

# Logged out: Analyzing Non-participation in the Internet

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## Abstract

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Participation in the multimedia and Web 3.0 era has been theorized, leading to models like Nico Carpentier's (2011) access, interaction, and participation (AIP) that is oft-debated in communication discourse. There is evidence, however, of human movement towards non-participation that occurs with, alternately to, or after media-aided participation. Investigating this is crucial to holistic theorizing of media use and non-use and of human connection to and disconnection from the internet. Through theories like social shaping of technology and motivational theory, and using content analyses of purposively sampled textual accounts of disconnection from the web, this study parses motivations for and goals of voluntary human disconnection from the Web. They range from the therapeutic to the artistic and serve as grounds for a model of non-participation that the researcher draws from interdisciplinary concepts such as personhood, intentionality, and Kulturkritik. The new model broadens horizons towards empirically-grounded understandings of mediated communication and of the interaction between human beings with communication technologies.

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**KEYWORDS:** media participation; internet and disconnection; media use; personhood

## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

The growing predominance of the Internet as a communication mechanism has elicited new questions about participation. Whereas Web 1.0 triggered questions about the interconnection of information and access to the internet, and Web 2.0 provoked inquiry into the integration and social participation of users in the internet, Web 3.0 brings to the surface queries into connecting people via the internet through the connection of data, concepts, and applications (Beal, 2019; Naik and Shivalingiah, 2009).

At this stage of the evolution of the internet, it has seen both active users and deliberate non-users. The phenomenon of voluntary disconnection from the Internet is expanding the parameters for reflection on participation's

manifold manifestations. Deeper questions, therefore, need to be raised in relation to participatory modes. Posing and exploring answers to these questions will enable media and communication practitioners as well as consumers to have a deeper grasp of the value of real human connection for which they can exercise responsibility through truthfulness, among other virtues, both online and offline.

In this article, I examine why people choose to disconnect from the Web. In answering the question, I position empirical evidence within a contemplative-philosophical paradigm. Corollary to this, I propose junctures for the power negotiations related to optional Web disconnection, illuminating horizons for the act as an alternative participatory mode.

## 2.0. THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To rescue the concept from becoming too amorphous, scholar Nico Carpentier (2011) theorized participation as the concerted and thereby democratic act of decision-making or use of power within political institutions and the political aspects of life. Participation means “co-deciding” that proceeds from interaction or “socio-communicative relationships” and begins with access to or “presence” of means of interaction (Carpentier, 2011, pp. 28-30). Within communication, participation entails that people, for instance, audiences and media practitioners co-decide on or with media technology, content, production and consumption, and organizational policy (Carpentier, 2011, p.30). Participants in media and communication “are positioned towards each other through power relationships that are (to an extent) egalitarian” (Carpentier 2011, p.31).

In his access, interaction and participation (AIP) model, Carpentier characterized participation itself as defined by the element of power, situated in processes and localities involving specific actors, contingent and part of society’s power struggles, separate from democratic-populism, invitational and different from access and interaction (Carpentier, 2011, pp. 24-27). The AIP model is germane to discussing why people disconnect from the Internet because the act, contingent on the invitational nature of participation, can be read as an exercise of power to abdicate a manner of participation, discontinue

interaction and retreat from access, all in favor of alternatives.

Even as the AIP model pertains to participation in a mediatized world, access, interaction, and participation need to be closely read in conjunction with the equivalent concepts of presence, socio-communicative relationships and co-deciding to become applicable to alternative, Web-disconnected participation. The latter terms are useful when disconnecting from the Internet is construed as a deliberate choice for immediate or non-mediatized presence, relationships, and collective decision-making. The model, however, is limited in conceptualizing alternative participation that implies distancing from media technology, content, mediated production and reception, and media organizations at the core of the AIP model. Motivational and social shaping of technology (SST) perspectives can address this gap.

The “motivational perspective” has been used to explore the relationship between Internet use and personal social capital production, a relationship that in turn, predicts civic engagement (Shah et al, 2001, p.141). In a study, it was found that “informational uses of the Internet are positively related to individual differences in the production of social capital” while social-recreational uses are negatively related to these (Shah et al, 2001, p.141). If a motivational perspective can help establish a relationship between civic engagement and types of Web use, it is plausible to use this perspective to conceptualize variables that may be tied to optional

Web non-use in general at the very least. Civic engagement as a feeling of invitation to participate that is “precondition for participation” may be one such variable, as data suggest a positive relationship between it and non-Internet media consumption among civic-engaged, older generations of audiences (Carpentier and Jenkins, 2013; Shah et al, 2001). An architecture of motivations for disconnection can be founded on a range of domains, from institutional politics to the political elsewhere where the findings and reflections of scholars critique to varying degrees the phenomenon of Internet connectivity and by extension AIP in and through the Web (Carpentier, 2011).

In these domains, the number of possible motivations for disconnection is almost endless. Psychology has brought to the fore a positive correlation between the time young people spend online and their likelihood of fighting, possessing weapons, and refusing to help others (Twenge, 2013). Social media, in particular, have been shown to build “weak” ties and lead to heightened narcissism as well as mental disorders. Social media use at the same time has been associated with a fall in young people’s empathy, civic engagement, and political involvement (Twenge, 2013, p.11). Psychiatry is resolving whether “harmful Internet use” warrants the establishment of nomenclature of new disorders or merely provides “a context for the enactment, precipitation, or amplification of behaviors associated with preexisting conditions such as OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder)

or depression” (Kirmayer et al, 2013, p.177). Socio-economic perspectives have highlighted Facebook’s commodification of user data (Light and Cassidy, 2014). Communication research has exposed a disruptive dependence on the Internet among those who heeded instructions to abstain from it, such that after they went offline, “activities that were planned and organized online by others were literally missed, birthdays and other important dates were forgotten and went by unnoticed” (Kaun and Schwarzenegger, 2014). Amid progress in Internet and mobile technologies, philosophy and contemplative studies have sounded the alarm over people’s exposure to both “information overload” and “content overload” defined as “access to too much content” that in overwhelming people defeats the very purpose of helping them “participate effectively in the democratic process” (Levy, 2007a, p.235; Himma, 2007, p. 269). On the education front, the reduction of thinking time owing to information overload has been lamented, while the longing for increased and swifter connectivity has been diagnosed from a religious perspective as symptomatic of “our existential lack, our radical sense of inadequacy and incompleteness as human beings” (Levy, 2007b; Loy, 2007).

Conversely, Internet users have acknowledged the rewards of being disconnected from the Web. Concretely, they value disconnection for enabling them to delineate their professional and social lives, mark transitions between stages of life, signal their level of participation in group

dynamics, avoid conflict, carefully select associates, protect friends and family, resist contributing to content overload, manage self-disclosure, negotiate Web-based messaging mechanisms and participate in or “focus on other forms of sociality and socialization” like travel with friends enhanced by “technology blackout” (Light and Cassidy, 2014, p.1177). Likewise, going offline has brought to the surface users’ renewed appreciation of the immediate, physical presence of family and friends. Further, disconnection led to insights about the relative unimportance of Web content about maintaining offline communication and sociality, non-necessity of Web connectivity in the presence of communicative significant others, and compatibility of offline life with being updated about current affairs (Kaun and Schwarzenegger, 2014).

Some scholars (Light and Cassidy, 2014) view practices of disconnection as SST—the human shaping of and interaction with technology, amid non-human actors, from design to appropriation. SST emphasizes that users affect technology in the way that they use it amid non-human actors even as designers also affect technology especially, by the way they design it. From an SST perspective, the scholars have reflected on self-regulated Web or social network use as measures towards the recovery of privacy or “adding value to our experiences” (Light and Cassidy, 2014, p.1174). From the same perspective, shades of disconnection have been seen as forms of resistance allowed by sites like Facebook as an institution that seeks to continue to

benefit socioeconomically from subscriber data by preventing account termination while giving users the impression of having accomplished resistance (Light and Cassidy 2014, p.1174). If SST perspectives have made salient the tensions between the socioeconomic interests of a social network and the private interests of netizens, it can also shed light on whatever struggle there is between the Internet as a whole and persons who go offline.

Synthesizing these reflections up to this point, going offline or optional disconnection from the Internet, along with its various permutations are variants of access, interaction and participation enabled by participation’s invitational character and prompted by the consequences of Web connectivity (negative motivations) as well as the rewards of disconnection (positive motivations). As a heuristic tool, the motivational perspective aids in identifying which concrete items at alternative AIP’s core motivate practitioners. SST perspectives are also heuristic. They help illustrate what power struggles ensue between digital media institutions and netizens when technology through design acts with human appropriators and non-human actors like physical space. In interpreting disconnection as a manner of participation, this argument builds on the premise that connection and disconnection must be analyzed together in examining mediatized societies and that in such examinations, attention must be paid to the types of power involved, for instance, the socioeconomic, as a defining element of un-me-

diated participation (Carpentier 2011; Kaun and Schwarzenegger 2014; Light and Cassidy 2014). In the following section, I further maintain that contemplative studies and philosophy broaden horizons for discussing disconnection from the Internet.

The model and perspectives mentioned beg a deeper level of inquiry into and interpretation of voluntary disconnection from the Internet that necessitates ascent into the contemplative-philosophical plane. On this plane, the question persists in the form: Why do people opt for an alternative, non-mediatised participation on account of their motivations and as a form of resistance?

The answers have transcendent dimensions that can be best apprehended and reflected upon using a contemplative-philosophical hermeneutic derived from secular, Buddhist, and Christian traditions. To come up with such a hermeneutic, I use a framework combining concepts such as Pope Francis' (2016) communication and mercy, Kevin Healey's (2015) contemplative media studies, Francois Wessels' (2015) intentionality, Reilly's (2008) Mertonian architecture of personhood, and Graham Ward's (2002) Christian Kulturkritik. With this hermeneutic, voluntary Web disconnection can be more deeply understood. Once the consequences of Web connection and rewards of disconnection have been sorted into categories like the political, economic, biological or psychological and analyzed in relation to alternative AIP or non-mediated presence, socio-communicative

relationships and co-deciding, they can be appreciated as signifiers towards and within contemplative-philosophical awareness. Carpentier (2011) has been careful to note that while not everything is political, there is a political dimension to everything such that particular situations can become sites of power contests since they can always be made more egalitarian by and among the parties involved in them. A contemplative-philosophical hermeneutic helps clarify the reading of the politics of voluntary Web disconnection, privileging attention to the ultimate junctures of the power struggle that calls for immediate presence, socio-communicative relationships, and co-deciding.

If, in Carpentier's (2011) AIP model, the sites of negotiation are media technologies, content, production-consumption ecologies and organizations, from a contemplative-philosophical hermeneutic I propose five loci for presence, socio-communicative relationships, and co-deciding. These points of engagement are contemplation, Kulturkritik, intentionality, mercy, and personhood. I propose them based on the simple observation that they can be performed by humans largely unaided by media or Web technologies, on the fact that they are being discussed anew by their proponents as assets for navigating a world where the offline and the online tend to intertwine, and on the ground that they can easily have political aspects even if they are not political per se. Contemplation taken from the notion of "contemplative media studies" involves a critical approach to media

that takes an interest in digital culture's religious dimensions and identity-shaping role, prizing socioeconomic justice (Healey 2015, p. 948). Christian Kulturkritik entails culture industry analysis that is open to celebrating technological innovation while keeping "an exteriority to the ubiquity of the cyberspatial environment" in the tradition of theologians who welcome technology not as a displacement of the divine but as an opportunity for stewardship of the earth and its resources (Ward, 2002, p. 70; Shatzer, 2015). Intentionality is a state of reflecting about the purposes behind human choices and actions, particularly in the face of problems (Wessels, 2015). Mercy in the context of "mercy and communication" refers to a way of human communication offline as well as online that "generates a closeness which cares, comforts, heals, accompanies and celebrates" (Francis, 2016, p. 4). Personhood, an outgrowth of contemplation in the tradition of Thomas Merton refers to a human being's sense of wholeness marked by "inclusiveness, integration and integrity" in a spirit of "naturalness, spontaneity and joyfulness" (Reilly, 2008, p. 22). Web disconnection as freely chosen, alternative manner of participation can then be said to be geared towards the presence of time for, communicating in favor of, and co-deciding with or on these ultimate junctures.

Having crafted a new framework for discussing why people disconnect from the Internet, I argue that the question needs to be asked afresh due to gaps in research. The chief gap calls for a discussion based on empirical evidence of freely

chosen Web disconnection in the context of participation (Carpentier, 2011). Light and Cassidy (2014) explored levels of disconnection from the Internet, but apart from mentioning a technology blackout, their study focused on departure from the SNS Facebook and not from the Web itself. While they discussed this specific disconnection as a form of resistance, their interpretation of data was limited to the socio-economic viewpoint, assessing one social network's use of institutional power. Kaun and Schwarzenegger (2014) did initial work in paving the way for examining Internet disconnection in relation to connection in response to previous research that examined disconnection only as a deficit or an abnormal. However, their methodology of enforced disruption of Internet connection on research subjects limits the generalizability of their insights. A class of people exists who freely and as a matter of daily life outside the context of scientific research suspend Internet use, not to mention a class of non-students who unlike their respondents are plausibly less attached to the Internet. As a matter of fact, their study falls somewhat short of their own goal of discussing Web disconnection in tandem with disconnection rather than within a discourse of disconnect as abnormal and connection as normal: Their methodology concedes as a given the suspension of a routine, a normality of connectivity among their subjects (Kaun and Schwarzenegger, 2014). Moreover, scholars who explored or established the negative effects of Internet connection and attendant phenomena such as con-

tent overload as well as the positive effects of disconnection have not connected these potential motivations to user decision to shun access to the very infrastructure of the Internet (Himma, 2007; Levy, 2007a; Levy, 2007b; Loy, 2007; Kirmayer et al, 2013; Twenge, 2013; Kaun and Schwarzenegger, 2014; Light and Cassidy, 2014).

In view of the research gaps, my main objective in this study is to provide a deep interpretation of voluntary disconnection from the Internet using a contemplative-philosophical hermeneutic that draws from the AIP model, SST concept and motivational perspective and is applied to data sourced from persons who voluntarily, that is, in a course of events uncontrived by researchers went offline. Concurrently, I hope to make a modest contribution to parsing the notion of participation and bringing contemplative studies and philosophy to bear on reflections on motivations and power in relation to communication within our mediatized milieu.

**2.1.1. Main research question:** Why do people disconnect from the Internet?

### 3.0. METHODOLOGY

To answer the interpretative research question, I ventured to use inductive and deductive research strategies with a qualitative approach. I examined voluntary disconnection from the Internet as a case of the more general phenomenon of participation. From the population of internet chronicles of persons who deliberately went offline, my units of analysis were first-per-

son accounts or essays about the experience of disconnecting. My sampling was purposive, first in honor of the research question and my theoretical-conceptual framework, secondly according to the criteria that the articles must be from those who voluntarily disconnected and finally upon consideration of feasibility (Brænder 2015). I specifically used homogeneous purposive sampling. First, I used the key words “disconnecting from the internet” as a Google search entry. Second, I eliminated articles that were not first-person accounts of disconnection from the internet. Third, I eliminated articles that were not part of the first ten pages of search results as of February 2016. Using this sampling method, I arrived at six first-person accounts of disconnection from the internet (see Appendix A). The authors of the first-person accounts or articles included two journalists, a contributing writer to the website of a software solutions company, a startup investor-adviser, a communications specialist for information technology services, and a blogger.

Following a method of qualitative content analysis, at the inductive phase, I read all of the articles twice and then subjected each them to first level coding, specifically causation coding, since this best responded to the need to find out what made the writer-users decide to disconnect from the Web and what incentives they gained from disconnecting (Bech, 2014). I simultaneously subjected the articles to evaluation coding, since this primed the data at the inductive phase for a facet of analysis at the deductive

phase (Bech, 2014). Causes like distraction were coded as negative. Reported results of Web disconnection like restored focus were coded as positive. At the second level of coding, I combined similar causes or motivations classified in the first level coding under particular domains, counting, for instance, multiple reports of addiction as one item under a domain (Bech, 2014). This primed the data for another facet of analysis at the deductive phase.

After conducting two levels of coding, I proceeded to the deductive phase and found that from a motivational perspective, both the consequences of Web connection that led to the decision to disconnect and the rewards of disconnect can be grouped as follows: 1) Psychological health, 2) Physical health, 3) Relationships with people, 4) Creativity, 5) Time management, and 6) Truth or contemplation.

In the next section, I provide an overview of the rest of the results and discuss them from a motivational perspective and in relation to alternative participation, SST, and my contemplative-philosophical hermeneutic.

#### **4.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Psychological health reasons cited for leaving the Internet included feelings of brain overload, the fear of missing out, a distraction from everyday life, addiction to Internet content, and shortened attention span. The rewards of going offline included a better sense of focus, regaining a sense of calm, less anxiety, longer attention span, and the joy of the experience of snail mail.

Physical health reasons for Web disconnection included a sense of fatigue and disconnection from the physical world. Physical health benefits of disconnect mentioned include weight loss, involvement in sports and physical exercise. As for relationships with people, connection to the Internet was cited as a barrier to offline conversation and for its incapability to offer moral support and motivation to continue striving the way people can in face to face settings. Disconnection from the Internet was observed to have enabled real-life meetings, catching up with family, getting back in touch with proximate people and greater awareness of others in the moment.

Under creativity, Internet connection was tied to less originality due to the penchant for sharing unoriginal content. Disconnection offered the reward of being an inspiration for writing, enabling the writing of half a novel and the branching out of ideas in new directions. Time management was observed to have suffered with Internet connection, which made users idle away, procrastinate on tasks, and lose time for family and people in general. Going offline offered increased productivity, better personal routines, more time for projects that require focused attention and reading. Web connectivity was cited as tending to violate freedom. One writer-user wrote that she felt technology was controlling everyone, including herself, and several subjects said they felt too dependent on the Internet even for things that could be accomplished offline like asking for directions. After disconnection, the subjects observed they were



free to really work, be selective in their personal communications and regain control of their own attention. Under truth or contemplation, motivations for leaving the Internet included the perception that it gave a mere illusion of working to those connected to it, that it lacked meaning, corrupted the soul, and that connectivity was an unnatural state of life. Disconnection offered rewards like contemplating towards the following realizations:

- o “Chunks of time away from digital life are critical both to renewal and to work itself.”
- o “I have missed nothing.”
- o “Mindfulness is important. It’s easy to drift through your workday (and beyond), sailing along on a steady stream of e-mails, web links, and phone calls. Remember that you call the shots, and spend your time (consciously!) according to what you want to accomplish.”
- o “Absence [from the Internet] makes the time spent together [with it] grow more productive.”
- o “The internet isn’t an individual pursuit, it’s something we do with each other. The internet is where people are.”

SST perspectives hold that designers’ design of technology together with its interaction with people within particular situations shapes the technology. While Facebook allows gradations of disconnection, the design of the Internet also allows levels of disconnection, including completely unplugging from it. User disconnection towards alternative participation is a possibility in its shape. It is marked by users who decide

to disconnect. Their decision to break with the Internet as a collection of institutions highlights types of power other than economic that based on the results of this study, users find worth a struggle. Web connectivity is largely tied to institutional-political or socio-economic motives, yet the results indicate that for certain Web users, the political that is offline holds more importance. They feel the urge to exercise their power to break with the Internet, conjointly power to take care of their psychological and physical wellbeing, renew their relationships with people offline, use their non-digital creativity, improve their time management and stretch their minds in the contemplation of truths. This is alternative participation. Many users are cognizant that even without access to the Internet, they possess the immediate presence of their psyches and physiques, are party to socio-communicative relationships with people immediately around them and have opportunities for immediate co-deciding with them on time management as well as creative and contemplative pursuits.

Using my contemplative-philosophical hermeneutic, I argue that immediate presence, socio-communicative relationships, and co-deciding play out on the sites of contemplation, Kulturkritik, intentionality, mercy, and personhood. People’s non-virtual presence is required for contemplation—a critical view of media and how digital culture tends to become an idol shapes identities, or foists injustice, as when one of the user-writers critiques the internet

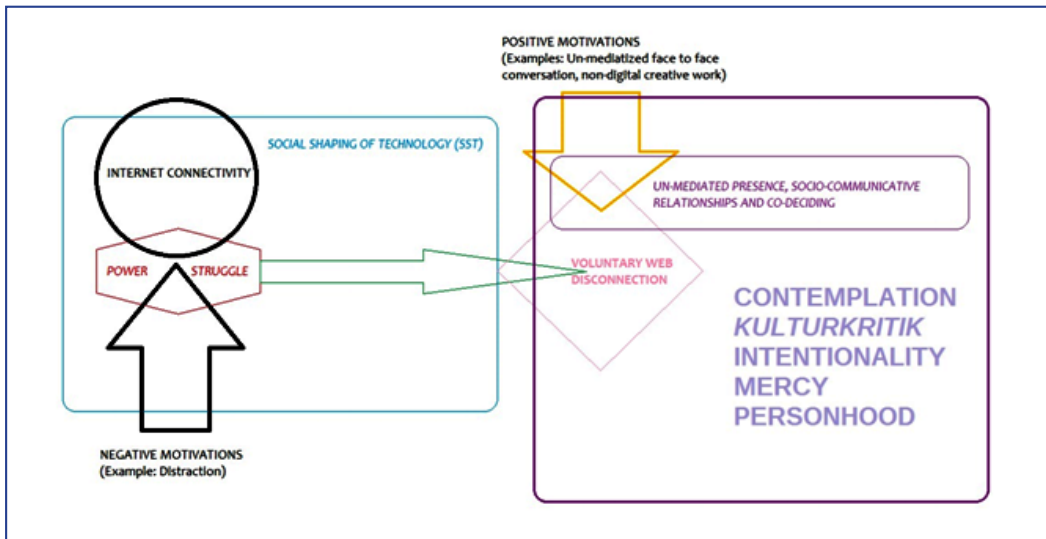


Figure 1 Examples from study results situated in relation to the motivational and social shaping of technology perspectives and in the context of sites of engagement for offline or alternative participation.

as a trove of distractions (Graham, 2008). This un-mediated presence is needed for Kulturkritik, to clearly appreciate digital technology and Web connectivity without succumbing to virtuality's illusions or losing sight of the wider world beyond cyberspace. Another user wrote about renewed evaluation of the Internet as an aid to relationships but only after a year away from it (Miller, 2013). Presence makes possible the intentionality that is capable of wondering about the teleology of the Web within the broader, im-mediate web of life and its multifaceted realities. As a user admitted, one does not actually miss life by going offline (Kelsey, 2014). Sheer presence makes possible merciful communication, which, offline as well as online, means "to help create a healthy, free and fraternal closeness... in the one human family" (Francis, 2016,

p. 4). This was observed by one user, who said his sister complimented him on his improved communication with her when he disconnected from the Web (Miller, 2013). The non-virtual presence is the person who strives for inclusive, integrated, natural, spontaneous and joyful personhood in the Mertonian sense, like the user who wrote about coming back with more enthusiasm to Web-related work after ten days of total disconnection from it (Schwartz, 2013).

Aside from being junctures for presence, contemplation, Kulturkritik, intentionality, mercy, and personhood are also junctures for socio-communicative relationships and co-deciding, since their dimensions are enriched in the field of relationships and grow in the direction they are taken within the dynamism of common decisions (See Figure 1).

## 5.0. CONCLUSION

This article aimed to answer the question, “Why do people disconnect from the Internet?” Using material published online by persons who freely left cyberspace, answers have been deconstructed based on a motivational perspective: People leave the internet because of the loss of motivation to be connected to it and because of the rewards of being disconnected. They leave because connectedness is detrimental to their psyche, harmful to their physical health, corrosive of their relationships with people, inimical to their creativity, disruptive of their time management, and damaging to their capacity for contemplation. The social shaping of technology (SST) occasioned not only contention on socio-economic power but also contentions on the political outside political institutions. In these contentions, users exercised power and self-determination to attend to non-virtual areas of life. The exercise took the form of durations and patterns of disconnection from the web of institutions that comprise the Internet. I have further demonstrated how offline or alternative participation occurs on offline loci (See Appendix D). The reasons behind voluntarily unplugging from cyberspace, therefore, crystallize around the politics of keeping the human mind and heart robust apart from and amid Web technology. Disconnection from the internet has given users gains such as more peace of mind, the pleasures of physical exercise, deep and face-to-face interpersonal relationships, and more spaces for creation and intellectual pursuits. Such motiva-

tions are embraced by those who go offline because nothing in the shape of the internet as a technology is capable of substituting for the said motivations. Offline incentives have no online counterparts.

I have thus laid the groundwork for further discussing participation, particularly when responses to invitations to it are situated beyond mediatized communication. A future study would benefit from a larger sample taken from keywords similar to the ones used here. Furthermore, subsequent research should investigate the co-decisions people make within the political in various un-mediated arenas with and on contemplation, Kulturkritik, intentionality, mercy, and personhood.

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