg and Ytre-Arne, 2021; Syvertsen, 2022; Albris et al, 2024). Noting the prevalance of discourses and practices related to disengaging from digital culture, André Jansson and Paul C. Adams (2021: 3) have suggested that the study of digital disconnection will 'define social science in the 2020s', much in the same way that the study of networking dominated the 2000s

and 2010s.[3] In short, despite the unending drive towards digitization that big tech platforms and governments around the world are encouraging, analogue technologies and offline products and experiences are thriving.

The analogue idyll

The chapters collected here explore this growing enthusiasm for the analogue across a diverse range of contexts. The conceptual framework of the 'analogue idyll' structures the volume and refers to discourses, representations, imaginaries, and practices that promote or celebrate the positive affordances of the analogue. In literary studies, an 'idyll' is a pastoral poem or prose composition that depicts a highly romanticized and idealized rural life, traditionally celebrating the simplicity and innocent pleasures of shepherding.[4] This idyllic life was often located nostalgically in a past 'golden age' that was imagined to be simpler and more meaningful, a world that has since been irrevocably lost.[5] In eighteenth-century Britain, in a society that was undergoing sweeping urbanization and industrialization, the English Romantics projected many of the values associated with the pastoral idyll onto the countryside. In romantic painting and literature, the countryside was often presented through a nostalgic lens as a slower-paced, healthier, and happier place – a remnant of the past – in contrast to the frenzy, vice, and artificiality of modern urban life. These romanticized and idealized representations of the countryside have been critically conceptualized as expressive of the 'rural idyll' (Strathern, 1982; Rapport and Overing, 2003). Historian Jeremy Burchardt (2017: 65) notes that, as a critical concept, the rural idyll 'is a useful shorthand to describe a congeries of positive attitudes towards, and representations of, rural life and landscapes'. More than simply demarcating a spatial division between the rural and urban, evocations or representations of the rural idyll often express broader concerns about temporality, technology, progress, modernity, and the future (Marx, 1964; Williams, 1973).

Many of the idealized values that have historically been accorded to the rural are now being attributed to the analogue. If the rural idyll offered a vision of a time and place free from the malaise of urban life, the analogue idyll offers a vision of a time and place free from the malaise of digital life. In contrast to the speed, artificiality, and toxicity of the digital world, the analogue world provides opportunities to slow down and experience more 'authentic' and 'meaningful' social interaction. The analogue is

[3] For an analysis of the turn to disconnection in the social sciences beyond the study of digital culture, see Candea et al (2015).

[4] The Greek poet Theocritus (mid-third century BC), whose poems were known as Idylls ('eidullia'), is often celebrated as the founder of Ancient Greek bucolic or pastoral poetry (Hunter, 2002).

[5] Hesiod, writing in ninth century BC also looked back to a bucolic golden age (Short, 2006). The Roman poet Virgil would later further popularize the notion of the bucolic golden age, with his mythologizing of the unspoilt landscape of the Greek province of Arcadia in the *Eclogues* (Burchardt, 2002).

typically presented as an unmediated space that is closer to nature or more natural than the digital. As Clara Wieghorst and Lea Zierott (2021: 80) note, '"the analog" describes a pristine state or a space free of any media'. The analogue idyll presents an appealing possibility: that there are still spaces untouched by digital technology where one can escape the relentless demands of networked life.[6] Often this 'outside' is imagined quite literally as the outdoors, where one can immerse oneself in nature. The persistent association between the analogue world and the natural world may stem from the perception that analogue technologies are older than digital technologies and, as such, are part of an analogue past where human beings were 'more inherently connected to nature' (Sterne, 2016: 42).

Constructions of the analogue idyll often have a spatial dynamic that resembles that of the town/countryside divide that structures the rural idyll. With internet connectivity widely available in cities, efforts to disconnect from digital technologies and experience the analogue often involve heading out into the 'wild'. Rural and remote areas have thus become key sites for digital detox retreats, promising rest, rejuvenation, and purification from digital exhaustion (Figure 1.3).

As Vanessa Bartlett and Henrietta Bowden-Jones (2017: 11) note, 'Earth, food, and the natural environment are often seen as the ultimate antidote to digital overload'. The analogue idyll often abuts with popular imaginaries of 'wilderness' as a space far removed from the malaise of modernity (Cronon, 1996). Even if the internet and mobile phone coverage are increasingly accessible in wilderness areas, the wild is nevertheless imagined as an analogue space where one can momentarily escape digital life. In some cases, the increasing reach of digital connectivity is also reconfiguring conceptualizations of 'wilderness'. As digital expansionism aggressively continues to accelerate (albeit unevenly, and in ways that often reproduce historical patterns of marginalization and inequality), Wi-Fi signals, mobile phone networks, and other forms of electromagnetic radiation (or 'e-smog') from telecommunications infrastructure increasingly 'pollute' wild spaces.[7] Apps like the White Spots app help people find signal-free 'dead zones' (sometimes known as 'white zones') with low levels of electromagnetic radiation (Pearce and Gretzel, 2012; Wieghorst and Zierott 2021: 83). We are now seeing conservation projects arising to protect the few remaining electromagnetic radiation-free zones where it is imagined that pristine disconnection can still be experienced. In France and Italy, two 'refuge zones' (in the province of Drôme in southeastern France and within the Vena del Gesso Regional Park in northeastern Italy) have been established by people who suffer from electromagnetic hypersensi-

[6] Cultural theorist Steven Shaviro (2003: 64) has observed: 'In an increasingly networked world, escape is nearly impossible. ... You cannot opt out of the network entirely, but at the very least, you can try to be connected a little less'. Others have also spoken of the difficulty of opting out of networked society when connectivity is made so easy. Galloway and Thacker (2007: 126) point out that with Wi-Fi, 'the very air you breathe is a domain of access'.

[7] As Freeman (2009: 204) notes, 'Fewer and fewer parts of the world will be untouched by wireless Internet access'.

tivity (for whom the radiation emitted from digital devices negatively impacts their health and wellbeing). In the UK, protestors have challenged the installation of 4G masts in the Knoydart peninsula in the Scottish Highlands (Cocker, 2023), an area that has been deemed 'Britain's last wilderness' (Gillespie, 2016), partly due its lack of mobile phone and internet coverage. Digital divides certainly endure (Ali, 2021), but satellite-based internet projects (like Elon Musk's Starlink and Jeff Bezos' Project Kuiper) are driven by visions of ubiquitous connectivity, where consumers can access Amazon.com from locations as wild and remote as the Amazon rainforest. Jonathan Crary (2013: 30) observes that the reach of the internet means that 'no moment, place, or situation now exists in which one can *not* shop, consume, or exploit networked resources'. Indeed, the ultimate dream of surveillance capitalism is for internet access to be available 'everyware', with the eventual aim of eliminating spaces or times where it is possible to exist offline.

Figure 1.3: Camp Grounded, a digital detox retreat in the redwoods of North California (35mm analogue photo)
Source: Theodora Sutton

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At the same time, the analogue idyll is not quite as spatially determined as the rural idyll. Disconnecting from the digital world does not always take place in rural areas or even outside – one can take time away from a digital device at home or within a city. It is not the argument of this book that digital connectivity has now thoroughly networked the rural, to the point that the rural idyll is no longer a viable myth and the analogue idyll has arisen to take its place. One of the reasons why digital detoxes often occur outside of urban environments is precisely because the rural is still perceived to be less networked than the urban. The emergence of new communications technologies – from the telegraph to the telephone to the internet – has always prompted concerns that the speed and stress of modernity will reach the countryside. In fact, the notion that the countryside is endangered or under threat is a central animating element of the rural idyll. Whether due to telecommunications, industrialization, developments in transportation, or urban sprawl and counter-urbanization, invocations of the rural idyll often position the countryside as existing in a state of imminent erasure. Similarly, evocations of the analogue idyll sometimes position the analogue as a domain that is in danger of vanishing as digital technologies and practices become ever more omnipresent. We see this in debates about the loss of handwriting skills as schools increasingly prioritize touch typing (Rosen, 2025), laments about the decline of print media (Freeman, 2009: 177–9), and concerns about the waning conversation skills of younger generations.[8]

The analogue has thus surfaced as an increasingly valuable repository of meaning in a sociocultural milieu that is overwhelmingly digital. In everyday parlance, it is not uncommon to speak of '*the* analogue', as a noun phrase, to refer broadly to the domain of the offline. In its noun construction, the analogue is typically evoked to describe an idealized space, practice, or way of life, that is perceived to be slower, and more authentic, natural, and real than the digital, which is construed as fake and artificial (Robinson, 2008: 21). This expansive understanding has allowed for a range of things beyond technology to be described as 'analogue', including reality itself (with the 'real' or 'analogue' world often opposed to the 'unreal' or 'unnatural' digital world), and, amid the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), the human. If someone prefers to take notes using a pen and paper rather than a smartphone, they may describe themselves as an 'analogue' person (Schrey, 2014: 33; Taylor and Ewen, this volume). If one chooses to live offline, detached from the internet, one could be said to be living an 'analogue life' (Wieghorst and Zierott, 2021: 80). As Derek Robinson (2008: 21) summarizes, the term 'analogue' has come to connote 'something authentic and natural, against the artificial, arbitrarily truncated precision of the digital'.

[8] In *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art* (2006), Stephen Miller refers to mobile phones, iPods, computers, video games, and other digital technologies as 'conversation avoidance devices' (Miller, 2006: 282) and argues that these technologies are contributing to what he identifies as a decline in 'real' conversation, with people losing the skills and confidence to communicate offline. For similar perspectives, see Locke (1998) and Turkle (2015).

Underpinning the analogue idyll are multiple binary opposites that often overlap and interlink (Table 1.1). The analogue is conceived as the opposite of digital, as old rather than new, as natural rather than unnatural. The next sections of this chapter explore some of these associations to more closely examine what is at stake in evocations of the analogue idyll.

Table 1.1: Binary opposites that often align with popular conceptualizations of the analogue/digital distinction

Analogue	Digital
Non-computational	Computational
Offline	Online
Old	New
Natural	Artificial
Rural	Urban
Real	Fake
Material	Immaterial
Physical	Non-physical
Tactile	Non-tactile
Tangible	Intangible
True	False
Unmediated	Mediated
Healthy	Unhealthy

Analogue, digital, post-digital

The term 'analogue' can span several meanings and senses. In the technical-scientific domain of audio-visual signal processing, analogue and digital refer to distinct signal formats. Analogue signals are continuously variable waves, while digital signals are transmitted in discrete units of countable binary 1s and 0s (Figure 1.4).[9] In some contexts, these underlying technical properties form the basis for the celebration of the analogue over the digital. For example, an audiophile may celebrate the sonic properties of vinyl records and express concern that 'something' is lost in the music when the continuous and variable waves of analogue audio are converted into the discrete binary units of digital data required for a compact disc (CD), MP3 file, or streaming. As Pinch and Trocco (2002: 319) highlight, for some audio enthusiasts, 'digital sound is too perfect, too clean, too cold – they long instead for the imperfections of the warm, fuzzy, dirty analog sound'.[10]

[9] As Stewart Brand (1987: 18) notes, 'Analog is continuous, digital is discrete' (see also Goodman, 1968: 159–164).

[10] On analogue purity, see Palm (this volume). For a discussion of analogue imperfection, see Wieghorst (2021: 211–212).

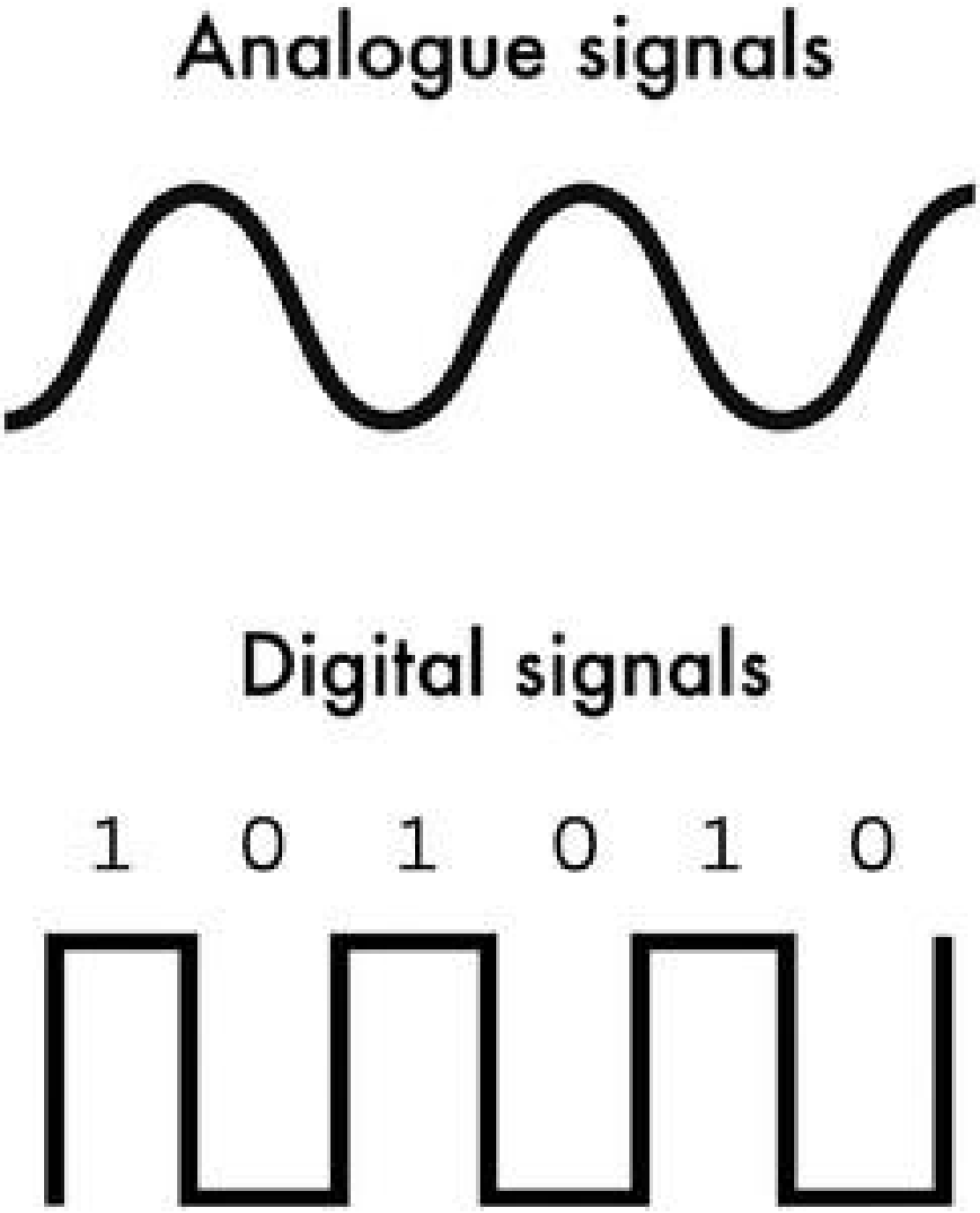

Figure 1.4: A representation of analogue and digital signals
Source: A.R.E. Taylor

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Beyond the technical distinctions of information transmission, in common usage today, 'analogue' typically refers loosely to any technology that does not contain computational electronics and the term is often treated as a synonym for the 'non-computational', 'non-digital', or 'offline'. An example definition of this usage comes from journalist David Sax (2016: xiv), for whom the analogue,

is the opposite of digital. Digital is the language of computers, the binary codes of 1's and 0's, which in endless combination allow computer hardware and software to communicate and calculate. If something is connected to the Internet, runs with the help of software, or is accessed by a computer, it is digital. Analog is the yin to digital's yang, the day to its night. It doesn't require a computer to function, and most often analog exists in the physical world (as opposed to the virtual one).

Media scholars may find this definition problematic because it positions the analogue and digital in a rigid binary opposition that overlooks historical and technical nuance. Distinctions between analogue and digital are complex and often overlap in practice. For example, digital technologies are manufactured from and rely on analogue materials, as visual culture theorist Florian Cramer (2014: 20) highlights: 'The electricity in a computer chip is analog, as its voltage can have arbitrary, undifferentiated values within a specific range ... the sound waves produced by a sound card and a speaker are analog.' Another problem with using the term analogue to refer to anything non-computational or pre-computational is that this fails to capture historical complexity. Computers have not always been *digital* machines. Early electronic computers were known as analogue computers because they used continuously variable physical data (electrical, mechanical, or hydraulic quantities) to simulate models that stood in *analogical* relationship to the problem that was being modelled (Robinson, 2008). 'Analogue' in this sense refers to something that is comparable to something else (for example, when space engineers use Earth's deserts as 'analogue' sites to test equipment in environments or conditions similar – analogous – to Mars).[11] The operating of analogue computers was not based on binary digits (bits) but on the processing of continuous data from physical phenomena (such as voltage, temperature, water, or sound waves) that behave in ways analogous to the problem being solved. A mercury thermometer could be considered an example of a very basic analogue computer, where the expansion of the mercury is directly proportional to the temperature. Digital computers process data in discrete, binary units that can only be either 0 or 1, representing the 'on' and 'off' states of electrical switches within the computer, rather than a continuous range of values like an analogue computer.[12]

[11] This meaning of analogue to signify similarity or comparison stems from the Ancient Greek ἀνάλογος (análogos), meaning 'proportionate' (Galloway, 2022: 212).

[12] Derek Robinson (2008: 23) notes that 'digital computers operate on binary 1s and 0s rather than continuous voltages'.

Just as the term analogue has come to stand in for everything and anything that exists 'outside computers' (Sterne, 2016: 37), in a colloquial sense 'digital' now often refers to anything computational or connected to the internet.[13] Originally stemming from the Latin *digitus*, meaning finger or toe (human 'digits'), digital broadly refers to 'something that is divided into discrete, countable units' (Cramer, 2014: 15). In this original sense of the term, many things that today we might not typically consider related to computing could be classed as digital. For example, the paper punch card system that employees once used to clock in and out of work is a digital system because it represents information (an employee's presence or absence) using discrete states in the form of holes punched in predefined positions that unambiguously log when an employee began and concluded their work. A guitar's fingerboard is technically a digital system because frets divide it into discrete notes, in contrast to the fingerboard of a violin, which is not divided by frets and therefore offers a continuous range of notes (Cramer, 2014: 16). An abacus could be considered an example of a non-electronic digital system because it represents values discretely via beads that are either at one end of the rod or the other (though it could also be considered an analogue system because the beads can slide across a continuous range of ambiguous positions on the rod).

Prior to the development of digital computing in the mid-twentieth century, analogue machines were the norm and, as such, the analogue nature of something was not remarkable.[14] It wasn't until the 1990s, when digital computers, mobile phones, and the internet had become pervasive, that the term 'analogue' became a meaningful category for understanding and describing anything that was 'not digital' (Sterne, 2016: 31; Palm, 2019: 644). In this sense, the analogue only became discenerable *after* the digital – which complicates simple media histories structured around the periodization of the 'analogue era' preceding the 'digital era'.

The analogue and digital have long co-existed. Scholars of media nostalgia have complicated simple distinctions that easily separate the analogue and the digital by exploring the vast range of practices through which analogue aesthetics are incorporated into digital media (Marks, 2002; Bishop, 2012; Niemeyer, 2014; Sapio, 2014; Schrey, 2014; Wieghorst, 2021). Social media filters enable users to add analogue-looking sepia tones, film grains, and effects to the photos they post online (Bartholeyns, 2014; see also Böhn, 2007). 'Analog Horror' is an internet-based subgenre of the found footage

[13] In fact, just as 'digital' now almost strictly refers to the computational, in everyday parlance the word 'technology' has increasingly come to refer narrowly to digital or computational hardware, a shift in meaning that overlooks entire histories of non-computational technology, from wooden spears to spectacles.

[14] This is not to say that there were not hierarchies attached to analogue technologies. For example, typewriters which are revered for their analogue charm today were once considered examples of the mechanization and industrialization of the writing process because they reduced the infinite variation, expressiveness, and continuous flow of cursive handwriting (an analogue system) into invariable, discrete letters (for this reason, in a technical sense, typewriters can be considered a digital writing system [see Cramer, 2014: 16]).

horror film that uses stock analogue effects, such as the static of cathode ray tube (CRT) TV sets or the colour shifts and visual distortions of VHS players, to make digital films feel more analogue (Balanzategui, 2023). In these cases, the analogue is not opposed to the digital but is enabled and remediated by digital technologies. Beyond digitized analogue aesthetics, much of contemporary analogue culture is enabled by the internet, which provides users with new opportunities to engage with the analogue. Artists post their analogue artworks or Polaroid photos on social media. Many analogue technologies – from vinyl records to discontinued Super 8 cameras – can only be found via online sites like eBay (see Palm, this volume). Digital detox retreats rely on websites and social media to attract customers (who, in turn, often post or blog about their revitalizing time offline when they return online). The supposed comeback of print magazines in the video gaming community has been enabled by cheap and accessible desktop publishing software (Stuart, 2022).

Analogue and digital technologies cannot be so easily disentangled from each other (Elwell, 2014; Thorén et al, 2019; Fortunati and O'Sullivan, 2020). As such, rather than imagine media histories in terms of linear trajectories from an 'analogue age' to a 'digital age', a close focus on technological complexity and overlaps highlights that we live in multiple 'ages' at the same time (Wieghorst, 2021: 208). Media scholars have developed concepts such as 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) and 'residual media' (Acland, 2007) to capture the ways that media technologies blend and blur into one another in ways that trouble simple histories constructed around rigid divisions between 'old' and 'new' media or 'analogue' and 'digital' technologies (Edgerton, 2006). In this sense, the term 'post-digital' has been used in an effort to develop a more heterochronic perspective on media history that 'allows for the simultaneity of the analogue and the digital' (Wieghorst, 2021: 222). The post-digital describes a cultural moment in which digital, analogue, and hybrid digital/analogue technologies, aesthetics, and experiences co-exist simultaneously (Cramer, 2014; Berry and Dieter, 2015). Similarly, trend analysts have used the term 'newstalgia' (Jackson, 2023) to refer to the incorporation of analogue or retro aesthetics in new digital devices, such as the music systems that are designed to appear like vintage radios and often feature a CD player, cassette player, analogue and digital radio, Bluetooth connectivity for streaming, and a turntable for playing vinyl records (Figure 1.5).

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In a reversal of popular media histories, Alexander Galloway (2022) has argued that the golden age of analogue should not be understood as having occurred in a past, pre-digital era (when everything was analogue and therefore the analogue was unexceptional), but as unfolding *now*, in response to digitization (when the analogue has emerged as a distinct and revered category within a culture that is overwhelmingly

Figure 1.5: The GPO Chesterton music system combines multiple analogue and digital audio options and is nostalgically designed to look like a vintage music player
Source: GPO Retro

digital). The golden age of analogue refers to our current fetishization and celebration of the analogue. Galloway argues that academia has also been experiencing its own golden age of analogue, highlighting that it is no coincidence that the 'distinctly nondigital themes' (Galloway, 2022: 211) of new materialism, affect, the senses, and object-oriented ontologies, all of which have arisen over the last two decades amidst the increasing digitization of society, as key areas of scholarly focus. These disciplinary turns to 'analogue' theorization mark an effort to place a renewed focus on the body and materiality in reaction to what is often understood as the dematerializing effects of digitization. Others have also complicated linear trajectories that place the analogue prior to the digital, noting that 'The analog only acquires its fascination by the juxtaposition with the digital' (Stäheli and Stoltenberg, 2024: 1061). It is only in response to the digital that the analogue came to be retrospectively understood as 'natural', 'real', or 'authentic'. The positive values attributed to the analogue today are thus retroactive (Sterne, 2016: 40).

There is thus considerable discussion and debate around current usage of the terms 'analogue' and 'digital' among media and communications scholars. While theorists may argue for the need to move beyond these simplistic binary concepts (Jurgenson, 2011; Thorén et al, 2019) or may propose hybrid concepts such as 'digilog' (Barry, 2014) or 'digitalized analogue' (Fortunati and O'Sullivan, 2020), in popular culture, imagined distinctions between the analogue and digital remain meaningful and are persistently evoked. Rather than engage in what Stäheli and Stoltenberg (2024: 1069) call the often 'fruitless conceptual discussion of defining analog and digital media', the framework of the analogue idyll directs attention to the practices, discourses, representations, and imaginaries through which positive values come to be attached to the analogue. In doing so, the contributors to this volume do not suggest that these positive values are inherent properties or fixed characteristics of the analogue technologies or experiences being discussed. Taking invocations of the analogue idyll seriously, the chapters collected here examine how different actors in different cultural contexts construct this narrative and how invocations of the analogue idyll makes distinctions between the analogue and digital socially meaningful. Whether or not we agree that the analogue is more authentic or less harmful than the digital, this is the broad cultural attitude and, as such, has an impact on how growing numbers of people live their lives and relate to digital technologies. As a critical concept the analogue idyll offers one way that we can begin to explore the socially constructed nature of narratives that romanticize or celebrate pre-digital and offline life.

By focusing on 'analogue' as much as 'disconnection' this volume expands the scope of work in digital disconnection studies by making room to consider cultural activities and forms of experience that might not so easily be described as 'disconnective practices' (Light, 2014) but nevertheless celebrate the non-digital. Indeed, popular esteem for the analogue is not only enacted through disconnection from digital media. While some engagements with analogue media may be carried out in response to a dislike for digital media, or to avoid the internet or abstain from using smartphones, enthu-

siasm for the analogue does not preclude engaging with digital technologies (one can simultaneously appreciate the sonic properties of vinyl records whilst still enjoying the convenience of streaming via Spotify).

Commodifying the analogue

A growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship is now analysing the many ways that individuals are disconnecting from the internet or spending time away from digital devices. Concerned about digital overuse, users are abandoning their social media accounts (Karppi, 2011, 2018; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Foot 2014; Jorge, 2019; Baym, Wagman, and Persaud, 2020; Chia, Jorge, and Karppi, 2021; Feldman, 2021) and abstaining from using their smartphones and other technologies (Ytre-Arne et al, 2020). The scholarly field of digital disconnection studies builds on a longstanding body of media and communications research on media abstention, technology non-use, and news avoidance (Kraybill and Olshan, 1994; Selwyn, 2006; Portwood-Stacer, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Syvertsen, 2017; Hardey and Atkinson, 2018; Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020). Research on technology resistance and refusal has demonstrated that focusing on non-use can yield insights into the social dimensions of technology that are equally as valuable as those derived from studying its use (Wyatt, Thomas, and Terranova, 2002; Selwyn, 2003, 2006; Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003; Baumer et al, 2014; Wyatt, 2014). Practices of digital disconnection resemble earlier forms of media and technological resistance that emerged in response to modern technologies such as the telephone (Kline, 2003), cinema (Grieveson, 2004), and television (Krcmar, 2009). This larger body of work on technology refusal highlights that acts of disconnecting or opting out from techno-capitalism are not new and unfold across a continuum of positions, ranging from the ideological resistance of anti-tech radicals who live in a state of permanent politicized disconnection from the conveniences of modernity (such as the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski [Fleming, 2022]), to those who strive to mindfully balance their consumption of media services (Kitchin and Fraser, 2020). What is new with current forms of digital disconnection is the normalization of these practices today. Early studies of media refusal largely focused on individuals or communities that existed on the peripheries of society by virtue of their disconnection from media services. These were people that were often constructed as 'deviant' because their lifestyles subverted the norm of connectivity – whether that was connection to media services or electrical and gas grids (Vannini and Taggert, 2013, 2015). In our current moment, dominated by the perception that digital technology has become perniciously pervasive, disconnection is the 'new normal'.

Another novelty about current practices of disconnection is that they are often not framed as subversive or radical. Rather, users are actively encouraged (increasingly, by tech companies themselves) to take time away from their digital devices. This invites us to reflect on who, beyond the user, benefits from digital disconnection and in whose

interest moral panics about the dangers of digital overuse operate. Driven by discourses of techno-anxiety, the current popularity of digital disconnection has given rise to lucrative new markets and commercial opportunities that revolve around the nostalgic romanticization and commodification of 'the analogue', in its broadest sense. Self-help gurus and digital detox providers perpetuate the analogue idyll trope, promoting the restorative benefits of disconnecting in order to profit from the health concerns of over-connected users. The analogue is constructed as the domain for self-actualization, where users will rediscover their more authentic selves, regain control over their digital vices, and learn to become newly productive. In response to intensifying public and political fears about the impact of social media and smartphones on health and wellbeing, and in efforts to forestall government regulation, big tech companies have developed numerous apps and smartphone features (such as night modes and screen-time monitoring) that aim to promote 'digital wellbeing' (Mulvin, 2018; Beattie and Daubs, 2020). An entire economy of commercial apps has also arisen with the aim of helping users cultivate mindful connectivity by reminding them to take breaks to rest and repair (Kopitz, this volume). Many of these apps adopt the language of mindfulness and spirituality, encouraging users to subscribe to their services with promises of relaxation and recovery from digital overload. Mindfulness and other ancient practices formerly associated with Eastern philosophy now form the basis of what Ronald Purser (2019) calls the 'new capitalist spirituality'. Co-opted by the forces of commercialization and re-packaged as a 'privatized self-help technique' (Natale and Treré, 2020: 628), mindfulness has become a key tool of the digital disconnection industry and is often promoted on digital detox courses as a technique through which individuals can learn to more effectively manage their relationship with digital technologies. Efforts to resolve the many complex issues associated with digital technologies by simply disconnecting or taking a temporary 'detox' thus bolster an exploitative self-help industry which reconfigures social problems into personal problems where the individual user is blamed for their immoderate media consumption and charged with taking responsibility.

Digital wellbeing apps, self-help books, and digital detox retreats must be understood within the larger contexts of individual responsibilization and self-optimization that have been identified as characteristic features of neoliberal capitalism (Madsen, 2015; Syvertsen and Enli, 2020). Under neoliberal modes of power, governments step back from the provision of care and welfare. Rather than regulate big tech, responsibility is placed on individuals to exercise self-control and manage the pressures of constant connectivity by moderating their social media or smartphone use. This facilitates a culture in which individual users are chastized, blamed, or encouraged to feel ashamed if their media consumption is considered excessive (and, conversely, where individuals who practice disciplined moderation are praised and revered as good neoliberal subjects). Underpinning many digital wellbeing narratives is the ideology of 'productivity' (Gregg, 2018) and the idea that the self is a project that one is expected to continually work upon, to improve and optimize. For productivity gurus, while digital technologies can enhance productivity, one must carefully and mindfully navigate

their addictive design, taking regular breaks or detoxes to avoid digital exhaustion (Taylor et al, 2026).

We must therefore exercise caution before interpreting analogue practices as forms of cultural resistance. Rather than challenge or dismantle the hegemony of digital connectivity, practices motivated by (or that reproduce) the analogue idyll can inadvertently serve to reinforce digital regimes without addressing the larger power structures of neoliberal capitalism, or the structural issues associated with hegemonic digital connectivity that led to the celebration of the analogue in the first place. For example, digital detoxing bolsters the dominance of digital culture by enabling exhausted users to take a temporary break so that they may return to the digital world, reinvigorated, refreshed, and ready to continue (best illustrated by the slogan 'Disconnect to Reconnect' which is used by the digital detox provider Camp Grounded). Detox retreats like Camp Grounded (located in the redwood forests of California and branded as a 'summer camp for adults' where mobile phones and digital devices are banned for the duration of their stay), provide users with a few carnivalesque days of relief from the digital world (Figure 1.6). Anthropological work on carnivals has argued that such events are licensed affairs permitted by dominant culture and, as such, provide a permissible rupture of hegemony. Anthropologist Max Gluckman asserted that while these 'rites of reversal obviously include a protest against the established order', they are ultimately 'intended to preserve and strengthen the established order' (Gluckman, 1965: 109). Rather than provide a space to imagine or realize new relational possibilities with digital technologies, digital detoxing tends to reinforce the existing social order by positioning temporary withdrawal as a simple fix.

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Analogue nostalgia

The commodification of the analogue today must also be seen in relation to the larger commodification of nostalgia in late capitalism. Nostalgia is a central feature of the analogue idyll. A number of media scholars have charted the rise of 'analogue nostalgia', exploring how the use of analogue media or aesthetics often mobilizes 'a longing for former times' (Wieghorst, 2021: 207; see also Marks, 2002; Bishop, 2012; Niemeyer, 2014; Sapio, 2014; Schrey, 2014; Wieghorst, 2021). Analogue nostalgia must be seen as part of fascination in contemporary culture not only with retro technologies – a trend that some have termed 'technostalgia' (Pinch and Reinecke, 2009; Bolin, 2015; van der Heijden, 2015) – but, more broadly with the retro and vintage across spheres of cultural and economic production, including fashion, design, and music (Reynolds, 2012; Guesdon and Le Guern, 2014; Lizardi, 2015). Nostalgia for the analogue today is not only evident in the major revival of interest in analogue media technologies but

Figure 1.6: Carnivalesque activities at the Camp Grounded digital detox retreat in North California (35mm analogue photo)
Source: Theodora Sutton

also in the markets that have emerged for new technologies that are designed to appear vintage.

Nostalgia has been widely theorized as a key cultural logic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Davis, 1979; Jameson, 1988, 1991; Appadurai, 1996; Fisher, 2009, 2014). Svetlana Boym (2001: xiv) situates what she calls the 'global epidemic of nostalgia' in relation to the rise of 'cyberspace and the virtual global village', among other historical developments, and suggests that it is 'a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life'. Interpreted this way, current nostalgia for analogue media and experiences may be seen as the continuation of an extended reaction to the speed and frenzy associated with digital societies. For Fredric Jameson, postmodern culture's fixation with nostalgia was most evident in the proliferation of cinematic images that attempted to recreate the 'feel' or 'vibe' of past times. He introduced the concept of the 'retro mode' or 'nostalgia mode' (Jameson, 1988, 1991) to describe films that are less concerned with historical accuracy and more with imitating past aesthetic forms or offering stylized visions of the past based on selective, superficial, and often clichéd stereotypes associated with a historical period. He argued that this particular cinematic mode approaches 'the "past" through stylistic connotation, conveying "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image' (Jameson, 1991: 19). Certainly, productive parallels can be drawn between Jameson's notion of the nostalgia film and the resurgence of analogue aesthetics and cultural forms today, where 'pastness' is conveyed by adding a film grain filter or sepia tint to an Instagram image. For Jameson and others (Fisher, 2009, 2014), the proliferation of nostalgia films pessimistically signalled a larger loss of our capacity to imagine or create new artistic modes. '[I]n a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible', he observed (1988: 18), 'all that is left is to imitate dead styles'.[15] Jameson's critique is itself infused with a certain sense of loss and nostalgia for a time of original film production, and overlooks the creative possibilities and subversive ways that nostalgic texts recreate, reconfigure, and recycle past aesthetics.

Evocations of the analogue idyll often express a yearning to return to simpler, safer, pre-digital times, and lament the loss of an enchanted and innocent analogue world. People from the 'bridge generation' (sometimes referred to as 'Xennials', a portmanteau of Generation X and Millennials), whose childhoods bridged the pre-internet and post-internet eras, may nostalgically remember analogue media from their youth, such as cassettes or VHS tapes. News articles in the popular press lament the generations 'who came of age online' and 'now feel deprived of real connections' because they 'grew up glued to their screens, and missed the joy of being human' (Hinsliff, 2025). For those born after the widespread adoption of the internet in the early 2000s, analogue nostalgia is often not related to direct experience but harks back to an imagined past that their parents or grandparents may have had. This is nicely captured by one of

[15] Mark Fisher (2009: 59), citing Jameson's work on the postmodern nostalgia mode, similarly described contemporary culture as 'excessively nostalgic, given over to retrospection, incapable of generating any authentic novelty.'

the top YouTube comments (with over 63,000 'thumb ups') on the music video for Lana Del Rey's 2011 song 'Video Games' – a video that makes heavy use of super-8 film throughout. The comment, posted in April 2020, states: 'She makes me feel nostalgic for things I haven't even experienced' (nitikasood1603, 2020). Feeling a sense of longing for a time that you have not directly lived through has been identified as a characteristic element of the experience of nostalgia in late modernity. Writing in the 1990s, cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996) noted that marketing and merchandising techniques were increasingly in the business of manufacturing feelings of nostalgia that were not based on consumers' lived material realities. 'These forms of mass advertising', he highlighted (1996: 77), 'teach consumers to miss things they have never lost'. Appadurai employs a range of terms to try and capture this distinct mode of nostalgia, including 'imagined nostalgia' (77), 'armchair nostalgia' (78), and 'ersatz nostalgia' (82).

The reality crisis and the return of the real

In contemporary culture the analogue is often treated as a synonym for the 'real'. The offline, analogue world is typically conceptualized as 'real life' in contrast to the 'unreal' lives we construct and lead online. Digital detoxers take time away from social media in order to 'get back to reality'. Vinyl enthusiasts may claim that this music format sounds more 'real' than digital audio. Friendships that are developed offline 'in the real world' are often perceived to be more 'real' than the friends – or 'connections' – we make online.

The emergence of the analogue idyll in popular culture cannot be detached from the broader 'reality crisis' (Messeri, 2024) that has unfolded over the last two decades. The reality-distorting filter bubbles of social media algorithms, the 'alternative facts', 'fake news', and 'post-truth' politics that have accompanied the presidencies of Donald Trump, and the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), have all been blamed for loosening the fabric of reality. As philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2015: 43), suggests, 'Increasingly, virtualization and digitalization are making the real disappear'. Prior to these relatively recent reality-fracturing developments, since the 1980s cultural commentators have expressed concerns that new technologies and a highly simulated mediascape have given rise to a world in which it is increasingly difficult to distinguish the real from the fake.[16] The rapid circulation of mediatized images, the increasing affordability and popularity of cosmetic surgery, the enhanced verisimilitude of computer-generated simulations, the popularity of theming in urban planning and development (whereby cities and other spaces are modelled on theme parks, films, or other fantasy-worlds) and the market dominance of genetically modified foods that look and taste better than 'real' (natural/organic) foods, are just some of the developments that theorists

[16] Concerns about technology replacing the real with something fake or unnatural have been a key pillar of modern social theory (see Jurgenson, 2013).

argued were leading to an increasing blurriness between the 'real' and the 'fake' in everyday life (Eco, 1986; Sorkin, 1992; Baudrillard, 1994; Bryman,1999; Dear and Flusty, 1999; Haraway, 2000). Jean Baudrillard (1994) famously used the phrase 'hyperreality' to conceptualize the myriad ways that these developments were reconfiguring our relationship to reality.[17] Hyperreality referred to the ambiguous cultural terrain of late capitalism where differences between the fake and the real could no longer be discerned. The philosopher and semiotician Umberto Eco also used the phrase 'hyperreality' to describe the cultural condition whereby, even if the real and the fake could be identified, the fake was often preferred to the real (or appeared more 'real' than the real) (Eco, 1986; see also Best and Kellner, 1997). Eco famously contrasted his visit to Disneyland (California), which was full of animatronic animals, with a disappointing boat tour of the Mississippi River, where the 'real' crocodiles were not even visible. For Eco (1986: 45–46), Disneyland offered 'a fantasy more real than reality ... and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it'.

The fetishization of the analogue today can be seen as part of a wider cultural thirst for the 'real' in a world that is increasingly assumed to be fake by default. 'Reality' has become a key selling point – or ingredient – in product marketing and advertising. We now live in a world where it is not unusual for burger chains to claim that their burgers are made from 'real' beef, where potato chip packets assert that the chips within are made from 'real' potatoes, or ice cream labels highlight that their product contains 'real' cream (see Figure 1.7). Perhaps not unexpectedly, it is the big corporate brands, whose products are mass-produced and often assumed to contain artificial flavourings, that most often proclaim the 'realness' of their ingredients on the packaging of their products: the label on Heinz's tomato ketchup often states that their condiment is 'grown not made', the word 'real' dramatically dominates the label of Hellmann's mayonnaise; REAL Crisps is the name of a UK brand that manufacture hand-cooked potato chips.

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We can draw parallels between these reality claims and the fixation with 'authenticity' in popular culture (Enli, 2015; Heřmanová, Skey, and Thurnell-Read, 2023). Amid anxieties about the stability of 'reality' and 'truth', authenticity has become a highly valued quality and a key buzzword across social media, tourism, politics, branding, and advertising. Politicians, celebrities, and products must now all stive to appear authentic to appeal to consumers' search for the real in an unreal world.

The association of the analogue with the real is partly underpinned by the perception that the analogue is physical, concrete, and tangible, in contrast to the digital,

[17] Baudrillard's work presumes a singular and shared 'reality' or 'truth'. Such a perspective is decidedly western and overlooks the co-existence of multiple realities and versions of truth (Escobar, 2020; Messeri, 2024).

Figure 1.7: Reality is a key ingredient in McCain's potato smiles, which are 'made with real potato mash'
Source: A.R.E. Taylor

which is often understood as 'virtual', intangible, and existing in an electronic world behind the screens of our devices. The analogue is also often perceived as the domain of truth or truthfulness in contrast to the falsity of online sociality. The next two sections further explore these connections between the analogue and the real to trace how the 'digital' came to embody the falsity and 'de-realization' of contemporary societies.

The materiality of the digital

The persistent association of the analogue with the real is part of a larger history of representing digital media (and the internet in particular) as an immaterial or non-tactile domain that exists in an electronic or 'virtual' realm detached from material reality. This understanding is nicely illustrated by David Sax's (2016: xiv) previously cited claim that 'analog exists in the physical world (as opposed to the virtual one)'. Sax's definition reproduces an old but still prevalent binary view of the digital as a virtual world that is separate from the analogue or 'physical world'.[18] According to this view, the digital world is 'virtual', and the physical world is 'real' (Jurgenson, 2011). Popular metaphors like 'cyberspace', 'virtual world', 'information superhighway', and 'the cloud', which have been used to describe and imagine the internet and other electronic representations, have played an important role in structuring perceptions of digital computation as taking place in an ethereal 'elsewhere' removed from the 'real world' (Taylor, 2022: 216). William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer* popularized the term 'cyberspace', while films like *Tron* (1982) represented the software of a mainframe computer as an 8-bit electronic 'world' made up of neon-grids (Taylor, 2017: 46). This spatial representation of the digital as an electronic realm has also been established through popular films like *The Matrix* (1999), *Wreck-it-Ralph* (2012), and *The Emoji Movie* (2017). We can also see the trope of digital immateriality in Nicholas Negroponte's 1995 book *Being Digital*, in which he famously described digitization as a process involving a shift from 'atoms to bits' (Negroponte, 1995: 4). If atoms are understood to be the basic building blocks of physical matter, Negroponte presents digitization as a process of dematerialization, whereby material atoms are reconfigured into immaterial electronic bits in cyberspace.

While the metaphors that we use to apprehend the digital might appear mundane, political geographer Peter Vujakovic (1998: 158) highlights their social and political power: 'Common acceptance of particular metaphors (propagated or reinforced by the media) may lead to a limited view of an issue and the closure of constructive alternatives.' Metaphors that present the internet as a dematerialized, virtual space or world, overlook the materiality of the digital – or what computer scientist Paul Dourish (2017) has referred to as 'the stuff of bits' – and its social and environmental

[18] The title of Sax's book itself, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*, positions analogue technologies and experiences as 'real' things, and, by extension, suggests that digital technologies and experiences are somehow not real, or less real.

impacts. A significant body of work has now drawn attention to the materiality of the digital (Kirschenbaum, 2008; Blanchette, 2011; Horst and Miller, 2012; Reichert and Richterich, 2015). The binary digits ('bits') that make up the digital representations we see on screen are generated by physical computing machinery, which consists of various mineral and elemental components (Parikka, 2015; Starosielski, 2019), and an extensive infrastructure of fibre-optic cables, data centres, energy networks, human workers, and logistical arrangements of natural resources (Hogan, 2015; Parks and Starosielski, 2015; Starosielski, 2015; Rossiter, 2016; Plantin and Punathambekar, 2019; Taylor, 2019). To continue imagining the internet as an immaterial realm that is separate from material 'reality' is to overlook this massive infrastructure's geopolitical, social, and environmental entanglements with the 'real world' (Ortar et al, 2022).

The pervasive notion that the digital is a non-tactile and intangible realm removed from physical reality and human sensory experience has led to broader concerns that digital life marks a form of sensory impoverishment. Journalist Christine Rosen (2025: 77) in her book, *The Extinction of Experience: Reclaiming Our Humanity in a Digital World*, laments that 'As our world becomes ever more saturated with images and virtualizations, we shouldn't let our desire for technologies eclipse the human need to see, touch and make things with our hands.' For Rosen, the increasing digitization of everyday life robs us of the corporeal, sensory experience of material (analogue) things which she understands as essential to being human. Rosen suggests that the current popularity of handcrafted goods can be seen as a response to dissatisfaction with an increasingly virtual economy and reflective of a longing for sensory objects from which we are deprived in 'a world dominated by screens' (Rosen, 2025: 77). Chris Anderson, the former editor-in-chief of the tech-focused magazine *WIRED*, has similarly blamed 'screens and personal computers for our lack of contact with physical objects' (Morozov, 2014). Discussing his involvement in a DIY 3D printing venture, Anderson reproduces the binary association of analogue physicality and digital non-physicality: 'digital natives are starting to hunger for life beyond the screen', he writes. 'Making something that starts virtual but quickly becomes tactile and usable in the everyday world is satisfying in a way that pure pixels are not' (Anderson, 2012: 18). Freeman (2009: 199–200) laments the decline of 'real-world meeting places' such as 'cafés, post offices, parks, cinemas, town centers', arguing that 'electronic communication leads us away from the physical world ... We may rely heavily on the Internet, but we cannot touch it, taste it, or experience the indescribable feeling of togetherness that one gleans from face-to-face interaction'. Freeman ultimately calls for us to 'turn back to the real world and slow down' (2009: 203). The views of Freeman, Anderson, and Rosen are reflective of broader perceptions that the analogue is a physical and tacticle domain where we can engage in authentic sociality and hands-on sensory experiences. Anthropologists have advanced another perspective, arguing that we are no less human, authentic, or social when we are online – we just experience and engage with these differently (Horst and Miller, 2012). For many people, online interactions are just as rich and rewarding, or perhaps more so, than offline interactions. This popular association of the virtual

with the non-tactile also overlooks the physical, sensorial, and haptic dimensions of the digital. Indeed, tactility and sensoriality – in the form of pings, vibrations, and other forms of sensory feedback – are in fact central to our interactions with digital devices, which are themselves physical, material objects (Paterson, 2007; Parisi, Paterson, and Archer, 2017; Parisi, 2018).

Analogue truth

The analogue (or the offline) is often presented as the domain of truth, where meaningful and authentic human relationships are developed and where one cannot deceptively 'hide' behind a screen. By contrast, the internet is presented as an artificial or false domain of filtered and staged photos, fake news, and superficial online 'friendships'. This distrust of the digital marks something of a shift from initial imaginaries of the internet. In the 1980s and 1990s, popular perceptions of the internet as a non-physical space detached from the material world led to celebrations of 'cyberspace' as an emancipatory realm for the presentation of one's 'true' self and the construction of authentic identity unfettered from the baggage of the material body. Removed from one's 'real-world' identity, those surfing the web could express their 'true' self without fear of judgement based on their personal appearance or life situation (Turkle, 1984, 1995, 1999). From this perspective, the process of digital dematerialization freed users from the materiality of the body and the social pressures associated with it (age, gender, ethnicity, class, and so on), enabling new forms of liberated subjectivity. As media scholar David Gauntlett (2000: 14) noted, because internet users 'cannot see each other, and are not obliged to reveal their real name or physical location, there is considerable scope for people to reveal secrets, discuss problems, or even enact, whole "identities" which they would never do in the real world'. This meant users were 'free to pick and choose genders, sexualities and personalities' (Gauntlett, 2000: 23), enabling some to feel they could 'express their "true" selves' when online (Gauntlett, 2000: 15). Early internet forums, message boards, and homepages were theorized as spaces for the performance of fluid, postmodern identities, where self-presentation could be 'achieved under optimal conditions' (Papacharissi, 2002: 644). 'In cyberspace', Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen wrote (1994: 6), 'Identity becomes infinitely plastic in a play of images that knows no ends'. Users who played online games similarly celebrated the possibilities for truthful self-expression that their avatars afforded (Filiciak, 2003; Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010).

Of course, anxieties also emerged about the authenticity of these online presentations of self (Stone, 1991; Gauntlett, 2000: 14–15). Concerns about the ease with which users could create fake online identities to deceive others were reflected in films like *Hard Candy* (2005) and *Catfish* (2010), the plots of which revolve around individuals being manipulated online by users pretending to be someone they are not. In contrast to the liberating effect of early online forums where anonymity was the norm, the emer-

gence of social media platforms placed an emphasis on 'pre-existing social relations' (boyd and Ellison, 2008: 221) and often revolved around photos of users, reconnecting identity and the body. However, rather than leading to more trust online, concerns with truthfulness now came to centre around users' strategic selecting and editing of photographs with the aim of creating the illusion of a perfect life, family, or body. Underpinning these concerns is an awareness of the ease with which digital technologies enable image manipulation.

Developments in imaging technologies since the 1990s, including Photoshop, computer generated imagery (CGI), and, more recently, social media filters and AI-generated imagery, have all given rise to concerns about the falsity of digital images. The relationship between digital images and reality has been an enduring topic for philosophers and media theorists since the 1980s. Digital images are understood to have an ontologically different relationship to reality than analogue images. Media theorist Lev Manovich (2001: 293), drawing on semiotic theory, refers to analogue cinema as the 'art of the index'. In semiotics (Peirce, 1931–48), an indexical sign implies the existence of an object in physical reality (for example, smoke is an index of fire, dark clouds are an index of rain, a footprint is an index of human presence). Analogue photos are indexes of the objects photographed by the camera: the material objects in the photo once existed in reality in order to be photographed (this is not to say that analogue images cannot be staged or manipulated). Analogue films thus 'largely consist of unmodified photographic recordings of real events which took place in real physical space' (Manovich, 2001: 294). The 'truth value' of analogue photography lay in its indexical relationship to reality.

Digital imaging technologies, however, can generate images that have no indexical relationship to any underlying reality. As Manovich (2001: 294) notes, with digital photography, 'everything can be simulated'. 'Rather than filming physical reality', Manovich (2001: 300) observes, digital technologies make it, 'possible to generate film-like scenes directly on a computer with the help of 3-D computer animation'. Digital technologies like CGI and AI-generated imagary can create images from scratch, without relying on re-presenting anything 'real' captured by a camera. For this reason, Michael Heim (1995: 70) argues that digitally produced visual entities are not representations: 'They do not re-present. They do not present again something that is already present somewhere else'. This is close to Baudrillard's (1994: 6) definition of digital simulation as a technique that 'is opposed to representation'. In his analyses of hyperreality, Baudrillard argued that digital modelling can generate the appearance of the 'real without origin or reality' (Baudrillard, 1994: 1). For this reason, he suggested, digital simulation 'threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false", the "real" and the "imaginary"' (Baudrillard, 1994: 3). Digital imagery's non-indexical relationship to reality means that it is often understood to lack truth value. Indeed, today, in a cultural climate where AI-generated videos, deep fakes, and filtered photos proliferate online, the digital is increasingly not trusted by default. Widespread cultural awareness of the potentially fabricated nature of digital imagery has led to dominant

assumptions that most images posted on social media have been edited, processed by filters, or manipulated in some way. This perception has given rise to numerous social media trends based around efforts to introduce 'reality', 'truthfulness', and 'authenticity' online, such as the body positivity movement, 'de-influencing' trends (where 'influencing' has become synonymous with deception), and #NoFilter and Instagram Vs. Reality trends (whereby users share un-edited or 'truthful' selfies). Amid concerns about the spread of AI-generated imagery and the difficulty of distinguishing AI from reality, analogue nostalgia increasingly intersects with nostalgia for the human. While CGI once sat at the centre of conversations in the film industry about the replacement of analogue practices and human workers (such as special effects artists and stunt performers) by computerization, today, in the context of AI, it is the human element of traditional CGI that is now being foregrounded as a marker of analogue authenticity in an increasingly synthetic visual culture. CGI artists are now promoting human labour and skill as a celebrated element of digital production in contrast to AI-generated video production, in which humans are largely reduced to prompt inputters. As one 3D animator notes while showcasing his work on TikTok, 'like all my other videos, I've made this using the good old-fashioned 3D animation. You know, like the ones that you spend weeks creating' (Shortest Blockbusters, 2025). AI has provoked a longing for the perceived authenticity, materiality, and human element not only of analogue modes of image-making, but more broadly with pre-AI digital production processes. The values associated with the 'analogue' and 'digital' are thus constantly in flux and shift in relation to new developments in technology.

Chapter overview

The chapters in this volume trace a diverse range of responses to our current tech-saturated moment, investigating practices or products through which 'the analogue' is being made newly relevant as a domain of meaning, experience, and economic and imaginative investment. The 'analogue idyll' is presented as a framework for bringing together diverse and dynamic cultural expressions that promote the affordances of analogue technologies and offline experiences into a shared analytical space. The aim is not to debunk, demean, or dismiss expressions of the analogue idyll but to explore similarities, nuances, and differences across multifarious critiques of digital culture. As such, the chapters in this collection each show the rich range of ways that the analogue idyll is constructed or construed in different geographic, social, political, and cultural contexts.

The next chapter, authored by Michael Palm, focuses on what is perhaps the quintessential icon of analogue media: vinyl records. Vinyl has become a fetishized media format of the analogue economy. It is not only vinyl records themselves that are loaded with 'nostalgic charge' (Wieghorst, 2021: 209), but also their manufacturing process. In the UK, the popularity of vinyl has led to the opening of new vinyl press-

ing plants in the north of England. News coverage has not only celebrated the revival of vinyl but also the revival of factory work, nostalgically harking back to a golden era of 'analogue' labour that has declined with the rise of post-industrial, desk-bound, computer-based jobs. In the United States, the number of record processing plants has also increased dramatically over the last decade. In this chapter, Palm builds on his ethnographic research (2017; 2019) along vinyl's contemporary supply chains in the US to examine the contradictions of making and selling records in post-digital culture. Palm argues that vinyl record production is best seen as an example of 'mass craft', a term he uses to capture the ways in which these mass-produced media are invested with the authenticity typically associated with handmade craft goods. Moving beyond the analogue/digital binary, Palm's chapter introduces the concept of 'post-digital logistics', which he uses to theorize the symbiotic relationship between vinyl and the digital economy – where social media, streaming platforms, and online marketplaces, are all essential to vinyl's enduring popularity.

In Chapter 3, Alexandra Kviat examines efforts across the hospitality industry to rekindle forms of 'analogue' sociality. She explores the policies of growing numbers of cafes, pubs, and bars that ban or restrict Wi-Fi, laptop, or smartphone use on their premises. Informed by a survey of disconnection policies used by businesses operating in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, Denmark, and France, this chapter challenges some popular assumptions about their possible effects. Situating this phenomenon in a longer history of anxieties about technology, sociability and the 'third place' (Oldenburg, 1989), Kviat shows how disconnection policies contribute to table turnover, customer experience, brand positioning and promotion, and support the non-economic ambitions of hospitality entrepreneurs while simultaneously reinforcing normative ideas about who and what third places are for. Neither an antidote to hyperconnectivity nor a cynical marketing plot, such initiatives reflect broader tensions around precarity, community, and neoliberal politics.

In Chapter 4, the focus shifts outdoors. Dave McLaughlin analyses experiences of hikers on the Appalachian Trail in the United States to explore how long-distance walking holidays reproduce (and reconfigure) the analogue idyll. The health and well-being benefits of walking have long been widely celebrated but have taken on heightened significance as concerns spread about the addictive nature of digital technologies. McLaughlin explores how long-distance walkers, particularly hikers of colour, queer hikers, and Native American hikers, engage with (rather than reject) digital devices, challenging popular representations and imaginaries of the Appalachian Trail as an analogue idyll. He shows that the presence of digital devices does not necessarily negatively impact walkers' enjoyment of the Trail. Indeed, McLaughlin interrogates claims that position walking as a useful means of regaining our natural, authentic, harmonious selves outside of and away from digital connectivity. Instead, he shows how the analogue and digital interlink, conceptualizing the trail as a 'post-digital' walking experience.

In Chapter 5, Paul O'Connor traces the rise of a new digital divide that has emerged between those who have the economic means to disengage from social media and those who do not. The concept of the digital divide has traditionally described the disparity between those with access to information and communication technologies and those without, a gap often shaped by socioeconomic, geographic, and infrastructural inequalities. O'Connor approaches this concept from another angle, exploring the inequalities within highly digitized societies that enable some privileged people to disconnect from digital technologies while others from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have to remain connected, often for their work. In the hyper-connected Global North where digital connectivity is an increasing imperative for day-to-day life, taking time away from social media is something only a privileged few can do. O'Connor develops the concept of 'digital distance' to capture the ways in which some social media influencers strive to temporarily take a break from these platforms. Yet these influencers make sure they digitally capture their retreat to the analogue (which often take place in luxury resorts), taking photos of themselves relaxing by the pool or walking through idyllic countryside, and posting these when they return online. The analogue and digital are thus entangled as these influencers continue to use their digital technologies to document their time offline. For O'Connor, these acts of conspicuous digital detoxing valorize a specific form of luxury disconnection which is inaccessible to the majority of users.

In contrast to O'Connor's focus on social media abstention among influencers, Chapter 6 explores the theme of digital disconnection and privilege in relation to more traditional forms of celebrity. In this chapter, A.R.E. Taylor and Neil Ewen trace the emergence of the 'analogue celebrity'. They use this term to describe famous figures who engage in practices of digital disconnection that often hark back to earlier formations of pre-digital celebrity. These practices unfold across a spectrum of positions, from those who reportedly refuse to use email or mobile phones to those who take the occasional hiatus from social media. Taylor and Ewen focus on social media abstention among established celebrities. While social media has been widely theorized as a key tool for the practice of contemporary celebrity, Taylor and Ewen argue that the refusal of social media can add significant value to a celebrity's brand in the current cultural moment of digital backlash, providing celebrities with opportunities to align their images with ever-shifting constructions of authenticity, and to consolidate their fame within the attention economy.

The political economy of attention in the digital age is also the focus of Chapter 7. Malene Hornstrup Jespersen, Annika Isfeldt, and Kristoffer Albris explore the promotion of digital detox and disconnection courses in Denmark. This chapter is based on interviews with Danish companies that offer digital detoxing programmes. By combining analyses of these interviews with analyses of the companies' online marketing materials, Jespersen, Isfeldt, and Albris examine the different values behind these digital detox services, with some prioritizing mindfulness and others focusing on wilderness survival. They argue that what unites the companies, despite these different agendas, is the promise to their clients that taking a break from their digital lives will provide

them with the means and tools to attain a more authentic and mindful presence in the world.

Further exploring the commercialization of mindfulness in the digital economy, in Chapter 8, Linda Kopitz analyses the booming market for mindfulness apps that aim to provide users with momentary respite from their busy digital lives. Kopitz analyses the advertisements of three leading mindfulness and meditation apps – *Calm*, *Headspace*, and *Meditopia* – that aim to enable users to momentarily re-connect with the analogue. Within the narratives of these advertisements, Kopitz identifies an inherent criticism of technologized, digital lifestyles, in contrast to the app experience, which is presented as natural, material, and analogue. Through this analysis, Kopitz thus draws our attention to the ways that representations of the analogue are mobilized by digital wellbeing companies and, by analysing these analogue-digital entanglements, explores the contradictions of using *digital* solutions to disconnect from *digital* problems.

Taken together these chapters demonstrate the rich range of practices and imaginaries through which the analogue is produced and reproduced within the idyll mode. In the examples and case studies presented in these chapters, the analogue is always valued highly, but what it is valued for, and why, differs significantly. By bringing together a range of representations and practices that celebrate the analogue under the framework of the 'analogue idyll' we do not suggest that all modes of engaging with the analogue are necessarily idealized or illusory, or romanticized. The concept of the rural idyll has been criticized for being 'far too dismissive' and assuming, a priori that positive views of the countryside are 'all idealised or even illusory, and that our task as academics is to debunk them' (Burchardt, 2017: 70). We certainly do not mean to engage in 'simplistic reductionism' (Burchardt, 2017: 72), where diverse and nuanced positive views of the analogue are lumped together as if they form a single cultural entity. Expressions of the analogue idyll necessarily unfold across a spectrum of positions and many people who prefer analogue technologies have good reasons for doing so. An interior designer may find that pen and paper are more conducive to capturing the free flow of thought than the notes app on their smartphone. An elderly person whose care alarm is connected to the analogue phone network may have well-founded fears about the 'digital switchover' to an internet-based phone system (Vallance, 2023). Someone undertaking a digital detox holiday in a rural B&B without broadband may be motivated by important mental health concerns. A nostalgic or romantic sentiment may shape many celebrations of the analogue but this should not prohibit us from taking seriously the criticism of – or scepticism towards – the digital that is often being expressed. Evocations of the analogue idyll invite us to question hegemonic assumptions about technological 'progress', techno-positivist narratives about innovation, and big tech marketing strategies that encourage users to continuously consume the latest digital devices, as well as the environmental impacts of these consumption practices.

At the same time, it is important to highlight the dangers of uncritically celebrating the analogue and to examine the privileged positioning from which evocations of the analogue idyll can emerge. Those who desire to disconnect or disengage from digital

culture often reside in parts of the world that have high-speed and reliable broadband infrastructure. For those who live in areas with limited internet access, or who cannot afford digital devices, the analogue can constitute an involuntary and constraining daily reality. Even within countries with high levels of digital infrastructure, images and imaginaries that perpetuate the analogue idyll trope can reflect a privileged position that is detached from the socioeconomic realities of many people (the majority of whom simply can't afford to disconnect from digital technologies because their daily lives depend on these). There are also significant economic barriers that must be overcome in order to engage in certain analogue media cultures (vinyl, after all, is a lot more expensive than a streaming subscription). Practices of rejecting digital technology entirely, perhaps by living off grid to escape digital surveillance or lead a healthier life, do not help to reimagine digital culture differently or build a more just and equitable digital society, especially for those who can't afford to take refuge in the analogue. Rather than opt out entirely, it is through critical engagement with digital technologies and by placing political pressure on big tech companies and governments, that we can steer ourselves towards more equitable digital futures that are not based on unchecked data surveillance, burnout, and unsustainable upgrading (Cramer, 2014: 12; Casemajor et al, 2015: 863; Natale and Treré, 2020).

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6: Analogue Celebrity: Digital Refusal Among the Rich and Famous

A.R.E. Taylor and Neil Ewen

Introduction: Digital death

On 1 December 2010, US popstar Alicia Keys released a YouTube video titled 'Alicia Keys' Last Tweet and Testament'. In the video, she announced her 'digital death', stating that she was suspending her social media usage until $1million was raised for World AIDS Day. The money was to be donated to the Keep a Child Alive (KCA) foundation, a non-profit organization that Keys had co-founded with film producer Leigh Blake in 2003, which provides support services for HIV/AIDS-affected communities in India and Africa. Conjuring the imaginary division between the 'digital' and the 'real' she says: 'I have decided to sacrifice my *digital* life in order to give *real* life to people affected by HIV and AIDS'. Keys then performatively begs fans to buy her digital life back by donating quickly, saying that she already misses social media. Evoking familiar feelings of craving social media, Keys positions herself as ordinary and relatable. Several celebrities joined KCA's digital death campaign, including Lady Gaga, Elijah Wood, Kim Kardashian, Justin Timberlake, and Usher, each pledging to return online only when the funding goal had been achieved. The campaign was accompanied by striking images of these celebrities posing in coffins.

Underlying the KCA Digital Death campaign was the assumption that abstaining from social media could meaningfully be considered a challenging form of adversity or hardship suitable for celanthropic activity (akin to running a marathon for charity, for example). Another assumption was that the Tweets and Facebook posts of these celebrities were so valued that fans and followers would be willing to effectively pay for them (via a donation) to recommence. Ultimately, the campaign did not generate enough donations: and with only half of the funding goal reached after the first week of the campaign, pharmaceutical billionaire Stewart Rahr was asked to donate the remaining money to ensure the celebrities would meet their target. Usher had in fact arisen from his digital death before the target was met, adding to suspicions that the group of celebrity philanthropists had been disappointed by the public reaction.

Perhaps social media users preferred Facebook and Twitter without them and realized that by *not* donating they could ensure the celebrities remained offline for as long as possible?[1]

By late 2010, social media had become a key tool through which celebrity was practiced. While the KCA campaign was largely a flop, it invites consideration of the role that the non-use of social media has come to play in the production of celebrity in the age of constant connectivity. While there exists a significant literature on social media and celebrity, comparatively little attention has been paid to celebrities who resist or refuse these platforms and how this stance relates to the construction of 'authentic' celebrity personae in a complex cultural moment defined at once by the ubiquity of social media and by an intensifying backlash against these platforms (see Thomas, 2014; York, 2018; Ingleton and York, 2019). The rejection of social media and, in some cases, the non-use of digital technologies more broadly, has played an important role in the construction of some major celebrity personae. For example, it has been widely reported that Keanu Reeves does not use social media, and online speculation even suggests that he may not own a computer. Margot Robbie describes herself as a 'very analogue person' in a December 2023 interview with CBS News, explaining that 'I do everything handwritten'. She discusses how she hand-wrote a letter to Quentin Tarantino to try and convince him to cast her in his 2019 film *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. She explains that she thought this approach would be more effective than an email because she knew that Tarantino is also 'a very analogue person', who 'only has a home phone' and she didn't know if he 'does' email (CBS News, 2023). Cillian Murphy's disengagement with digital culture has been widely discussed after interview clips went viral in which he revealed his lack of interest in social media, stating he is 'too old for that'. Commentators lauded the actor's avoidance of social media as a praiseworthy example of self-discipline and restraint (The Minimalists, 2023). Murphy also apparently adopts a minimalist approach to his smartphone, with an all-black wallpaper, few apps installed, and notifications disabled (Outstanding Screenplays, 2024). Many other stars reportedly do not use social media – at least in the form of a public-facing account. Sandra Bullock, Daniel Craig, Scarlett Johansson, Kate Moss, George Clooney, Kate Winslet, Olivia Wilde, Renée Zellweger, Jennifer Lawrence, Keira Knightley, Rachel McAdams, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, Emily Blunt, Emma Stone, Kristen Stewart, Julia Roberts, Mila Kunis, Daniel Radcliffe, Tina Fey, Cate Blanchett, Saoirse Ronan, Chris Pine, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Theo James, and Alicia Vikander are just some of the other famous names who ostensibly do not have social media accounts.

Celebrities who refuse to use social media are of different ages and their fame is aligned with different media forms, though this trend is particularly notable in the film industry. Some even shun specific digital technologies altogether, such as film

[1] One wonders whether the campaign would have been more successful if, for every donation received, the celebrities had to spend longer offline.

director Christopher Nolan, who, according to some interviews, does not use email or smartphones (Riley, 2012a, 2012b; Smith, 2020). Nolan is also an ambassador of analogue film, often opting for 35mm or 70mm film stock instead of digital video, and using analogue production practices where possible (such as editing sequences from the original negative or using photochemical colour timing). Woody Harrelson has apparently not used a mobile phone since 2021 (Watts, 2024), stating in a June 2024 episode of his podcast, 'I don't like to be readily available to any human being at any time'. This statement quickly went viral, with images of the quote widely circulating across social media. Queen Margrethe II of Denmark is famous among Danes for 'her outspoken rejection of mobile phones and the internet' (Gozzi, 2024). Many more celebrities have decided to temporarily abstain or quit social media, often to strategically return online a few days, weeks, or months later, to a frenzy of fanfare – usually conveniently timed around the launch of a new product release. This practice has become increasingly fashionable amid the wider cultural backlash against big tech companies (the 'techlash') since the late 2010s (Seymour, 2019; Zuboff, 2019; Chia, Jorge, and Karppi, 2021).

Despite growing disillusionment, these platforms remain a structuring presence in everyday life. The act of refusing to use social media still draws considerable public and press attention, as testified by the virality of clips and the regular news articles dedicated to various practices of analogue celebrity. Listicles, such as '21 celebrities who don't use social media' (Bahou, 2021) or '29 Celebrities Who Reject Social Media & Why' (Sprankles and Grey, 2023) are now a staple of celebrity news and gossip columns. In the celebrity press, and across fan forums and Reddit posts, a celebrity's lack of social media presence or disengagement from digital culture is represented in myriad ways: as abnormal or deviant; as endearing; as subversive; as a form of technophobia or luddism; as an admirable demonstration of discipline and self-control; as a respected political stance towards media platforms that are increasingly perceived as negative or harmful forces.

Taking this interest in celebrity social media refusal as its starting point, this chapter introduces the term 'analogue celebrity' to describe a broad spectrum of disconnective positions and practices that celebrities engage in or adopt in relation to digital technologies. At a conceptual level, analogue celebrity is related to, but distinct from, performances of 'celebrity reluctance', theorized by Pamela Ingleton and Lorraine York (2019; see also York, 2018). Ingleton and York develop an analysis of the 'reluctant celebrity' through an exploration of tweets in which celebrities express their reluctance to engage with social media. Reluctant celebrity is 'a simultaneous, double-facing mode of celebrity performance in which the celebrity is disinclined to perform, yet performs nevertheless' (Ingleton and York, 2019: 367). In contrast to reluctance, which 'exists at, but never crosses, the threshold of withdrawal' (Ingleton and York, 2019: 367), analogue celebrities are those who refuse to use digital platforms, or who have crossed that threshold and withdrawn (though sometimes only temporarily) from

these platforms. Performances of analogue celebrity provide a generative opportunity for exploring celebrity self-fashioning, power, and privilege in post-digital culture.

With digital technologies and social media now pervasive forces in everyday life, a diverse body of interdisciplinary literature has critically examined varying practices and expressions of digital technology avoidance, including social media refusal (Wyatt, Thomas, and Terranova, 2002; Selwyn, 2006; Bauerlein, 2011; Helsper and Reisdorf, 2013; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Hardey and Atkinson, 2018; Syvertsen, 2020; Chia, Jorge, and Karppi, 2021). Celebrity practices of digital refusal can range in intensity, from taking the occasional social media hiatus to the more extreme example of refusing to use email or mobile phones. Through our use of the term 'analogue celebrity' we do not seek to reinforce or reify rigid binaries between the 'analogue' and the 'digital' or between technology 'use' and 'non-use'. We recognize that celebrity disengagement from digital technology 'is rarely total, but often situational' (Hesselberth, 2018: 1997) and can be related to a specific medium, time, or place (Keanu Reeves, for example, does not have his own social media accounts but still often appears in TikToks promoting his band, Dogstar, and is therefore no stranger to leveraging the promotional affordances of social media). As such, we conceptualize analogue celebrity less as a distinct typology and more as a practice that unfolds across a spectrum of positions in relation to digital technologies and platforms, with the aim of conceptualizing digital refusal and, more broadly, technology non-use, in more nuanced terms (Wyatt, Thomas, and Terranova, 2002; Wyatt, 2003; Satchell and Dourish, 2009; Baumer et al, 2014).[2] We draw on press articles and social media comments to develop two case studies, the first focusing on Keanu Reeves and Renée Zellweger in relation to the promotion of their 2016 film *The Whole Truth*, and the second on Ed Sheeran. The different forms of social media non-usage among these famous figures provide entry-points for sketching two practices of analogue celebrity: Reeves and Zellweger as 'digital refusers', and Sheeran as a 'digital detoxer'. These categories are necessarily unstable and ever-changing but productive in delineating differences in celebrity social media non-usage. Prior to the case studies, we begin with a brief overview of the literature exploring celebrities and social media and explore two key affordances of social media – accessibility and authenticity – through which celebrities engage their fanbases and maintain their fame, so that we may better understand how practices of digital refusal and detox rework and reconfigure (rather than reject) narratives, performances, and experiences of celebrity authenticity.

[2] At the opposite end of the spectrum to digital refusal, there is the chronically connected celebrity, represented by the likes of Snoop Dogg, Zendaya, and Khloé Kardashian, who release upwards of five hundred social media posts per month (Leskin, 2019). Beyond social media, some celebrities are reportedly very attached to their mobile phones. Back in 2008, in an interview with *Elle* magazine, Madonna revealed that she and Guy Ritchie (her husband at the time), 'were so busy that both of them slept with their Blackberry under their pillows' (Freeman, 2009: 164).

Social media and celebrity: the promise of access and authenticity

Within the field of celebrity studies, a considerable body of work has explored new forms of fame that have coalesced around social media, and the various ways that famous people, from film stars to politicians, strategically engage with these platforms (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2013; Gaden and Dumitrica, 2014). The years between 2005 and 2015 marked something of a golden era of social media usage. Millions of people around the world, including celebrities, opened accounts on Facebook, Twitter (now 'X'), Instagram, and other social platforms. 'Everyone, we are told', Jonathan Crary observed in 2013, 'needs an "online presence", needs 24/7 exposure, to avoid social irrelevance or professional failure' (Crary, 2013: 104; see also Rosamond, 2017). Having a social media presence quickly became the norm, and a valuable component of the celebrity toolkit.[3] As well as providing established celebrities with a powerful vehicle through which they could consolidate their fame, these platforms also facilitated the rise of new forms of social media-based 'micro-celebrity' (Senft, 2008; Gräve, 2017; Abidin, 2018), such as the 'influencer' and the 'YouTube star'. Agents and publicists trumpeted the importance of social media as a platform for increasing a celebrity's public reach. Expectations and obligations for public figures to regularly post content on social media – especially those without superstar status – quickly became part of everyday celebrity labour. 'It is not uncommon for artists to flit across Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Vine, Line, Snapchat and Periscope', Guardian journalist Eamonn Forde noted in 2015, 'with much of their day taken up in trying to keep these promotional plates spinning' (Forde, 2015). Many famous figures adapted to the changing requirements of celebrity culture by providing increased access to their ostensibly 'authentic' selves via social media, capitalizing on the new forms of intimacy and accessibility these platforms afforded.

The act of posting on social media enables celebrities to communicate directly with their fans, bypassing formal access brokers, such as public relations professionals, agents, managers, or other 'cultural intermediaries' (Rojek, 2012: 27) that traditionally manage or control a celebrity's public communications (see also Gamson, 1994: 79–80), producing a sense of unmediated access. Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011: 139) note in their study of celebrity Twitter usage: 'celebrity is practiced through the appearance and performance of "backstage" access'. While media technologies have always provided fans with a certain degree of backstage access to celebrities, social media increased the potential for accessibility exponentially. Its rise unfolded alongside an intensification of cultural interest in the private (rather than professional) lives of the rich and famous (Turner, 2004: 4). Hannah Hamad (2018: 46) notes that the new media forms associated with Web 2.0 produced 'skyrocketing levels of accessibility, visibility

[3] Perhaps the peak of celebrity engagement with social media was captured by the famous 2014 Oscars 'selfie' taken by Bradley Cooper and posted on Ellen DeGeneres' Twitter.

and speed of circulation to and of celebrity imagery and discourse'. This accessibility can play an important role in diminishing felt distances between audiences and celebrities, bringing a famous figure 'closer to home' through regular content and updates posted throughout the day. Stars like Sylvester Stallone, Justin Bieber, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, and Cristiano Ronaldo regularly post on their social media directly from their mansions and workplaces (while on set, on tour, in the locker room, or simply eating a meal), providing fans with what feels like a behind-the-scenes glimpse at supposedly un-staged private lives. In contrast to earlier forms of media that granted audiences 'behind-the-scenes' access to stars (such as interviews, appearances on talk shows, or DVD extras), social media is often perceived as providing more immediate access, sometimes even real-time access in the case of the live-streaming options that these platforms offer. Social media content from celebrities thus often feels direct and uncensored. This perceived opportunity for direct and real-time interaction has enabled new para-social forms of 'digital intimacy' to emerge between celebrities and their fans (Thompson, 2008; Reade, 2020).

The rise of social media has unfolded alongside a cultural fascination with the 'authentic' (Syvertsen and Enli, 2020; Heřmanová, Skey, and Thurnell-Read, 2023). Authenticity is often colloquially used as a synonym for 'honesty', 'integrity', 'sincerity', 'genuine', 'true', or 'real'. In popular culture, authenticity remains a celebrated and revered quality of a person, place, or product – even if the term has long been co-opted by marketing agencies, the tourism industry, politics, branding, and advertising (MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1988; Peterson, 1999; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Enli, 2015). Despite the commercialization and commodification of authenticity, the concept still holds cultural value. Social media can provide celebrities with opportunities to construct a presentation of self that seems 'authentic' because it appears un-staged, private, intimate, and 'stripped of PR artifice and management' (Marwick and boyd, 2011: 149). By posting photos of their private lives and by appearing to respond personally to comments, celebrities (and politicians) use social media to cultivate a sense of an authentic personal connection with their fans and followers (Dare-Edwards, 2014; Gaden and Dumitrica, 2014).

Cultural theorists have tended to approach claims of authenticity with scepticism, preferring to emphasize the socially constructed, dynamic, and context-dependent nature of authenticity discourses (Trilling, 1972; Bendix, 1997; Cheng, 2004). This has been particularly true in analyses of social media, where scholars often foreground the constructed and performative nature of evocations of authenticity by using various qualifiers including 'staged authenticity' (Pooley, 2010), 'contrived authenticity' (Abidin, 2017), or 'mediated authenticity' (Enli, 2015; Frowijn, Harbers, and Broersma, 2023). Marwick and boyd (2011) note that celebrity Twitter users 'reveal what appears to be personal information to create a sense of intimacy between participant and follower [and] give the impression of candid, uncensored looks at the people behind the personas' (Marwick and boyd, 2011: 139). 'Appears' and 'impression' are the operative words here. Critical theorists remind us that authenticity is never an inherent

quality. Despite the apparent promise of un-staged, unscripted, or unedited access, a celebrity's self-presentation within 'behind-the-scenes' media products is carefully crafted and managed by the celebrity and their public relations teams. While social media may promise to provide direct access to a celebrity who appears genuine and authentic, celebrity self-presentation on social media is often carefully constructed to be consumed by others. Celebrities must thus engage in ongoing forms of 'impression management' or 'authenticity labour' (McRae, 2017: 14; Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch, 2021) to develop a presentation of self that appears both believable and genuine. If a celebrity's social media account is found to be managed by a PR team, fans often do not accept the posts as authentic self-expression. For example, regular debates have unfolded around Britney Spears' social media usage. During the period of her conservatorship, Spears repeatedly stated that her personal Instagram was one area of her life over which she had control (Access Hollywood, 2019; ET Live, 2019). However, she has since been open about the fact that she has a dedicated social media team, which often leads to questions about the authenticity of her content. Celebrities and their publicists must tread carefully, because 'deliberately managing one's impression to be perceived as authentic is commonly presented as the direct antithesis of being truly authentic' (Frowijn, Harbers, and Broersma, 2023: 219).

Authenticity is often performed on social media through revelatory acts of self-disclosure. The sense of intimacy and direct access afforded by these platforms has enabled social media to become key sites where celebrities disclose private experiences, make public confessions, or apologize for inappropriate behaviour. Since the late-twentieth century, the construction, performance, and maintenance of celebrity authenticity have been increasingly tied to practices of self-disclosure and confession. According to Sean Redmond (2010), the confessional is any given moment in which a famous person engages in a revelatory act understood as heartfelt and honest. Disclosing information that is private or difficult to discuss, or confessing to difficulties or errors, is a key means through which a celebrity's authenticity can be established (Muntean and Petersen, 2009). Talk shows, interviews, documentaries, and social media are all arenas through which celebrities position themselves as 'authentic' through acts of confession and public apology. Social media thus occupies a curious position in contemporary popular culture. These platforms are at once perceived to provide opportunities for individuals to appear genuine, honest, and authentic but, at the same time, widely associated with fake, filtered, and staged content.

In the following case studies we introduce two examples of analogue celebrity positioning, exploring how social media non-use reconfigures the accessibility of the celebrities and the construction of their authenticity: 1) Keanu Reeves and Renée Zellweger are examples of 'digital refusers' whose permanent lack of social media harks back nostalgically to a golden era of celebrity when the private lives of stars was shrouded in mystery; and 2) Ed Sheeran as an example of a 'digital detoxer' who engages in temporary breaks from social media for wellbeing reasons that often also serve as valuable PR opportunities. Through this discussion we explore how celebrities cultivate authen-

ticity through their rejection of social media. Lack of social media presence, we argue, has become a key way through which a celebrity's authenticity can be demonstrated in the age of the techlash. This analysis ultimately reveals the seemingly endless flexibility of the concept of 'authenticity' in relation to social media platforms. Indeed, a celebrity can use social media to communicate their authenticity, but authenticity can also be communicated through a rejection of these platforms.

Digital refusers: Keanu Reeves and Renée Zellweger

January 2022 began with fervour and speculation in the world of social media celebrity. Could it be true that Keanu Reeves, who had famously shunned social media, had in fact now joined TikTok? A five-second video titled 'Welcome to my TikTok', posted on the 18 January 2022, appeared to show Reeves, sitting on a sofa in a John Wick-style black suite, looking at his smartphone. In the comments, a number of users welcomed Reeves to TikTok. Many, however, were sceptical. Upon closer inspection, some noticed small details about Reeves that looked slightly strange – from his fingernails to the unusual eeriness of his smile. The name of the account itself was a giveaway: unreal_keanu. It turned out to be a hoax: an AI parody account using deepfake technology. Subsequently, the account released a steady stream of videos showing Reeves doing a range of (often Matrix-themed) activities and poses, quickly amassing millions of followers.

These videos re-ignited interest in the Hollywood actor's curious absence from social media. In the middle-aged period of his career, Reeves' celebrity has been the subject of fascination.[4] Notably, Reeves' non-use of social media has become an integral aspect of his star persona. Online message boards are rife with fan reflections and speculation about why Reeves does not have any public-facing social media presence. In a 2019 thread dedicated to the subject on Quora, a social question-and-answer site, one user proffers that social media is 'a cesspool of self-serving bullshit to jack-off one's ego. [Reeves] seems like a genuine guy so that doesn't seem to appeal. Plus he's already famous so he doesn't need to self report. I also read somewhere (like 15 years ago) that he claimed he doesn't even have a computer' (Quora, 2019).

The user presents social media as a vacuous arena of self-serving marketing and promotion that Reeves does not need to participate in because he is 'genuine' and 'already famous'. While social media can provide celebrities with a platform to carefully construct a persona that appears authentic, avoidance of social media is here presented as an equally important index of authenticity. Celebrities without social accounts, the user suggests, exist beyond the shallow pursuit of self-aggrandizing promotion. This

[4] See, for example, the special issue of *Celebrity Studies* dedicated to Reeves, including an article on Reeves as a 'reluctant eco-celebrity' (Moffat and Kääpä, 2022).

response aligns with a larger cultural perception of Reeves as an honest, humble, and down-to-earth celebrity – a perception that has emerged in response to several widely reported anecdotal acts of kindness that Reeves has carried out (Horeck, 2022). The user's comment also highlights that, unlike social media influencers who rely on these platforms for their fame, Reeves' fame pre-dates social media and, as such, he does not need these platforms to further amplify his fame or boost his career. Similar sentiments are echoed by another user, who asks, 'Why should he be on social media? He doesn't need exposure or advertising. His name and talent for his craft are more than enough' (Quora, 2019).

For this user, Reeves does not need to stoop to the level of social media self-promotion because his acting talent is enough to maintain his fame. The star is presented as a talented craftsman dedicated to his art.

A key reference point in discussions about Reeves' lack of social media presence is a 2016 interview conducted by *Entertainment Tonight* promoting the film *The Whole Truth* (2016) with Reeves and co-star Renée Zellweger (Murphy, 2016). Like Reeves, Zellweger does not use social media and has discussed her stance towards these platforms in various interviews. A voiceover cutaway during the 2016 interview highlights that 'neither of the A-listers have [social media] accounts connecting them with their fans', which segues into a question from Deidre Behar (the journalist conducting the interview), about the reasons behind this. Behar asks: 'Can we get you on there? We wanna see the behind-the-scenes!', to which Reeves replies: 'For me, I guess it's privacy ... it is important to me'. By refusing to use social media, Reeves places a limit on his accessibility and is able to exercise a modicum of control over how much of his private life is available for public consumption. But his stance towards social media also generates media interest, ensuring he continues to attract attention.

Zellweger responds to the interviewer's question by harking back to a mythical era of stardom where stars' private lives were ostensibly less accessible, enabling celebrities to cultivate a sense of mystery and intrigue. Foregrounding the aura of mystery that a lack of social media presence can establish she replies: 'don't you think a little mystery is a good idea?'[5] Early theorists of celebrity culture suggested that film stars (particularly those associated with the 'golden era' of Hollywood) were defined by their distance from 'ordinary' people (as the 'star' metaphor captures). 'They live at a distance, far beyond all mortals', sociologist Edgar Morin observed in his 1960 analysis of stardom (Morin, 2005 [1960]: 9). This distance is often spatially circumscribed (stars live in gated compounds reserved for the elite, for example), but it is also social, cultural, and economic (Rojek, 2015: 115). Media scholar Jib Fowles (1992) used the phrase 'star village' to describe this elite celebrity realm that is both metaphorically and

[5] For a number of celebrities, the manufacturing and maintenance of 'mystery' is perceived as a key facet of stardom. In a March 2024 interview, British actor Theo James discusses his lack of social media presence, similarly stating that 'I'm quite a private person ... I like to keep a little bit of mystery' (Vij, 2024). Elsewhere, Chris Hemsworth has also commented that 'The mystery of who you are is what keeps people interested in wanting to see you on the screen' (Duboff, 2013).

materially distant and inaccessible to most people. Ellis Cashmore (2006: 19), writing specifically about Hollywood stars, observes that these individuals appeared as if they

were parts of the pantheon: like deities, they seemed to exist at a level above that of other mortals. They lived lives of such opulence, such splendour, such sublime beauty that they seemed unapproachable. And, in a genuine sense they were ... They secured themselves away and drip-fed their fans with occasional personal appearances and carefully controlled silvery images.

The distance between stars and the public was carefully navigated. Access to stars was limited and largely relied on media professionals for its facilitation through talk shows, magazine interviews, or photo shoot releases. Of course, even golden age stars used the media (from talk show interviews to staged paparazzi shots) to strategically share parts of their private life, granting audiences a supposed glimpse of the person 'behind' the performances. Today, the act of posting on social media intensifies this logic, and, in doing so, Zellweger suggests, reduces any 'mystery' surrounding a celebrity's private life.

By posting mundane food photos, live-streaming from their houses, or sharing make-up-less selfies, celebrities can strategically appear like 'normal' people doing 'ordinary' things.[6] Such posts can cultivate a sense of intimacy, closeness, and familiarity between a celebrity and their followers, enabling famous figures to 'transition from distant star to accessible celebrity' (Hamad, 2018: 52). By contrast, Zellweger suggests, lack of social media presence can enable celebrities to maintain the mysterious aura of a distant star, nostalgically harking back to an earlier form of pre-digital fame where interactions with stars, and information about them, was less widely accessible, a throwback to an older era of celebrity in which access to the famous was more limited. As celebrity studies scholar Sarah Thomas (2014: 245) notes, social media refusal enables some of the biggest modern stars to 'maintain the traditional classical star's aura of distance'. Thomas (2014: 245) suggests that lack of social media 'helps these phenomenally successful stars to remain elusive and extraordinary, "knowable" only through gossip and traditional mediation'. Mystery, distance, and allure are valuable tools through which fascination and interest in a celebrity can be maintained. In an era of social media saturation, refusing to have a social media presence does not only generate mystery but also intense interest as to the reasons underlying this decision, ensuring enduring press attention. As such, practices of using or not using social media among celebrities must not be seen as political opposites, but as the heads and tails of the wider attention economy within which the famous necessarily operate.

In the interview, Zellweger states that 'most [social media content] is really unimportant and unnecessary and makes a person's life way more interesting and colourful than it is in truth'. These comments reproduce popular critiques about the triviality of social media status updates and the often staged and untruthful performances of

[6] An extreme, almost parodic, example of this comes from Ricky Gervais' social media feeds in which he posts purposely unflattering photographs of himself while having a bath.

self that take place on these platforms. Zellweger suggests that social media is a site of inauthenticity, untruth, and manipulation, where appearances are contrived and deceitful. By rejecting social media, she is seen to shun the superficial world of online impression management and attention-seeking.[7]

Zellweger's digital refusal extends beyond social media, to other digital devices. In a 2022 interview for *Harper's Bazaar*, she stated that she tries to limit her screen time and avoids checking her mobile phone until the evening (Rapkin, 2022). In many popular narratives of digital refusal, the rejection of digital technologies often goes hand-in-hand with a celebration of the outdoors. In an unsurprising evocation of the analogue idyll, Zellweger explains to *Harper's Bazaar* that she spent the bulk of her time during the COVID-19 lockdowns, 'outside every day, building things and planting things' (Rapkin, 2022). Here the privilege of digital refusal is strikingly clear. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while Zellweger was able to avoid the digital world, many people (especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds without access to green spaces) were stuck indoors and unable to disconnect from their digital devices, having to working remotely via Zoom, and finding escape in binge-watching Netflix or doom-scrolling through Instagram (Kuntsman, Martin, and Miyake, 2023). A degree of privilege thus underpins the capacity of a celebrity to opt out of digital culture. Celebrities who were famous before the social media era, such as Reeves and Zellweger, can afford to avoid these platforms. Their fame is not tied to social media, and they can attract media attention without needing to engage with these platforms. This is not the case for non-'A-list' celebrities – particularly 'celetoids' (Rojek, 2012) – many of whom rely on social media to find work, promote themselves, and remain in the public eye. An analogue/digital divide emerges within celebrity culture between those who do not need to use social media and those who cannot completely abandon these platforms because they rely on them to make a living (O'Connor, this volume).

Taking breaks from social media

In contrast to celebrities like Reeves and Zellweger, who have refused to engage with social media from the outset, others have decided to take temporary breaks from their social media activity for various reasons. Taking momentary social media breaks or 'digital detoxes' has become especially fashionable among social media influencers (Jorge and Pedroni, 2021), who depend on these platforms for their livelihood and who are thus well positioned to understand the stress and pressure that comes with the need to constantly maintain an online presence (Glatt, 2022, 2023).[8] But beyond

[7] For an analysis of celebrities criticizing the hollowness and superficiality of social media, see Ingleton and York (2019).

[8] Some social media influencers do leave social media for good (and attract considerable attention in doing so). In 2015, the Australian Instagram influencer, Essena O'Neill, suddenly deleted many of her pictures and left the platform, stating that it was 'contrived perfection made to get attention' (Hunt,

social media influencers, digital detoxing has also become popular among 'traditional' celebrities. Unlike influencers, these celebrities can afford to take extended time away from social media because their fame has never been (or is no longer) dependent on these platforms. Kanye West, Selena Gomez, Kendall Jenner, Adele, Zayn Malik, Stephen Fry, Rylan Clark, Thierry Henry, Gypsy Rose Blanchard, and Tom Holland are celebrities who have taken hiatuses from social media. The reasons underpinning their breaks differ, from the need to improve mental health (by temporarily escaping the toxic and hateful comments of online trolls), to attempts to avoid distraction (in the hope of increasing productivity and focus), or to safeguard their brand if they have posted problematic content that threatens to get them 'cancelled'. In 2021, Adele abandoned social media because she found it distracting. 'I just would find myself not getting my errands done for the day', she explained in an interview with *The Face*. 'It's *made* to be addictive' (Carty-Williams, 2021, emphasis in original). Adele's comments reproduce tropes of social media addiction and distraction; tropes that have become a central narrative element of anti-social media sentiment. Adele is widely known for her sometimes insensitive posts on social media and, for this reason, in the past her PR team have changed her passwords or restricted her usage (Lasimone, 2021; Oganesyan, 2021). For some, Adele's passionate and volatile posts are evidence of her authenticity, reflecting her inability to conform to the staged, edited, and contrived requirements of celebrity social media performance in the cancel culture era. As journalist Rebecca Reid (2020) states: 'Adele is too real for Instagram, too gobby for Twitter, and too talented to need social media at all.' By describing Adele as 'too real for Instagram', Reid seems to suggest the star has an irrepressible authenticity (evidenced by her controversial posts) that is incompatible with the contrived falsity of social media. For Reid, there also appears to be an imagined threshold of fame or talent beyond which a social media presence is not needed.

Several other celebrities have taken breaks from social media after posting off-brand content. Indeed, if not used strategically, social media can be a minefield for celebrities, with an insensitive post potentially exposing them to public criticism which may lead to their 'cancellation'. Ten Walls, J.K. Rowling, Elon Musk, Katie Hopkins, Azealia Banks, and David Eason have all been widely criticized for controversial comments they have posted on social media. Other celebrities take breaks from social media to escape hateful trolls. Comedian and author Stephen Fry regularly quits social media in response to comments his posts attract. In 2009, he threatened to leave Twitter because there was 'too much aggression and unkindness around' (Press Association, 2015). In 2015, he also temporarily shut down his Twitter account and logged out of Instagram (see Kennedy, 2015). Twitter has been singled out by numerous stars as

2015; see also Jorge and Pedroni, 2021: 74–75). The act generated considerable attention among the international press and O'Neill was celebrated for raising awareness of issues related to body dysmorphia and social media addiction. It was quitting social media itself that enabled O'Neill to ascertain a new level of fame that transcended Instagram, for a while. Indeed, four years later, after sinking into relative obscurity, she returned to Instagram.

a platform that attracts abusive trolls. Other celebrities who have left Twitter after suffering abuse – dubbed the 'Twitter Quitters' by the popular press (Savage, 2017) – include Miley Cyrus, Sue Perkins, Halsey and *Avengers* director Joss Whedon.

These celebrity breaks from social media have occurred against the backdrop of a growing discourse of disillusionment with these platforms that has gained cultural traction since the mid-2010s (Chia et al, 2021). Moral panics have proliferated in the popular press around a range of concerns related to social media. Addictive design mechanics have been blamed for enticing users to spend hours of their time endlessly scrolling through feeds (Seymour, 2019). Social media content has been blamed for distracting users, leading to a loss of productivity and dwindling attention spans. The algorithmic recommendation systems that govern social media networks have been blamed for creating 'filter bubbles' that transform these platforms into breeding grounds for online hate where 'toxic' viewpoints proliferate, 'radicalizing' users. There are growing public and political debates about the harmful impact of social media on mental health, with concerns arising around body dysmorphia, social comparison, or exposure to harmful content. Like many previous media technologies that have been identified as sources of potential social harm, from television to videogames, social media has been decried as unsafe, dangerous, toxic, a threat to liberal democracy and even human life. This ongoing backlash against the big tech companies responsible for social media has been termed the 'techlash' (which was shortlisted for the Oxford English Dictionary's 2018 word of the year).

Within this context, it has become increasingly common (and fashionable) for celebrities to publicly announce that they are taking a break or 'detox' from social media. A celebrity's break from social media is typically announced *on* social media. Often these announcements take a confessional form, providing celebrities with a valuable opportunity to demonstrate their ordinariness, normality, and authenticity by drawing attention to their relatable struggles with social media addiction, distraction, or pressure – revealing to their fans and followers that they wrestle with the same problems that everyday social media users experience. Laura Portwood-Stacer (2013: 1041) has noted that social media abstention is 'a performative mode of resistance, which must be understood within the context of a neoliberal consumer culture, in which subjects are empowered to act through consumption choices – or in this case non-consumption choices – and through the public display of those choices'. One celebrity who regularly uses performative social media breaks and 'returns' to construct his authenticity through confessional acts (and, in the process, to strategically build hype for new album releases) is Ed Sheeran.

The digital detoxer: Ed Sheeran

Ed Sheeran's career is heavily entangled with social media. With approximately 16 million Twitter followers and 49 million subscribers on Instagram, he is one of the most

avidly monitored celebrities on social media. His rise to fame was largely facilitated by social media, in the form of the YouTube channel SB.TV, launched by the late British music entrepreneur and DJ Jamal Edwards and now an online R&B/Hip-Hop platform. In the early years of his career, Sheeran released several videos through SB.TV and would regularly spend time on Twitter in live Q&As to help build his fanbase. Part of Sheeran's success is due to his strategic leveraging of social media to promote his work. Instead of using traditional marketing he has typically opted to release teaser posts, videos, and clips of forthcoming singles on Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram, using social media to directly respond to fans with the aim of building a personal connection.

Through his social media marketing approach, Sheeran has generated hype and anticipation for his music. Concurrently, he began to take regular, highly publicized, breaks from social media and other digital devices.[9] In December 2015, at the end of a world tour promoting his second album, he announced on Instagram that he would be taking time-out from his 'phone, emails and all social media', returning in autumn 2016 (teddysphotos, 2015). In this post he stated that he had found himself 'seeing the world through a screen' and suggested that he was going offline to experience unmediated reality. Sheeran's announcement generated a frenzy of news coverage, with some journalists speculating that this could mark the beginning of a mass celebrity exodus from social media (Kennedy, 2015). A *Guardian* article headlined 'Post-Internet: Has the Bubble Burst on Pop's Social Media Strategy?', suggested that Sheeran's decision was reflective of 'a growing dissatisfaction among pop stars with their social media obligations' and that he may 'inspire others to finally break from the "always on" culture' (Forde, 2015). In a blurring of the rural idyll and the analogue idyll, the article closes by drawing a connection between the countryside and the offline:

Towards the end of the 1960s, many acts pulled themselves out of the bacchanalian merry-go-round that was London in order to 'get it together in the country'. Ed Sheeran could now inspire the current generation of pop stars to cut free of their marketing moorings and get it together offline. (Forde, 2015)

One year later, Sheeran returned to social media with a video released on Twitter in which he held up a decidedly analogue piece of paper with the handwritten message: 'New music coming Friday!!' (teddysphotos, 2017). Press coverage quickly proliferated (Robinson, 2016). Sheeran clearly understood how to strategically leverage social media abstention to generate publicity and build hype. Since then, he has continued this strategy, taking breaks from social media only to end his digital silence with the announcement of a new album, adding further hype and promotional value to the release.

In a 2017 interview with the UK tabloid *The Sun*, headlined 'Sheeran Twitter Quitter', he announced that he had stopped using Twitter: 'I've actually come off

[9] Sheeran is not the only celebrity to detox from social media only to return when strategically beneficial. Lorde uses social media in a similar way, releasing cryptic messages to build hype for her music after taking time offline (Paul, 2024).

Twitter completely. I can't read it. I go on it and there's nothing but people saying mean things' (Wootton, 2017). Mobilizing wider narratives about social media platforms as harmful spaces where online hate speech and cyberbullying proliferate, Sheeran aligned his brand in opposition to the toxic culture that was increasingly associated with social media. Sheeran's social media detoxes also extended to other digital technologies. In a June 2017 carpool karaoke with James Corden, he claimed that he no longer owned a mobile phone (*The Late Late Show with James Corden*, 2017). Later, in December 2019, he announced he was taking 'a breather' from social media and returned in September 2020 to announce the birth of his daughter (teddysphotos, 2019). In November 2022, he undertook a further break. A post that showed him standing on a boulder, staring pensively out to sea, was captioned: 'Signing off now until 2023. See you in the new year. Much love, Ed x' (teddysphotos, 2022). This break ended on 19 January 2023, when he returned online to post the video for his latest single 'F64' (teddysphotos, 2023a).

Sheeran's return to social media became a flashpoint in early 2023, with online news outlets all covering his 'social media comeback' (Gurley, 2023). Just over a week after his new single was released, he posted a confessional video on Instagram, formally announcing his return and apologizing for his social media abstention. In the video, titled 'Back in the bitz', he explains that he had taken time off from social media due to 'turbulent things' occurring in his personal life, including the death of his friend Jamal Edwards, the founder of SB.TV (teddysphotos, 2023b). He continues, 'I just didn't really feel like being online and pretending to be something I'm not when I wasn't feeling like that', and explains that he wanted to be 'totally honest' with fans. Sheeran's narrative alludes to wider popular perceptions that social media platforms are cultural sites where people present carefully staged constructions of a happy, perfect self. It is, of course, understandable that he may not have wanted to post content during this difficult time. However, there is no reason why 'honest' content could not be posted about the difficulties he was encountering; social media does not have to remain a space for staged happiness and perfect worlds. The confessional video provided Sheeran with a platform to demonstrate his honest and authentic persona, enabling him to strengthen relations of intimacy and authenticity with his fans.

The post provoked a multitude of heartfelt comments from fans. For one fan (iamju-jutakano), Sheeran's post was a stark reminder that celebrities are subject to the same struggles as 'ordinary' people: 'People tend to forget that artists, celebrities, famous people are human beings just like them. Everyone has ups and downs Ed! Shit happens to us all'.

This sentiment was echoed in other comments. One user, melasimpson, highlighted that

There are shedloads of musicians, singers, actors etc who have their 'people' handle all the fan media. You've spoiled us mate! But we don't 'own' you. I'm happy to have the music and blessed to see your posts, but the very fact that you live your life like

a 'normal geezer' with ups and downs, like us all, is the one thing that makes you the man we love.

For this user, Sheeran's open discussion of his struggles with social media signalled his normality and his dedication to his fans. This relatability can work to establish authenticity, where Sheeran appears genuine and honest. This was suggested by one user (adashorwhatever) who said: 'don't ever feel like you have to post anything for us that isn't the real you'. An Instagram fan page (teddyed_11) dedicated to Sheeran celebrated his return and praised Sheeran for running his account himself, rather than relying on a social media PR team: 'We don't care how often you post Ed. We just care that it is actually you when you do. Even if that means once a month or less. ☒'

This comment suggests that content posted by a celebrity themselves is more important than a regular stream of content posted by a PR team. One fan (pattyjeank) highlights that, given the level of fame Sheeran has now reached, he no longer needs to feel the pressure to engage in social media labour: 'You've moved way beyond those days on Twitter when you'd do an impromptu Q&A'. In a YouTube reposting of the video by *Entertainment Tonight* (2023), a fan (EmilyJBunny) similarly states that 'When you're Ed Sheeran you don't NEED a social media presence. Do what you like Ed, we are here for whatever you got!' One comment from jld4780 praised Sheeran's authenticity, stating that, unlike other celebrities on social media, he hadn't got 'stuck in the game of pride'. Another YouTube user (graceskyephoto) sympathized, stating that 'Sometimes everyone just needs to take a social media break. It's good for the soul'.

High-profile social media breaks present celebrities like Sheeran with opportunities to performatively construct their authenticity and ordinariness by demonstrating that they grapple with the same problems that everyday social media users encounter. Through confessional acts of self-disclosure about the toxicity of social media and the mental health difficulties that arise around the pressures of maintaining an online presence, celebrities unite themselves with their followers in their common struggle with these platforms. Momentarily opting out of social media thus enables celebrities to 'construct their images as "real" people, subject to stress, overexposure, and abuse of digital devices' (Jorge and Pedroni, 2021: 75). Celebrity digital detox narratives often 'allude to a wider lexicon of social media toxicity' (Jorge and Pedroni, 2021: 70; see also Sutton, 2017; Syvertsen, 2020) and emphasize the importance of self-care, with celebrity digital detoxers serving as exemplars of the neoliberal injunction that individuals, rather than big tech companies or governments, should take responsibility for health and wellbeing issues related to social media. Celebrity digital detox posts provide fans and followers with a neoliberal narrative of self-regulation via confessional self-disclosures where an honest and vulnerable authentic celebrity self is supposedly revealed. Sheeran's breaks from social media must thus be seen within the wider context of the 'self-regulation society' (Syvertsen and Enli, 2020: 1270) that has emerged under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism, in which individuals are encouraged to practice self-control and self-care, often by turning to market solutions in the form of

self-help guides or an ever-growing range of digital disconnection consumer products (such as lock boxes for mobile devices [Fast and Syvertsen, 2024] or expensive digital detox retreats [Fish, 2017; Sutton, 2020]). Amid the backlash against big tech, disconnecting from digital technologies has become a fashionable trend and marketing opportunity, energizing an entire economy of detox holiday packages, self-help products, and wellbeing courses through which users are enjoined to take responsibility for managing their overconnectivity (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019; Syvertsen, 2020).

Sheeran's social media breaks enable him to appeal to his fanbase by presenting himself as a 'normal geezer' who struggles with social media like ordinary people. These breaks are often strategically timed to build up to a new release and to produce hype and anticipation, to the point that it is not only the release of new music that becomes a flashpoint but also his repeated returns to social media. Through highly publicized digital detoxes, celebrities like Sheeran come to embody, reproduce, model, and perpetuate neoliberal ideologies of self-control and self-help. Sheeran thus arises as a good neoliberal subject, taking self-imposed breaks from social media without ever fully abandoning the platforms, in order to support his productivity and creativity, while simultaneously constructing an image of authenticity, building hype for his return online and, of course, promoting his music (generating value for his brand, his record label, and for social media platforms when his return sparks a viral frenzy of activity).

Conclusion

Social media has long been theorized as a valuable site for the production of celebrity authenticity and remains a key tool through which celebrities strive to construct and stage authentic selves by providing fans with glimpses into a supposedly unmediated life. Increasingly, the rejection or abandonment of social media (and, in some cases, other digital technologies) also plays a significant role in the production and maintenance of fame, providing celebrities with further opportunities to enact and demonstrate authenticity. Within the contemporary context of digital overload and social media backlash – defined by widespread recognition of the filtered, edited, and staged nature of many social media posts, and by debates around the impacts of social media on mental health – these platforms are increasingly associated with the inauthentic and the toxic.[10] Growing numbers of celebrities are now capitalizing on this tide of anti-social media sentiment by taking temporary breaks from these platforms, strategically distancing their brand and values from this toxicity. For the stars who refused to open social accounts in the first place, this moment of digital disillusionment has served to reinforce their authenticity. Indeed, stars such as Keanu Reeves, Renée Zellweger, and Cillian Murphy appear wise, far-seeing, and steadfast in their values.

The reasons why celebrities opt out of social media or refuse to open accounts are many and varied but often relate to concerns with privacy, mental health, or produc-

[10] As suggested, for example, by the rise of #NoFilter and 'Instagram vs reality' trends.

tivity. Additionally, some celebrities quit social media to make political statements. For example, following Elon Musk's controversial takeover of Twitter in late 2022 – after which he rebranded the platform as 'X', fired 80 per cent of employees, allowed the mass reactivation of banned accounts, and drastically reduced content moderation protections – a raft of celebrities made grandiose statements protesting Musk as they left the platform, in what might be considered progressive political action or simple virtue signalling, depending on one's own standpoint. Those celebrities – whom we may term 'righteous refusers' – included Elton John, Trent Reznor, David Simon, Gigi Hadid, Whoopi Goldberg and Shonda Rhimes (Mier, 2022).

Some practices of analogue celebrity, such as the outright refusal of social media, may nostalgically hark back to a pre-digital golden age of celebrity where the lives of famous people were shrouded in mystery. Of course, attempts among the famous to conceal their private lives from the press often creates intrigue (and sometimes this is the strategic intention of the celebrity). Opting out of social media can therefore serve as a valuable PR tactic, generating mystery, buzz, and interest among the press around the celebrity's private life and their reasons for avoiding social media, while also generating compassion and respect from fans.

A focus on media stars who disengage with social media invites reflection on the subversive potential of digital disconnection practices among celebrities. When a high-profile star refuses to join these platforms or takes a temporary break from their online activity, and when this is accompanied by the celebrity critiquing data privacy issues or the addictive design logics of social media, it can open discussions around the negative potential of social media and big tech, and potentially encourage others to opt out too (though there is little evidence to suggest this). Temporary abstention from social media may initially appear as a critical stance against data-driven capitalism. However, while these temporary detoxes may momentarily deprive big tech companies of some valuable data, these breaks are rarely permanent and are often undertaken so that the celebrity can rest, re-energize, and ultimately return online, ready to re-engage their fans and followers, generating viral interest (and value) for social media platforms when they do so. The narratives and actions of celebrities who engage in momentary detoxes from social media often reproduce or reinforce neoliberal models of governmentality, whereby individuals are positioned as accountable and responsible for their (mis)use of digital technology within the self-regulation society.

This is not to suggest that celebrities who fully and permanently opt out of social media, like Keanu Reeves and Renée Zellweger, radically challenge contemporary configurations of capitalism. To some degree, their permanent rejection of social media enables these celebrities to opt out of the data-driven value generation that forms the economic basis of these platforms (though viral content about their lack of social media presence itself generates value for the platforms). Even if a celebrity opts out of social media, they remain very much discussed (and, as such, indirectly 'present') on these platforms and online more broadly. Indeed, as we have suggested, practices of digital refusal often perpetuate press interest in the celebrity, ultimately reinforcing

the circuitry of attention economy capitalism that underpins wider celebrity culture (an economy which itself is intimately entangled with social media and digital devices). Celebrities themselves rarely critique their role in this economy. Furthermore, as the rejection of the digital becomes increasingly fashionable, commodified, and lucrative within the context of neoliberal consumer culture, celebrities that refuse to use social media (or engage in digital detoxes) now play an important role within a wider economy of digital disconnection. Spawning news articles and serving as role models for offline living, their digital disengagement is packaged into consumable content that satisfies a growing cultural interest in – and market for – the non-digital.

As such, technology refusal in these contexts cannot simply be understood as a counter-hegemonic practice. Digital refusal among the rich and famous may challenge dominant values around technology (by calling into question common assumptions that digital technology represents 'progress' and 'innovation', or by subverting norms that equate social status with owning the latest upgrade), but the practices discussed here also reflect the structural inequalities that shape both celebrity culture and digital culture, highlighting the new digital divide that has emerged between those who have the wealth and privilege to opt out of digital society and those who do not.

While it may be tempting to opt out of social media, this is not an option for the vast majority of people who rely on these platforms to find jobs, conduct work, maintain relations with family and friends, and engage with public services. Wealth and privilege enable analogue celebrities to log out and detach themselves from the realities of daily life in digital societies. Media theorists Simone Natale and Emiliano Treré (2020), among others (Karppi, 2011; Mejias, 2013; Rosamond, 2017) have argued that engagement (rather than disengagement) with digital technologies is a necessary precondition for developing adequate critiques of – and resistance to – the hegemony of the digital within contemporary societies. What is needed are strategies of resistance that are not based on withdrawal but on undermining or reworking the operating logics of social media platforms and the wider attention economy. Rather than incite change in digital society through critical engagement, the celebrity who disengages from the digital world retreats into their own luxury, private analogue idyll.

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