Students on a Social Media 'Detox': Disrupting the Everyday Practices of Social Media Use

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Abstract. This article explores how disruption of habitual social media use reshapes the information behavior of emerging adults. Using the core ideas from theories about the social acceleration of time, reverse domestication and social media literacies, we designed a study where full-time BA-level students (N = 42) were asked to keep a diary about quitting social media for five consecutive days. Despite temporary disconnection, participants expressed anxiety and negative emotions brought on by the non-usage and perceived slowing of time – meaning mostly boredom and 'fear of missing out' while being inaccessible to others. Alternatively, many participants expressed fulfillment and a sense of serenity from the absence of constant availability. Considering this exercise of contemplating taken-for-granted activities, we propose a simple tool to reflect upon information behavior in the context of accelerating social time, to ensure subjectively perceived comfortable sense of time.

Keywords: Information behavior · Self-reflexivity · Social media use · Students

1 Introduction

In our paper, we discuss the initial results of our recent study exploring how disruption of habitual social media use reshapes information behavior of young adults. By contextualizing this study in theories of accelerating social time [1, 2], and uses and gratifications [3, 4], we explore people's perceptions of passing time: its pace, and connections between perceptions of time, and sustaining various relationships during a disruption of everyday practices. These relationships, kept up by "connected presence", "expressive communication", and "micro-coordination" [5] often remain taken for granted due to the quick pace of life – thus, a certain amount of reflexivity (part of both social media literacies [6] and media domestication [7]) is needed to revisit already established, but unnoticeably changing information behavior under daily pressure [8].

There is existing research on disconnection and non-use with the focus on people who are disconnected because of digital divides [9], who give up or abstain from social media as means of ideological resistance [10], or have different strategies for limiting their use of specific platforms [11]. We aim to explore how planned disruption of habitual use of social media can enable and empower participants' self-reflexivity and how 'detoxing' influences the perception of time and social relationships.

Our study involves personal diaries about social media usage disruption during five consecutive days. Over 40 BA-level students at the University of Tartu kept diaries as part of their homework during the "Information Society and New Media" courses. These students normally have social media occupying an important part in their lives, so this homework enabled them to step back and see what would happen in case social media would be entirely removed from their reach for a few days. As has been discussed elsewhere [12], one's own choice or forced disruption in non-use or disruption of social media can also matter in the form of so-called 'have-nots' or 'want-nots'. In the present context, the students were presented with a task to abstain, so they were forced to become 'have-nots', but through the use of such exercise, many could explore the depth and overlap of their belonging to the 'want-nots' group to a certain extent.

Thus, our study functions as an initial test of a low-cost and low-tech tool for self-diagnosis which, instead of demanding to do something, demands not doing something. This way, our study proposes easily accessible and applicable social media literacy-related practical recommendations, potentially inspiring the teaching practices of colleagues teaching courses about learning skills, and at the same time, shedding light on relevant aspects of emerging adults' information behavior.

2 Theoretical and Empirical Background

Several recent studies have stressed the importance and effect of the increased pace of our daily life, including rapid production and consumption of information [8]. The pace of life, characterized by imperatives of "flexibility" and "efficiency" [1], taken-for-granted instantaneity [8], multitasking and other 'symptoms' of acceleration of social time [2] affects lives of people with different socio-demographic backgrounds [13].

While some studies have stressed the temporal factors in information seeking [14], the context of fast-paced life has been considered in fewer works [15, 16]. To gain a better understanding about the impact of the accelerating pace of life on information behavior (containing both active and passive activities to obtain information, but also information avoiding strategies [17]), the slow principles like reflexivity and mindfulness, control over speed of information consumption, the "non-task aspect of much information behavior" [8, p. 700] have been discussed. Yet, these principles still contain possibilities for further inquiries. It is even possible to stress the urgency of studies that consider the acceleration of social time in the framework of the information behavior as apparently, previously established time-management strategies or mindsets might not be useful under those new circumstances [18].

Theoretically, our study takes its vantage point from the uses and gratifications theory [3, 4]. The basic needs that both traditional media and social media fulfill, are:

- cognitive needs to acquire information and knowledge;
- affective needs to view content for excitement, enjoyment, and pleasure;
- social needs to create a sense of group belonging, influencing and contributing to others;
- individual needs to enhance self-promotion, personal gain and confidence;
- escapist needs to use the technology to flee from reality and create an alternative virtual and imagined reality [4].

Considering the needs and active roles [4] of social media users, to some extent, we also need to rely on media domestication theory which describes "how media and communication technologies are becoming increasingly interwoven in users' lives" [7, p. 27]. Some technologies and platforms have been domesticated to the point where they are perceived as reliable and trustworthy tools, thus losing their magic and becoming unnoticeable part of the routines [19].

As social media is used for a number of reasons – for example, finding and sharing information; maintaining, managing and building relationships, and one's own identity/communities, participating on many levels and modes [20] – our study also focuses on social-media-specific literacies. As has been stated previously [21], neither engineers nor policymakers are proposing serious solutions to the disorienting super-abundance of digital communication. Furthermore, digital and social media literacies are often framed as the responsibility and expression of individual agency [22]. So designing and testing a tool for developing such literacies in our research participants, can potentially serve as an attempt to fill the aforementioned gap both in theory and practice.

In fact, there are various and often overlapping concepts (such as information literacies, media literacies, new media literacies, digital literacies) used when talking about people's ability to apply informational self-determination in online settings and participatory cultures [23] in a meaningful way. We will focus on a more specific and relevant subset of digital skills – social media literacies [6, 24]. Social media literacies have also been analyzed in five sets of skills and knowledge related to attention, participation, collaboration, network awareness, and critical consumption [6]. These skills are not always linear and interconnected, with attention as fundamental to all others and at the center of our study – to be aware, present and mindful, knowing when to be alert and vigilant, when to block out distractions and make use of disengagement practices. In fact, the boundaries between use and non-use are increasingly blurred, with emerging practices enabling diverse ways and degrees of engagement with and disengagement from social media [11, 12]. In media domestication theory this kind of reflexivity is bound to 'reversed media domestication' entailing "reflection on the cognitive and practical strategies for distancing and withdrawal" [7, p. 29] from social media, and developing strategies of "controlled reduction of media intake" [8] – qua different information or social media 'diets'. Eventually, self-reflexivity or the "reflexive form of knowledgeability" [25] is a core concept for the agency of people in general, not just social media.

The notions of accelerating social time, uses and gratifications theory, but also social media literacies inform our research questions. Firstly, to set the focus of our study on the fast-paced life, we approach the students' social media disruption diaries to ask how they described the pace of time when absent from social media. Secondly, considering various uses and gratifications of social media, and the reflexive nature of our study, we are interested in how these perceptions of time were connected to sustaining peer, family and work-life relationships. These two aspects can both be considered as important contributors to learners' success, and thus, can be discussed fruitfully in the context of academic life and social media literacies.

3   Methodology of the Research

We conducted our study at the Institute of Social Studies, at the University of Tartu. In the fall semester of 2017 and spring semester of 2018, we asked BA-level students enrolled in the "Information Society and New Media" courses to stop using social media for five consecutive days. The students (91 in total) kept personal 'social media detox' diaries about this experience. As the courses were held in English, the diaries were written in the same language, as well. We encouraged the students to write as if they would write for themselves without constraining or censoring themselves. Over five days, the average length per diary was four pages (using standard formatting). We offered the students the option of submitting their diaries for our study – 42 students agreed to do so. Submitting a diary was entirely voluntary. After grading the diaries as part of the homework in the course, we invited students to submit their diary with a disclaimer that they could opt out of participating in our study any time. We also empowered the participants by giving them control over the final "printed word" [26] – they could edit the diary when necessary, and we also kept our promise to properly erase all the personal details from the diaries for the analysis. While analyzing the diaries, we considered their performative nature [27], and the fact that the diaries were related to homework, thus still subjugated to certain Freirean power hierarchies. Despite these limitations, our research design allows us to evoke self-reflexivity on the participants' level, and provides us with qualitative insights into aspects of people's lives often left unexamined.

The diaries were submitted by a rather heterogeneous group of students: the majority of students enrolled in this course were 19–23 year-olds from Estonia, studying journalism and communication, while about a quarter of students had an international background (coming from various countries via student exchange programs). Of the participants, 27 were female and 15 were male. We collected the diaries presented by full-time regular students but many Estonian students also work (part-time), so their work-life might also be heavily integrated with active social media use.

We analyzed the 42 submitted diaries (174 pages in total) using within-case and cross-case qualitative text analysis, more specifically, thematic qualitative text analysis [28]. This type of analysis suggests that researchers identify "what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities" [28, p. 57]. We identified our approach as combining inductive and deductive analytical logic, being of experiential nature and making use of the social constructivist framework [28, p. 58]. Deductive analysis was purposeful to consider the context of our theoretical reasoning behind the diaries. At the same time, while looking for answers to our research questions about the perceptions of pace of time and its impacts on various relationships, we approached the diaries inductively and experientially in terms of letting our diary authors speak for themselves.

4   Results

Before turning the focus specifically to our research questions, it is interesting to take a look at how the participants started the detox. The beginning was usually carefully planned and we saw two distinct time-related strategies for starting their disruption. First, matching the expected slow tempo with the most similarly-paced part of their existing routines. For example, participants were describing starting their detox on a day off, just before a weekend trip with their friends or going to visit their parents, often at the countryside (where the disruption seemed more justifiable and accepted by others than going off the grid in the city). The second strategy was timing the detox to cover a period of time where there is much and intensive (home)work to be accomplished, hoping to increase productivity and fight the anticipated boredom by keeping busy.

4.1   Perception of Time During the Detox

Although the perception of time was not mentioned in the description of the detox task, it was a central concept in students' diaries. When describing their usual habits that the participants were forced to break, social media was described as a time-filler, time-killer or time-stealer. Without social media and the distractions that come with constant multitasking, students usually described their day as passing by more slowly:

> M1: The day goes by pretty slowly when u don't use social media. But you win a lot of time! I managed to do a lot of work. That was the biggest positive.

From this quote we can see an example of how the slowing of time, and essentially 'free time' was quickly re-contextualized as a possibility to increase productivity in work or school-related tasks. Which can, without the availability of connected presence and micro-coordination [5] be more time-consuming and thus social media platforms lose their 'domesticated' status, becoming more visible once again [19].

Or alternatively, to increase work-related productivity, the participants exchanged one type of media to another – reading, watching and listening to the news constantly and intensely and thus fulfilling their cognitive needs (in the form of news) or affective needs (entertainment and enjoyment mostly achieved via Netflix or Spotify). In these cases, there is proof of looking for substitute activities, not adjusting to the newfound pace. In some diaries, we noticed that the participant had anticipated slowing of time and initial boredom that might come with it and even 'overplanned' their days:

> F21: I was really productive. However, by the end of the day my head was heavy and I felt as though it would explode any second. I realized that it was because I hadn't had any breaks to unwind.

Time without social media can feel wasted or unpurposeful which was evident from how the participants described their activities (eating, having a phone call, falling asleep, waking up) as being 'just that and nothing else', for example:

> F1: This morning I spent this fifteen minutes in the kitchen. I just sat there without using my smartphone and I drank my tea all alone. I was so bored and watched the grey walls of our kitchen.

On the other hand, time without social media can feel precious, the slower pace might transfer to other communication modes, as described here:

> F15: Without social media, communication speed is slower, time is slower, too. I suddenly want to write rather than typing, slowly rather than quickly. And when I described the stories and my feelings in the letters, I tried to get the language correct and beautiful. Actually I find that some words I wrote on the letters I might never type on the social media.

Mundane routines and activities are often accompanied by screens so time being spent without that stimulation can feel quiet and slow. In addition, the downside of gaining extra time, perceiving slowing of time was the feeling of FOMO (fear of missing out) set in motion by not being able to do these micro-checks constantly.

Typically, the participants settled in to the disruption in a couple of days. What usually began as a change in outward-oriented time (such as 'I have to share this', FOMO, worrying about contact with others) transformed somewhat into inward-oriented time perception or "reflexive form of knowledgeability" [25], or awareness [6] which was usually described as a positive feeling:

> F26: And while thinking my thoughts, I realized, that they were so pure and so my own thoughts. I thought about things, that I hadn't thought about for a while, (but I wished I would). This seemed such a new and fresh feeling, it felt like for a very long time /…/I was instead thinking about a lot more interesting and important things, about my own life, my own dreams and wishes, about my future.

Furthermore, most participants described increased face-to-face communication with others, as well as going back to and making use of 'old school' phone calls and e-mails.

When detoxes came to an end, we noticed a typical scenario in the diaries that can be termed sped-up acceleration. The participants often found solace even during the detox from getting back to 'normality' soon, to binge-scroll everything after the five-day-abstinence. And many of them did exactly that, for example:

> F2: It took me around 2 h until I was well-informed again. It is quite strange that I had no problems renouncing on social media, but then used it again as I would be addicted.

But in long-term, nearly half of the participants described different changes they had made to their social media usage based on the detox, for example: some had 'decluttered' their feeds by unfollowing people, groups and pages; others had switched off notifications that serve as a constant reminder or temptation to check different platforms or moved the app out of sight, to the last screen page on phone; few had even de-installed certain apps or stopped using them entirely (mostly Snapchat). In essence, some of the diary keepers explored the affordances of stepping into the shoes of the 'want-nots' group [12]. Interestingly, many of the participants expressed similar opinions about the length of the detox - feeling like they would have gained a deeper insight to their informational needs and invisible media usage patterns by being absent for a longer period of time:

> M8: During the last days, my brain received and processed so little amount of information, comparing to the previous periods. I think, there would emerge much more crucial changes and realizations if the detox period was longer.

Some students wrote in their diaries that now when they know the 'genre' and how to approach the disruption, they plan to make time for similar detoxes independently.

4.2   Relationships Affected by Detox

As we live in the always-on, on-demand society, most of the students felt like they could not just go off the grid and start the detox but rather prepare carefully. These preparations usually involved communicating their 'unusual circumstances' to important others and very noticeably, often taking a certain amount of pride of their uncommon choices:

> M1: My great preparations managed to save my relationships. Most of the people knew that I was not going to use for some time and they totally accepted it. A friend even said I should write a feature about it. What a feature that would be!

Others' reactions mostly mirrored the norm of availability, according to the diaries, as friends, family members and colleagues expressed surprise and in their reactions confirmed once again the exceptionality of such a disruption to the participants:

> F27: Some people were almost swept off their feet (again, definitely not an exaggeration). "Why on Earth would you do something like that?", "Is everything okay?", "So what will you and what will you not be using? Is Youtube social media? Should we start an iMessage chat? Can you cheat?" etc. Honestly I was not too sure myself.

One participant wrote about different generations having a different look at these aspects, when telling her (older) co-workers about going on a detox, they pointed out the "unoriginal specialness" of such disruption:

> F11: The funny thing is that when I told the people that I work with that I am doing a detox they said "How millennial of you." It's scary because the older generations can go without social media, it is us, the newer generations, who feel the constant need to use it to not miss out on anything.

In addition, the availability of facts and being able to seek additional information about people was sometimes perceived as making people anti-social:

> F22: I guess that Facebook makes me a bit more uncommunicative at some points, as I sometimes don't ask people where they live or come from, because I think I can look that up later.

Most dominantly notifications about going on a detox were contextualized as important information for friends and family ("so they know I haven't died"), as usually social media functions as a platform for small acts of care: being there for others constantly and paying attention, "extra closeness" as F27 put it. Most importantly, though, school and work relationships were brought up as something needing preparation and reorganizing:

> M1: Facebook is the only social media site I use every day. It has turned into a work site because of my usage. All of my group work goes on in Facebook and that is why this detox is a bit dangerous to be honest. It carries all possible functions and it turns out it has become irreplaceable.

Majority of participants described how the detox increased the amount of time spent on face-to-face communication that was perceived as having supremacy over computer-mediated communication, a shift from quantitative communication to qualitative one.

And to a few, the detox itself was a testing tool for existing friendships – who will care if I am not constantly available?

5   Discussion and Conclusions

In our study, we have kept in mind the specific constellation of accelerating social time [1, 2, 8], uses and gratifications [3] related to social media [4], media domestication [7], and social media literacies [6, 24]. Although it may seem that all these notions do not have much in common, there is still a common thread of agency and reflexivity binding these notions. The acceleration of social time, however, leaves little time to ponder on the technological and social changes (including acceptance of newer technologies), and may eventually cause an uncomfortable sensation 'fear of missing out' or just boredom. The question is thus: can reflexivity on "media produsage" [23] in this aforementioned context be treated as a transferable skill that can also be supported in various learning environments (such as a university, among others)?

The principle of keeping a 'social media detox' diary is simple as it helps to reflect on something one does not do. There can be different aspects one might consider writing about in her diary (like mood changes, small hints related to smartphone apps, reflections on a critical choice of information sources), yet one of those aspects is related to the perception of time, bound to the peer and work-life relationships. While theories on social media literacies in general point fruitfully towards the agency of social media users, participating and collaborating in different activities [6, 24], critical media consumption, but also attention [6], these kinds of awareness have seldom been related to temporality, that is – what about the perception of time with or without [7] social media, and the connection between time flow and fostering peer relationships.

For the field of media and information literacy, our study holds significance, as it points towards easy and fun ways to increase and develop people's media and information literacies. Considering that updating these nuanced and context-specific literacies are often framed as a personal responsibility [22], the accessibility and ease-of-use of tools and methods is crucial. Usually we turn our focus toward what it is that people do and what kinds of knowledge and skills are needed in order to engage in something, but we emphasize the importance and potential of *not doing* something, as a part of different literacies and the value of disengagement, serving as a mirror for self-reflexivity or exploring alternative media repertoires. So if the system is geared towards constant acceleration of time and there is a need for new time-management strategies [18], approaches enabling people to 'shift gears' are worthy of exploration. After all, people's agency is characterized by an innate ability to imagine different outcomes [25] which can bring change and restructuring.

Without preferring any attitudes of some research participants over attitudes of others, this study helped us to better understand the meaning of 'social media detox' in terms of perception of time. The 'social media detox' provided both new possibilities

(of doing something you did not have time to do before), but also new challenges (how to avoid boredom and solitude, and keep in touch with family and friends, how to run even the smallest errands outside social media). Also, the diaries revealed very vividly different categories related to diary keepers' evaluations about usage of time: whether it was 'well-spent', 'wasted', 'killed' – the diaries provided these useful insights both from the time before (when social media was still used), and the time after (when 'social media detox' left a certain amount of spare time).

The previous intensity of social media usage and satisfaction with time spent away from social media seem to form certain continua that invite posing new hypotheses – whether the intensive usage of social media usage induces stronger positive or negative emotions, related to perception of 'social media diet'? Or, besides the intensity of social media usage, what are the affordances of the absence from social media, and how strong do these affordances need to be in order to challenge the taken-for-granted normality of being instantly available [8]? These different questions and continua yield us understanding about subjectively perceived comfortable sense of time.

On the basis of our sample (N = 42) whose members were of relatively the same age, we were able to detect very different attitudes towards relatively similarly altered pace of time. Similarly, the absence from social media had very different impacts on sustaining various social relationships: some of our research participants happily sought new possibilities to communicate to their significant peers, while some were struggling to find these possibilities. Thus, our results help to take a look at the different social- media-related patterns of time consumption of emerging adults.

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