

# Burning out and turning off: Journalists' disconnection strategies on social media

Journalism  
2021, Vol. 22(10) 2475–2492  
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sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/1464884919872076  
journals.sagepub.com/home/jou



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## Abstract

This study explores forms of social media fatigue described by professional journalists, including frustration with the perception of their increased affective labor, dissatisfaction with communication environments on particular social media platforms, and increased anxiety about the possible impact of social media use on both their professional reputations and personal well-being. We argue that these forms of social media fatigue have influenced new professional practices on social media practice that include strategies of disconnecting from, but not necessarily terminating, social media use. Using a comparative analysis of semistructured interviews with Australian and American professional journalists, this study illustrates that experiences of social media fatigue over time have resulted in a careful renegotiation of professional and personal boundaries around journalists' social media use, influenced by the technological, social, and cultural affordances of specific media platforms, organizational and institutional constraints, as well as the online literacies and behaviors of journalists themselves.

## Keywords

Disconnection, journalism, social media, social media fatigue, social media practice

The increasing professionalization of social media spaces has encouraged journalists and news organizations to present an always-on presence, alongside the representation of an 'authentic' online persona and more intimate engagement with audiences. Many

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journalists – like other media workers – construct and maintain professional online personas that brand their news reportage and themselves by including aspects of their personal lives (Holton and Molyneux, 2017). However, this type of engagement can be problematic when journalists are caught between adopting popular social media engagement practices and enacting more traditional organizational and institutional norms (Bossio, 2018). Increasingly, journalists are among a number of professionals working in online spaces who report that the labor required to engage in social media practices and the complex literacies required to understand social expectations in these spaces (Lasén and Gómez-Cruz, 2009), is leading to ‘social media fatigue’. While we acknowledge the term ‘social media fatigue’ is a popular culture reference that suggests users’ dissatisfaction with social media, we use it because it also highlights some of the material impacts of the increasing professional use of social media. Indeed, social media ‘fatigue’ and related suggestions of the need for ‘detox’ from social media use are all expressions of much wider discussions about the need to both critically examine strategies and practices that continually negotiate and influence personal and professional use of social media.

This study argues that the increasing professionalization of social media cultures of sharing have created forms of ‘social media fatigue’ in journalists. These have been variously expressed as: frustration with the perception of their increased affective labor, dissatisfaction with the communication culture on particular social media platforms, and increased anxiety about the possible impact of social media use on their professional reputation or personal well-being. While in some journalists this may lead to physical manifestations of ‘burnout’, in this article we suggest that these forms of social media fatigue have also influenced new social media practices. Just as connection and engagement are social media practices utilized by journalists, we argue strategic disconnection from social media use have also become an important part of professional online practices. Such disconnection strategies include reducing personal posting and interactions with unknown users, decreasing screen time, and other more strategic uses of particular social media platforms.

While previous research has focused on the ways journalists have incorporated social media use into their professional practices (Domingo et al., 2008; Livingstone and Asmolov, 2010; Singer, 2012), few studies have considered how those practices impact individual journalists and further, how subsequent online practices develop as a result of those impacts. This study analyzes how journalists within different, but globally comparable, media systems perceive the personal and professional impact of increasing professionalization of social media practice. Furthermore, this study also focuses attention on an often-overlooked aspect of social media practices among journalists: the disconnection strategies used to enable professional and personal boundaries in social media use. This is important because focusing on disconnection strategies, or how journalists ‘turn off’ social media provides much more nuanced insight into the sociotechnical developments of professional social media use. Following Light’s (2014) conception of disconnection, this study illustrates that journalists’ methods of disconnection from professional social media practices may work in tandem with the different ways they connect online. That is, disconnection is not simply about non-use of social media but also encompasses the strategic ways users make social media work according to their individual professional and personal needs.

Using a qualitative analysis of semistructured interviews with 39 professional Australian and American journalists working full-time across a range of news media, this study analyses how these journalists construct and balance the use of social media in their professional and personal lives. The interviews suggest that Australian and American journalists are experiencing increasing social media fatigue, though their attempts to balance and negotiate their professional use social media differs according to specific organizational and professional pressures.

## **Journalism, online work, and burnout**

The transition of professional journalistic practice to social media environments has been a challenge for journalists. Journalists have struggled with the adoption of new online platforms for communication (Bossio and Sacco, 2017) as well as normalizing traditional practices of reportage (Singer, 2005) and engaging more dynamic online publics (Domingo et al., 2008; Lewis, 2012). Nonetheless, many traditional journalistic practices have transitioned to incorporate the social and technological affordances enabled by the use of social media for the production, distribution, and promotion of news. This use of social media has often been situated as enabling new forms of journalistic practice that are increasingly collaborative and prioritize authentic and transparent processes of presenting the news (Molyneux et al., 2018; Tandoc and Vos, 2016). For example, Hedman (2017) and Hanusch and Bruns (2017) found that journalists learnt post mixed professional and personal content on social media to meet both professional and promotional needs. Hayes et al. (2007) suggested that these forms of personal disclosure add to the culture of authenticity within social media and thus provide credibility to journalists' online interactions. Hedman and Djerf-Pierre (2013: 372) noted that journalists' use of social media may be seen as part of an increasing audience orientation and may also be taken as a component of the personal and corporate promotion of news organizations.

While these practices can be taken as more collaborative and largely productive journalistic uses of social media, some studies suggest that constant 'togglng' between traditional presentations of news content and personalized content or audience engagement on social media has caused heightened levels of self-reported exhaustion and mental fatigue for journalists (Holton and Molyneux, 2017). These changes require ongoing reevaluation and experimentation among journalists, both for increasing technical skill and understanding new social conventions online. However, as Opgenhaffen and Leen d'Haenens (2015) suggested, there are numerous examples of journalists who have – often unknowingly – misunderstood or overstepped the boundaries of a platform's particular social vernacular and faced the consequences from their employers. Others (Larsson and Ihlebaek, 2017) have suggested that while experimentation is encouraged, there is both overt and implied organizational pressure to use new online practices 'properly' without proper training or support.

The increasing professionalization of social media use and its associated pressures can add to the stress of working in newsroom environments, and we argue, to forms of social media fatigue. Much previous research has focused on the physical manifestations of 'burnout' in journalists, in particular due to particular work demands and environments.

Maslach and Jackson (1981) defined professional burnout as feelings of emotional exhaustion created by a stressful work environment and characterized by cynical attitudes toward work and dissatisfaction with professional accomplishments. In terms of journalism practice, burnout is most often examined as the impact of particular forms of reportage, such as emergency and conflict reportage (Backholm and Björkqvist, 2010), as well as stressful newsroom environments (Jung and Kim, 2012). Recent research suggests that younger female journalists and editors in small circulation newspapers may be most at risk of burnout due to work-related stressors (MacDonald et al., 2016). Other research has focused on how industry change, in particular the decline of newspapers, has impacted on journalists. The decline in the economic stability of traditional news media has contributed to subsequent pressure to produce quality work with fewer staff, shorter deadlines, the pressure of increasing distribution via online and social media, as well as lower remuneration and promotion opportunities, especially for junior journalists. Reinardy (2011: 34–35) suggested this working environment has created symptoms of burnout including increased self-reported levels of exhaustion, cynicism about their role as well as perceptions of decreased professional efficacy.

These and related studies are useful as indicators of some of the factors that might lead to burnout. However, we propose that social media fatigue differs slightly from more traditional understandings of journalism burnout. While both can have similar physical symptoms, burnout is caused by stressful work duties or environment, whereas we are framing social media fatigue as slightly more complex, encapsulating the constant pressure to professionalize the often-personal contexts for online practices of sharing and engagement (Lasèn, 2015). Journalists are increasingly impacted by the paradox of using personalized forms of sharing on social media as a form of professional work, which Gregg (2013) suggests ‘colonizes the very avenues for friendship and solidarity’ that would otherwise support individuals in stressful work environments (p. 105). While learning about and practicing more personalized interactions with audiences may be professionally expedient to journalists and their new organizations, it may also come with increased expectations of skill and labor that may also cross boundaries into personal time.

## **Journalism and social media work**

New forms of journalistic work engendered by social media technologies, techniques, and cultures should be contextualized by conceptions of new forms of online labor overall. Much of the focus of these new conceptions of labor have been the forms of ‘creative’, ‘informational’, and ‘affective’ work (Terranova, 2000). Affective labor is characterized by immateriality, that is, the creation and networked distribution of symbolic or informational services and products (Qiu et al., 2014: 566). The impact of these new forms of labor is complex as they often involve personal, intimate, and emotive forms of interpersonal communication in a professional context. That is, the dynamism of social media spaces reconfigures the context for private and public interactions (Lasèn, 2015). These exchanges are a kind of labor, and they can also be seen in the context of building and engaging with community, being ‘creative’, expanding personal and professional networks, and engaging in a pleasurable activity. Baym (2018) characterizes this

as relational labor, or practices and strategies that creative professionals have adopted to create stronger emotional and thus commercial relations with audiences.

Nonetheless, Gregg (2013: 5–6) suggests that professional work and identity in this context facilitates a form of individual pleasure and accomplishment from successful performance of work, which results in a willingness (and sometimes an organizational coercion) to ‘always be working’ as a means of indicating success. Social media may also contribute to this increasing personalization of an individual’s relationship to work, especially by creating and encouraging always-on availability and thus, the increased access to, and expectation of, professional labor within otherwise personal spaces. Therefore, affective labor can also be seen within the context of larger capitalization processes of culture. Many business practices channel collective and cultural labor into monetary flows, and the ability to do this is often built into media technologies (Terranova, 2000: 39). That is, media technologies enable certain activities rather than others, and this influences, but is also negotiated by, users for both personal and professional advantage. For example, technical affordances such as ‘liking’ posts, which intersect in more complex ways with specific social media vernacular and etiquettes, have influenced some of commercialization practices that successful social media fashion influencers utilize to monetize their content on social media (Abidin, 2016). Of course, the ability to boost public visibility does not always translate into social influence or successful commercialization (see Duffy, 2017). Rather, Duffy (2017: 15) suggests that the digital economy thrives on ‘aspirational labor’, which promises a career defined by passion and leisure, but is built on invisible, relational labor, increased precarity, and constant pressure to perform.

New forms of journalistic professionalism engendered by online and social media also provide new opportunities for journalists to create, promote, and engage audiences in news. However, these opportunities come with increasing demands on their labor, which also means journalists engage increasingly complex negotiation of relational labor. This continual negotiation of new professional skills and social media practices within increasingly pressurized newsroom environments, can lead to physical manifestations of burnout that are continually mediated through strategies of disconnection.

## **Social media and disconnection**

Disconnection strategies are the modes of disengagement individuals choose to avoid or mediate the connective affordances of particular social media both between and among sites and in relation to a user’s offline experience. Some disconnection strategies and boundaries employed to mediate the culture of constant connectivity include: creating private spheres for interaction, using technical boundaries like blocking or muting, or turning away from interaction altogether. Previous research has implied the importance of disconnection in social media use by suggesting the ways that users create and break connections across multiple sites (Baym, 2007, 2015; Tufekci, 2008). Karppi (2011) suggested that leaving social media platforms altogether for extended periods of time is an important aspect of mediating and finding value in connectivity. Other forms of temporary or permanent disconnection from social media platforms have included artistic or subversive acts of ‘digital suicide’ (Karppi, 2018), forms of digital participation reluctance (Cassidy, 2016), and expressions of lack of digital inclusion (Hargittai, 2007).

Understanding disconnection highlights an important sociotechnical perspective on social media use. That is, social media platforms come with particular social and technical affordances, but there is never a guarantee that users will allow these to shape their own use of the platform. Feelings of dissatisfaction about social media practices and environments, and extending from this, purposeful misuse of, or disconnection from, social media are also an important aspect of social media use. Light's (2014) work highlights that disconnection is not simply about non-use of social media but encompasses the strategic ways users make social media work according to individual needs. It is disconnection, in fact, that enables the potentiality of connective affordances on particular social media platforms (Light, 2014) because it encourages 'workable' uses of social media according to individual need and desire. Moreover, disconnection makes it possible to live with 'always-on' connectivity and the perceived limitations of particular social media platforms. For example, individuals might limit social media connectivity to manage large audiences or maintain a particular representation of self online; however, these disconnection strategies still add value and individual meaning to online experiences (Light and Cassidy, 2014).

Light (2014) suggests privacy is the most obvious motivation for disconnection. However, time, information overload, and desire for anonymity might also be factors in disconnection strategies. This study looks specifically at the need for disconnection from social media by journalists, filling a gap in the study of work-related 'burnout' in journalism. While describing the physical symptoms and impacts of workplace stress is important, more recent use of online and social media requires a much more complex understanding of the challenges and opportunities of social media use within contemporary journalistic practice. This study considers broader frameworks of social media work to understand how journalists in two major global news markets have harnessed some of the opportunities that emerge with increased use of social media, but also some of the disconnections, boundaries, and social media breaks that journalists have instituted to manage the labor of being 'always on'. Three research questions drawn from the literature frame this project:

*RQ1.* What are perceived contributing factors within reports of social media burnout for Australian and American journalists?

*RQ2.* What types of strategies are Australian and American journalists exploring to combat the negative impacts of 'social media fatigue'?

*RQ3.* What social, cultural and organizational factors might contribute to differences in the ways that Australian and American journalists express social media fatigue and implement disconnection strategies to combat it?

## Method

This study comprises a comparative, qualitative analysis of semistructured interviews with Australian and American professional journalists working in full-time positions within news media organizations. In the first phase of sampling, media lists such as Muck Rack, professional association lists, and personal networks were used to recruit

participants. The sample included a mix of broadcast, print, and online journalists working across commercial and public service media organizations. We interviewed 39 journalists in total; 20 Australian and 19 US journalists, averaging approximately 11 years working full-time for a news organization (Australian sample was 13 males and 7 females; the US sample was 13 females and 6 males). All responses were anonymized, and each respondent was designated a unique identifying number (i.e. Journalists 1–20 are Australian journalists; Journalists 21–39 are American journalists). The sample for this study excluded freelance journalists as they were deemed to have different online professional practices (Molyneux, 2015). The sample also excluded journalists who did not have more than 500 followers on at least one social media platform, ensuring participants' immersiveness in everyday social media practices.

Interviews were conducted via telephone and online communications and lasted from 28 to 62 minutes, averaging 38 minutes overall. The interviews were semistructured, with a mix of questions. For example, participants were asked about their personal and professional use of social media, how that use had changed over time, how their engagement with social media differed personally and professionally, what boundaries or obstacles they encountered when posting personal and professional content, and what impact the negotiation between personal and professional identity on social media had on their personal and professional use of social media.

Data from the interview responses were analyzed using a grounded approach, where themes were hand-coded and discussed between both researchers as they emerged (Given and Olson, 2003). This process was ongoing and iterative to allow for dynamic comparison between the responses from the Australian and American participants. Consistency was ensured both through specificity of participant demographics and through specificity of codes. This was consistently checked through comparison of codebooks for exhaustivity and relevance.

In order to provide an international lens to an area of research that has thus far mostly relied on single-country populations, this study focused on journalists from Australia and America. Although they follow similar ideological and professional models of journalism, the economic, demographic, geographic, and organizational similarities and differences in news production systems have not robustly been explored. For example, Australia has the most highly concentrated news ownership in the world. Just two news groups – *News Limited* and *John Fairfax Holdings* – account for more than 90 percent of the circulation of daily newspapers. In comparison, six companies control 90 percent of the news media in the United States (Lutz, 2012), though the United States has an abundance of local and regional news media outlets ranging from low-power FM radio stations to local news TV programming to weekly community newspapers (Pew Research Center, 2018). Local newspapers in Australia are predominantly owned by one organization, and the country has only three major commercial television networks and two public broadcasters (Dwyer and Muller, 2016). Australia also has a relatively small number of journalists working in permanent, full-time positions; less than 10,000 across the country compared to nearly 40,000 in the United States (Cision Media Database, 2018). However, Australia has one of the highest consumption rates of online and social media in the world, despite issues with Internet connection, especially in regional areas. While we acknowledge that a comparative approach produces data that

perhaps cannot be generalized to the work practices of all journalists, this study shows that the two countries face similar issues in terms of shrinking employment, negotiation of online and offline labor, changing models of production, distribution, and promotion of news and that they may also be under similar distress prompting social media fatigue and professional disconnection.

## **What is driving journalistic burnout and disconnection?**

This study focuses on the ways social media practices have been adopted within journalistic practice, journalists' perceived impacts of this adoption, and their individual negotiation of those practices in response to perceived impacts. In this context, we situate this process as an active negotiation of practice, tools, and rules. These are indicators of the process of learning, responding to, and reflecting on what constitutes the personal, organizational, technological, and institutional contributions to a journalist's professional context. In doing so, we found that the everyday practice of journalism on social media has both positive and negative impacts on the journalists themselves, and some of the negative impacts could be framed within a context of professional burnout.

We observed a number of similarities in descriptions of the negative impacts of everyday social media use by journalists. Many of these negative impacts stemmed from frustration and anxiety around the increased but often unacknowledged, relational labor of social media use for journalism. Relational labor focuses creative work on fostering engagement and connection with audiences for professional and economic benefit, both on an individual and organizational level. Journalism, like other creative industries, is bound up in the need for expertise in fostering connections and managing boundaries (Baym, 2015). The journalists in full-time employment interviewed for this project said that these forms of labor also had a profound impact on them – both personally and professionally. This included perceptions of professional work seeping into journalists' personal lives, anxiety about the reputational risk that social media politics, etiquettes, and cultures brought to their professional lives, and frustration expressed about working within always-on social media cultures.

While many of the journalists interviewed expressed negative emotions or sentiment about the impact of social media on their lives, it is important to note that they also maintained that social media was integral to their work. Indeed, most agreed that social media was a productive addition to their professional practice, particularly the possibilities to distribute their work to a larger audience. All journalists interviewed said that promoting their news work was one of their primary uses of social media. Or, as put by Journalist 33, 'in the US, we don't have a choice really. We have to promote our own work and be willing to talk about it in Snaps or on Twitter otherwise we're violating [organizational] expectations'. Australian journalists reported less organizational pressure but more professional expectation of self-promotion and news distribution techniques on social media.

Australian journalists expressed both frustration and anxiety about the impact of everyday use of social media had on their personal and professional lives. In particular, the 'always-on' culture associated with social media posting and engagement meant that journalists frequently felt as though the professional work of engaging on social media was also a labor that interfered with their personal lives. This was articulated

by journalists who suggested that everyday social media use meant ‘it’s a bit hard to separate sometimes what’s personal and what’s work’ (Journalist 1). Despite the perceived value of intimate and authentic engagement with audiences, the labor required to maintain these relations led to expressions of burnout. Australian journalists said they felt overwhelmed by the lack of boundaries between work and personal time and the professional risks associated with social media use. This continual affective labor had negative psychological implications for one journalist, who said,

Social media, when you’re a journalist, it’s always on. There’s always stuff to read and you’re always consuming information. I stop out of the desire to have time where I step out of that and likewise, part of it is recognition that using those spaces too much, for me, is directly related to increasing my anxiety and stress. (Journalist 2)

Part of the frustration that journalists expressed about this type of labor was keeping up with the social vernacular and behaviors expected within the often platform-specific social media communication cultures. Journalists suggested that this labor of keeping up with social media cultures led to professional anxiety about being able to do their job properly and personal anxiety about the impact of constantly engaging with those cultures on their lives. Given the extensive use of Twitter by journalists, it was unsurprising that a majority of journalists described negative interactions on the platform. For example, Journalist 2 said, ‘if Twitter were a person, I wouldn’t like them. I think that they would just be kind of showy and arrogant and self-bold and snarky and I’m just not trying to spend time with a person like that’ (Journalist 2). Others suggested that the platform was not actually a good place for the kinds of audience engagement and debate supposedly engendered by social media. ‘What Twitter had it really shown me’, said Journalist 4, ‘is how unwilling people are to change their mind or to accept facts which don’t concern what they already think’.

The negative implications of the various communication cultures, politics, and etiquettes engendered by social media was described as having a profound personal and professional impact on journalists. For example, one Australian journalist noted,

I think I probably have self-censored on occasion if I had a really strong opinion about something. I have felt that maybe it was such an unpopular opinion, if I want to express that opinion, I’m better off writing a full story about it and then tweeting the link to that story, rather than expressing my opinion in 140 characters and then possibly getting trolled or abused or something. (Journalist 5)

Journalist 5 suggested they were in response to colleagues who had been caught out by less guarded use of social media: ‘I’ve seen people quite damaged by what’s happened to them on Twitter simply for expressing an opinion’. Similarly, both US and Australian journalists described a ‘wariness’ (Journalist 3), ‘risk averse’ (Journalist 2), and ‘sometimes discomfoting’ (Journalist 23) experience of social media in their professional lives due to perceived reputational damage that any misuse of platforms might have.

Journalist 1 suggested that this professional anxiety and frustration also impacted on their personal use of social media: ‘There are times where I feel quite nauseous using

social media in my personal life . . . I got to the point where I couldn't stop opening Facebook but every time I opened it, it annoyed me'.

Journalists reported that anxieties around the cultures of visibility fostered by the architecture of social media engendered forms of resistance to these conventions about what is appropriate to share in these spaces (Lasèn, 2015: p. 65). The negotiations of social media affordances to turn off forms of online connection correspond to Miguel's (2016: 2) observation that 'social media users negotiate the breadth and depth of their public disclosures in order to at once develop intimacy with others while also protecting themselves from potential harm'. Both Australian and American journalists reported instances of self-censoring and profile management or careful negotiation of the production and sharing of personal content. Many said that experiences of social media fatigue had resulted in a very careful renegotiation of professional and personal boundaries around their social media use and in particular, reported various strategies used to disconnect from or switch off social media in their personal time.

### **What are the disconnection remedies journalists are seeking?**

The interviews revealed a number of different disconnection strategies journalists used to create a workable use of social media. These strategies were often associated with avoidance or turning off different forms of connection, such as: suspension or avoidance of particular social media profiles; muting, blocking, or other technical barriers to engagement; and finally, changing the types of interactions that journalists had on social media. The interviews indicated many of these strategies were the result of journalists' deep reflection about the impact that some social media cultures had on their personal lives and well-being, while others were symptomatic of the development of a more 'professional' interaction with particular platforms. Importantly, none of the techniques were about complete termination of social media use. Rather, they were strategies journalists used to make professional engagement on social media sustainable and meaningful in a professional context.

Some journalists suggested their introduction of particular disconnection strategies had to be balanced with organizational policies and editorial guidelines for social media use, though this was one of the few areas where Australian and American responses differed most. For Australian journalists, organizational involvement in use of social media most often took the form of editorial assistance to promote and distribute news on social media. Australian journalists suggested that they were encouraged by organizations to create branded social media profiles on particular platforms and were provided with social media training. However, overt social media policy or jurisdiction over social media practice was informal at most. For example, one Australian journalist suggested that organizational policy around social media practice was 'just common sense and decency and also just making sure that we're not going to do anything that will risk the company being sued or anything like that . . . because often it's from silliness or stupidity than anything else' (Journalist 5). Indeed, many of the Australian journalists asked about organizational social media policy used 'common sense' (Journalists 3, 5, 6 and 7) to describe how they might adhere to organizational policy around social media use.

Australian journalists instead suggested they were influenced more by the broader professional ideologies within the organization when engaging and disengaging from social media. Most often the disconnection strategies influenced by organizational ideologies were modes of self-censorship; that is, avoiding posting particular forms of social media content. While this kind of self-censorship seemed to be influenced by organizational concerns with legality, other Australian journalists suggested that both individual and organizational reputation were a factor in censoring social media content. As noted by Journalist 3,

you'd be crazy to think you could just get away with posting anything. The general sense of it [social media policy] is that you have to be conscious of the reputation of who you work for and you don't write anything that would be embarrassing or compromising.

In this way, individual professional reputation may also be bound up in the reputation of the organization the journalist works for – both need to be credible – and thus, avoiding posting of particular content is important in this context.

American journalists differed in that they were more acutely aware of organizational policies and pressures to ensure that they were posting regularly and with content that was acceptable to the editorial considerations of the newsroom. Many journalists suggested that these pressures were a source of anxiety: 'How do I take a break when I'm expected to be responsive all of the time?' (Journalist 25), while others had been positioned to believe that taking a break from social media might be dereliction of their professional duties or standards. For example, Journalist 33 asked: 'Would it be, I don't know, a violation of my journalistic responsibilities by breaking away or ignoring one channel? Would [news organization] send out a memorandum about it, or maybe fire me?' While American journalists were also aware of branding strategies and the need to keep their 'assets in line with who [news organizations] want us to be, what they post, and who they want us engage with' (Journalist 39), they were also far more concerned than Australian journalists with aligning their social media practices with those of their peers, suggesting more focus on institutional rather than organizational norms and violations. As Journalist 33, suggested

What we have is sort of a system where our company is our parents and our colleagues are more like our best friends. We care what our parents think, and we know they can take our allowance away if we don't do what we're told, but it's what our friends think of us that matters most.

These responses indicate an important aspect of disconnection strategies – the influence that different social contexts and forms of power have on social media practices of connection and disconnection. For example, news and media organizations monitor and assess forms of online connection used by journalists and some even have jurisdiction over the forms of disconnection journalists might be able to use, collapsing the boundaries between personal and professional boundaries of social media use for economic gain. However, individual journalists, and especially those in the United States, might put more stock into what disconnection strategies other journalists are using and what challenges and opportunities those behaviors offer. Although this might threaten the right

of a professional journalists to have a non-professional life, boundaries around the use of social media are complicated by the lack of distinction between private forms of identity online. These are instead decisions made by individual users in a number of different ways, each considering beliefs, actions, and consequences at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels.

### **Disconnection from particular platforms or platform-specific cultures**

Many disconnection strategies were situated not within the workplace but within particular platforms and interactions. Having control over the types of platforms used and the times they would be available for personal and professional online engagement seemed to be empowering to journalists who would otherwise feel overwhelmed by the 'always-on' connectivity of social media. Many journalists across both countries described professional 'rules of engagement' they used on social media, limiting interactions to those that had a promotional or professional context. For example, Journalist 2 said they limited comments and conversation online to users that they knew personally:

If I'm mentioned in a tweet about a story that I've written or if I post a story I've written, or people write back to me or tweet at me about the story, I'll probably generally like a comment. But, I don't usually engage in back and forth conversation. I'd say I'm a little more inclined to do so when it's like a verified account or it's like a fellow journalist of whom I'm aware.

Many journalists used these personal rules to avoid negative confrontations and trolling during their professional use of social media. For example, Journalist 10 said they modeled their online interactions on their sense of appropriate offline behavior:

I give everyone the benefit of the doubt but if they start swearing, if they start being abusive . . . I just block them . . . You wouldn't catch up with them, you wouldn't go out for a coffee with them. If you're in a bar, you would avoid them and I'm just not going to let them affect my life.

These rules seemed particularly pertinent to female journalists who had experienced trolling.

Another popular disconnection practice was choosing interactions according to a particular social media platform and its perceived communication culture. Some journalists reported separating personal and professional interactions onto specific platforms, such as using a public profile on Twitter to disseminate professional work and a private profile on Instagram to keep up with family and friends. For example, Journalist 30 noted, 'I'm a sports guy, or resource, when I'm on Twitter. But when I'm Instagram, it's my time, my content, my family and friends only'. Similarly, Journalist 1 said, 'I very rarely use Twitter in my personal life, I haven't for some years . . . I have about 3000 followers on it when I was more active'. This suggests disconnecting from personal tweeting was a development that occurred as the journalist gained more insight and experience on the platform. However, other journalists reported choosing to connect to platforms based on their understanding of its particular communication culture. For example, Journalist 5 said,

I could go for days and days and days without being on Twitter, and I wouldn't feel the slightest bit of FOMO or anything whereas Instagram I probably feel a lot more attached, maybe because I feel more part of the community.

Light and Cassidy (2014) refer to these practices as part of the 'geographies' of disconnection, due to the situated and platform-specific nature of some forms of disconnection. Suspending participation with particular platforms, or dedicating a particular type of connection to specific platforms indicates the situated nature of social media interactions, as well as connections between platforms (Light and Cassidy, 2014: 1173). Journalists might choose particular efficiencies in management of social media platforms or selectively control online presence in 'ways that keep us sane' (Journalist 27). All of these strategies, though they might be seen as a turning away or non-use of social media are nonetheless crucial because they add specific meaning or value to subsequent or alternative online experiences.

## **Disconnection by enacting personal social media boundaries**

In creating strategies to ensure social media interactions were meaningful and productive in a professional context, some journalists enacted boundaries between personal and professional self-representation online. Many journalists suggested that they only represented a professional persona online. This often meant that journalists avoided social media posting that included personal details about their lives, opinions, or interests. Some journalists suggested that this showed they were cognizant of organizational pressures to engage in non-risky behaviors on social media:

I want to post things that I think my audience would be interested in. They followed me for a reason, not because they're my friend. They followed me because they're interested in my stories or they're interested in the topics that I'm writing about. So, it's sort of what I'm trying to keep it to. (Journalist 9)

Related to this adherence to professional ideologies, Light and Cassidy (2014) also suggest that disconnection strategies often follow an 'ethical logic'. Although Light (2014) has previously suggested that privacy is perhaps the most obvious moral reason for engaging disconnection practices, other ethical considerations such as respect for perceived audiences or followers, perceived relevance of professional or personal posting and considerations of overall health and wellness might all be considerations when choosing how to connect. For professional journalists, ethical decision making around social media use is made through a lens of professional identity and ideologies. Journalists interviewed for this project, for example, suggested that they chose not to post professional work on personal profiles or not share opinions on a professional profile; they engage in an ethics of disconnection because they extend a duty of care toward personal friend networks who might not find their work relevant to their interests and a professional duty of care to audiences following their work on social media and expect the expression of particular professional values.

Related to the avoidance of posting personal content was avoidance of posting during what journalists considered personal time. Disconnecting from social media in personal time was one of the most common strategies that journalists used to create boundaries around social media labor. Many journalists suggested feelings of burnout and negative experiences online had influenced strategies of avoidance of social media in personal time. For example, Journalist 2 suggested their avoidance of personal posting stemmed from frustration with specific social media cultures: 'I used to post on all three more often. Over the last eight years and I've kind of reduced that a little bit . . . Part of that is general frustration with the tenor of the conversations in those spaces'. Others suggested the protection of privacy was important: 'I'm quite a private person and I like my space. I like my mental space and I guess technically I would always try and use social media towards maintaining privacy' (Journalist 8). Many others were more interested in creating meaningful interactions in both their private and professional spaces – this meant the development of particular boundaries over time: 'I actually have found over the years, I think I post a lot less than other people, in personal terms. I think because as a journalist, publishing is our whole life, it's what we do' (Journalist 1).

A large number of Australian and US journalists indicated that disconnection strategies had developed over time and experience with social media. Many related instances of reflection after a long period of professional use of social media; they were thinking more carefully about how they wanted to use the tool as well as the personal and professional consequences of connection on social media. While the majority suggested this was an outcome of 'getting older', we found that similar disconnection strategies were also enacted by less senior journalists, suggesting that individual reflection, rather than age or technical ability engendered use of disconnection strategies. In comparison to American journalists, Australian journalists seemed to have more freedom from organizational and institutional (or peer) jurisdiction to enact personalized forms of disconnection from social media as a form of individual meaning making emerging from their online experiences. Overall, journalists seemed to be able to negotiate particular uses of communication technologies, influenced by their own particular contexts. In this way, journalists' disconnection strategies may be seen as a series of options negotiated and influenced through individual conditions of use of social media and in particular contexts.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we focused on the ways that professionalized social media practices have contributed to perceptions of burnout among journalists. In doing so, we have illustrated that journalists use strategies of disconnection to negotiate social media practices that are more personally and professionally meaningful. Disconnection makes it possible for journalists, and the public more broadly, to live with connectivity. When thought of in this way, disconnection is less a negative action and more a pathway that allows for the understanding of professional use of social media by journalists. The findings here provide one of many lenses that allow for strengthened understandings of 'who or what is involved in disconnection, where it occurs and how it is enacted' Light (2014: 14). This work also provides a framework for understanding professionalization of social media

more broadly, where practices are seen as being influenced not only by the technical affordances of social media platforms but also organizational, institutional, and social frameworks for its use.

Light's (2014) work posits disconnection as not simply about non-use of social media but also encompasses the strategic ways users make social media work according to individual needs. For journalists using social media as a professional communication tool, disconnection strategies actually work in tandem with the different ways they connect online, positioning those connections more strategically as professional labor and thus inscribing particular meanings and uses for social media interactions. Light (2014) argued that these situated forms of disconnection empower strategic decision making around online use and thus strengthen subsequent forms of online connection. Many journalists described as modes of disengagement they actively chose or developed over time to avoid or mediate the connective affordances of particular social media both between and among sites and in relation to their offline experience. Importantly, it should also be noted that while journalists included in this study often talked about turning off or disconnecting from social media in their personal time, there were no instances where journalists talked about ending all social media use. Disconnection was rather seen as part of an overall strategy, developed over time and upon reflection about many different types of personal and professional experiences on social media. Disconnection strategies therefore were positioned by journalists as ways to improve subsequent personal and professional use of social media, not simply as a termination of connection altogether.

The interviews here indicated that disconnection practices were context-specific and individualized strategies that created workable boundaries to work within the always-on connectivity of social media. A comparative analysis of the interviews indicated that there are subtle but nonetheless important differences between responses from journalists in each country. In particular, the differences point to the ways that media systems influence a range of individual, organizational, and institutional norms. Thus, while connection and disconnection practices are the result of the active negotiation of empowered online users, these practices are also influenced by the technological, social, and cultural affordances of specific media platforms, as well as the online literacies and behaviors of the user themselves. Adding to this, the professionalized use of social media practices by journalists exists within a system of influences that were not fully covered by this article. Future studies should work more on comparative analyses across systems that operate differently from Australian and American Western liberal traditions. These studies might also work to build on the framework argued for and illustrated through the interviews here, which situates disconnection from social media as a potential pathway for decreasing social media fatigue and professional burnout.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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