

Digital Minimalism as a Leading Limitation of Media Communications in the Heyday of Digital Culture

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Abstract Digitalization today affects almost all spheres of human activity, including business and personal communications. At the same time, individuals increasingly use restrictions on the media presence of their and others in the space online. Such restrictions can be expressed in the form of a “*digital diet*” as a partial restriction on online communications and media consumption; in the form of “*digital detox*” as a temporary rejection of digital life, as well as in the form of “*media asceticism*” as a conscious withdrawal into an offline environment.

Our paper defines digital minimalism in business and personal communications as the dissemination of digital etiquette, certain behavioural practices in the media environment, as well as new digital terminology, which generally sets the prospects for regulating media consumption and the further development of digital culture. The results highlight the value of live communication as social capital that opposes the development and spread of digital relationships.

Keywords: *digitalisation, digital minimalism, media communication, digital culture*

1 Introduction

Nowadays, digitalization embraces many areas of human life and transforms many offline processes into online format. Digital culture influences human interactions at the levels of business and personal communication. New digital media, with its interactive character and hyper textuality, provides anyone access to information; moreover, the communication obtains the global character and sets no limitations and no borders for media consumption (Sokolova 2012).

On the one hand, it becomes easier to connect with other people, exchange information, share ideas, to receive the feedback. The media audience is proactive, with the opportunities to choose the content and the amount of media information to consume. On the other hand, deep involvement and expanding dependence on digital devices provide some problems in communication as online as well as offline; besides, the information overload leads to the feeling of being overwhelmed by digital technology, to distraction increase and some emotional problems. The addiction to gadgets is continuously increasing.

The idea of digital minimalism explores the possibilities to control and filter the information flows from the online communication. The trend for digital minimalism is gaining popularity in business and private life; certain forms of restrictions for media presence and media consumption create new terminology for the digital culture. Furthermore, such a digital disconnectedness establishes specific digital behavioural practices and digital norms related to private and business interactions online.

This paper explains the ways how digital minimalism can be presented in media communication with a focus on business and personal communications. Mainly, the research within the time perspective on digital minimalism

investigates the practices to disconnect or to limit the media presence in the days of digital culture. In particular, the research describes three opportunities to regulate media consumption within digital devices: i) the way to shortly reduce it; ii) the way to temporarily filter the amount and the content; iii) the way to avoid using digital devices for a long period. The paper highlights the value of live communication and promotes a controlled, conscious approach to media consumption and digital limitation by establishing and supporting private and business relationships.

2. Literature review

Many studies about digital culture and digitalization explore the relations between culture and digital technologies. As postmodernists (Baudrillard 2000; Jameson 2009), as well as the scholars from critical theory (Kroker and Weinstein 1994), ask questions regarding the character of relations between technological achievements and cultural values within the digital space (de Beer et al. 2015). Moreover, the researchers from different disciplines conduct studies about virtual spaces, relations of gender and power, the popularization of cybercommunities, subcultural identities, the domination of technologies on the individualities, etc.

As Sergeeva (2016) denotes, at the time of digitalization, mass culture transforms into the digital mass culture consisting of specific practices, values, and elements that are spread within the media presence and social networks. Digital culture accelerates the diffusion and popularization of various cultural objects, values, and attitudes. Digital culture sets new borders for interpersonal communication, on the other, by simplifying interactions in the virtual space, on the other side, by involving different types of media content (text, audio, video, etc.) in the mass communication process.

Moreover, digital mass culture creates new cultural codes that can be transmitted from online to offline communication as well as vice versa. The scholar argues that digital culture provides not only messages but contexts of them; it improves the quality and the significance of messages and facilitates its further proliferation among different social groups. However, the author mentions that in some cases, digital culture cannot wholly replace the offline mass culture: for instance, in the case of emotions and impressions from the cultural consumption, the effect of the real presence is much more valuable (Cabelkova et al. 2015).

Galkin (2012) argues that within digital culture gadgets are getting transformed from the auxiliary tool to the digital influencer that regulates and coordinates human life. Such a technological imperative understood as inevitable and essential technologies in human life overloads the natural capacities of human beings “to consume” the information. That leads to the automatization and robotization of many processes of manufacturing and production. The author proposes to consider the digital culture at the levels of material (digital devices), functional (social institutions), symbolic (language), mental (mentality), and spiritual (social and cultural values) objects. Furthermore, the core principle of digital culture, according to Galkin (2012), is a computing machine that adapts various cultural codes in digital communication.

The process of digitalization also influences business communication and corporate culture. For instance, Mamina and Tcareva (2018) claim that etiquette in the business sector takes place as in offline as well as in online interactions. Digital etiquette incorporates social and cultural norms and values of interpersonal communication and, at the same time, the technical and technological potential of the media sphere. Etiquette defines the social roles in communication at the interpersonal and intergroup levels and regulates the interactions.

Within the development of digital communication at work, etiquette influences the digital space and digital interactions and receives its new type, digital etiquette, for business communication. Digital etiquette includes the rules of business correspondence, the behavioural (ethical) norms in web-communication as well as principles of user interactions with gadgets. The scholars mention that, while in Russia, digital etiquette is still forming its significance in the business sphere, in the USA, for example, there are already confirmed rules of digital culture regarding the use of gadgets at work.

Digital culture provides new opportunities for social and vocational mobility, particularly for the new generations (Nagornova and Chikin 2014). New forms of professional occupation (freelance, downshifting, work in remote modus, individual mobility, etc.) appear due to the opportunities of digital communication. Furthermore, it causes changes in the job market regarding the employer and employee expectations (working conditions, motivation, salary).

Digitalization of mass communication and the development of digital culture reflect the interactions inside organizations. For example, employees from different generations prefer different ways for business communication, inside and outside the organization (phone, emails, messages, etc.). Those preferences influence the work hierarchy due to the awareness and access to the digital technologies that may reflect the differences in the education system of different generations (Chernykh and Parshikov 2016). Digital culture asks for some qualitative transformations in

personnel training, in the education system, at the job market, at the working places for additional motivation to deal with digital culture (Gnatyshina and Salamatov 2017).

3. Types of digital minimalism: time-related perspective

Among the variety of names for the digital disconnection as well as of types for non-digital practices, three main ideas in this research paper that distinguish digital minimalism regarding the time frame and the focus of communication. The time perspective defines here not only the period but the intensity of involvement and the particular goal of digital-free activities. The main focus of communication relates to personal and business interactions that lead to the creation and establishment of behavioural rules and cultural norms in the communication process.

3.1 Digital diet

The first type of digital disconnection is *digital dieting*: it means a reduction of media consumption for a specific reason, for a limited period to achieve better, more qualitative results in certain activities. For example, to go for a digital diet may be useful or even necessary while studying for creating better quality and results; it may also be relevant during holidays and free time, in general, to switch off mobile devices. Furthermore, the digital diet may concern business: personal (offline) meetings with clients can bring more profits as emailing, work meetings with switched-off mobile devices can be more productive due to more concentration on work goals.

Daniel Sieberg, in his famous book “The Digital Diet: A four-step plan to break your tech addiction and regain balance in your life” (2011), denotes that in the time of digitalization, individuals have less choice to become digital-free and escape digital addiction. However, the author proposes some popular ways to deal with such an addiction in modern times.

Brabazon (2012) describes the information excess due to the digitalization process with the language of food. On the one hand, information availability leads to information literacy; on the other hand, to the information and media gluttony, too. Moreover, such an information overload influences the quality of information consumed. The scholar argues that the quality of information that is easy and quick to access and consume in the digital space can be compared with the quality of fast food – it is easy to order and fast to get anywhere, the nutrition effect can be completed but the quality of such food compared to the home-made or good restaurant food makes a significant difference.

The most harmful effect of the information availability in the digital space, according to Brabazon, is the decrease of consumer expertise. It is easier and faster to read an article from Wikipedia (generalized and collective source) as from a scientific journal (approved results of a research); it is easier and faster (and cheaper) to order a hamburger at the next corner as to go to the top-level (and expensive) restaurant or to cook at home.

The information consumption today can be compared with snacking: tasty, nutritious, and unhealthy. The scholar claims that such a type of information consumption influences the quality of modern education while students instead prefer easy and fast educational strategies as slow and more conscious learning models. Furthermore, Brabazon (2012) proposes some ways to switch from information obesity to digital dieting as, for instance, using fewer media sources in learning, increase thinking and interpreting instead as cutting and pasting main ideas, make sources choices, and ensure the quality of media sources.

The experience with a technology-free entertainment program provides more fulfilling results for the consumers. On the one hand, tourists actively use digital technologies and mobile connectivity for a better experience; on the other side, temporary disconnection from the digital presence is much desired from tourists due to the differences in the quality of tourism experience offline and online (Dickinson et al. 2016). Moreover, the overload of information forces consumers to search for mobile-free holidays as a temporary disconnection from digital communication. It even influences the tourism market by creating “digital dieting” tourism offers (restricted wi-fi areas or no wi-fi areas).

Last but not least, as an example of a digital diet can be considered the National Day of Unplugging (2020) as a worldwide movement aiming to promote 24hours disconnection from digital devices with a perspective to become a regular global practice. The organizers – Reboot, the arts and cultural non-profit organization - share free toolkit for those who want to organize such a digital diet action.

3.2 Digital detox

The second type of digital minimalism is a *digital detox* practice. As detoxification of the body means removal of toxic substances, in the same way, detoxification from digital consumption and media presence concerns some practices that take much more time as a digital diet and aims “to reboot the system”, meaning temporary escape from information overload from the digital devices.

In the private sphere, individuals use mobile devices for direct communication as well as for education, information search, hobbies, and entertainment. At work, individuals also use (if it is not prohibited) digital devices as for private reasons as well as for working tasks (to plan a meeting, to send an email, to contact a client or a colleague, etc.). On the one hand, today, at the time of digitalization, it is essential to provide internet access and modern technologies used for productive work and fruitful interactions. On the other hand, such a constant media presence (even outside the working hours, at the weekends and holidays) harms the employers that is expressed in information overload, nervousness, stress, burnouts, etc. Such an influence asks from employers and employees for a regulation system that can facilitate conscious filtration of information flows, efficient time management.

One of the understandings of digital detox can be defined as a periodical disconnectedness from digital media or even a reduction of digital media involvement (Syvertsen and Enli 2019). It relates media resistance but not the total offline format of life; balancing between media presence and real life can bring awareness and consciousness to the media consumers. Like an addiction, permanent online- presence and availability, even 24/7 connectivity, can bring individuals to experiencing specific mental, physical, and psychological difficulties. Loss of context with real life and real problems, different disturbances, anxiety, fear, nervousness – for such problems, there are already self-help and scientific literature, training groups, psychologists, etc.

Moreover, phubbing as gadget and internet addiction can be expressed in the ignorance of other people in favor of gadgets (Mamina and Tcareva 2018). Mobile devices and distribution of (mostly free) wi-fi connection strengthen such an addiction and, as some scholars mention, threaten the education system and the social and cultural competences worldwide. Due to this situation, digital detox aims to lower stress from online communication and teach to focus on real (offline) communication as at work as well as in the free time. It is essential to mention that digital detox promotes not the denial of modern technologies but the ability to filter the information and to control media consumption.

Shaev (2018) claims that in the era of digital culture, the visual content presented online increases the information excess; the popularization of Instagram as the photo-based social network becomes the reaction of society on the textual information glut. In the same way, video-bloggers threaten by its popularity and increasingly influential role traditional blogs with texts as well as traditional video advertising.

Andreeva (2017) defines specific problems due to digital addiction and proposes some approaches for its research. Firstly, digital addiction can be considered within medical studies; it leads to a low level of self-control and aggression. Additionally, the emotional conditions of individuals can be directly affected by media presence and media consumption.

Secondly, from the psychological perspective, increased anxiety in society can also be considered as an effect of digitalization. Thirdly, from the socio-economic point of view, mobile devices improve the educational level of users and simplify interconnections; however, media presence can destroy the abilities to communicate offline.

Finally, as a reaction to the digitalization and as an answer for the digital minimalism practices, there is an entrepreneurial solution, mobile apps that help to control media consumption, to manage everyday tasks, to track media presence. That embraces mainly the start-up business sector: as in Russia as well as in the western world, many start-ups work with internet technologies and mobile devices. It attracts investments and develops amazingly fast. Additionally, the start-up ideas about digital detox incorporated in mobile apps increase popularity among conscious consumers.

Sutton (2017) provides an analysis of digital detox retreats and camps where people consciously disconnect themselves from the mobile devices in order to come back for real communication, to feel less stress and anxiety, and to “recharge” body and mind without digital culture. The scholar offers a “food/technology metaphor” as a framework for interpreting the idea of detoxification applied to food and digital consumption.

3. 3 Media asceticism

The most radical way in digital disconnection is the complete denial of digital devices use. It supposes the critical approach to the media use and critical position to the consumer society in general. A trend for *media asceticism* is gaining attention from different social groups, even not yet become mainstream. It may be incorporated in the complex of certain behavioural practices, mainly included in the practices of a healthy lifestyle. Some people disconnect themselves from the wi-fi at work or home; others delete or deactivate personal accounts in social networks.

Some scholars mention that practices of digital diet and digital detox in western countries are effectively developing (Solovyev and Belous 2014). Moreover, they are even incorporated as in the school/university education in the form of art workshops, digital-free trainings, and events, as well as in the corporate culture in the form of mindfulness practices, digital-free events, and mobile apps to control the media use. In Russian reality, such practices are not yet institutionalized but obtain the potential to become a modern trend in the following years. Furthermore, there is a significant difference in media use and media consumption in the megapolises and at the periphery. In the

Russian province, there is still a need for negotiation of the digital divide rather than already dealing with digital overload.

Solovyev and Belous (2014) define freedom from internet dependency as a new way of luxury good: many people today not only communicate but work online and earn money online. Thence, in order to get disconnected from the online information flows and media presence means not only to communicate in real life but probably lose some profits and clients. The scholar calls this practice as media snobbism and characterizes the elite class as that practicing media asceticism as a symbol of higher class and stable income.

In the same way, the New York Times reporter Nellie Bowles (2019) defines personal interactions as a new luxury good. The total expansion of digital devices transforms the price of real things and makes them costs less. So, rich people try to avoid online-addiction as much as possible and aim to pay more, to invest in real (offline) objects, emotions, experiences. It is a significant switch from possessing certain consumer goods as a symbol of high status and wealth to denying the digitalization for the experiencing real life.

For personal communication, media asceticism means the different status of availability (only meeting in person), privacy status (no information shared online), and restricted access to interactions (only in offline format). It may positively affect interpersonal relations, improve the understanding level, but, at the same time, limit personal connections due to the geographical distinctions. For business communication, media asceticism limits interactions with clients and colleagues, too. However, it may improve the focus on business tasks and stimulate findings for digital-free solutions in business communication that can bring extra profits and reputation for a company in the time of digital culture.

4. Results

The digitalization process obviously influences the character of online and offline communications. Digital culture creates new cultural codes and norms of interactions due to the media presence and media consumption of individuals. Some such codes and norms are commonly accepted worldwide, and others receive attention only in small groups of media consumers. However, the digital minimalism trend is spreading the influence as in western culture as well in Russian reality.

In the paper, there were three main types of digital minimalism presented. The first type, called a digital diet, explains the short-term perspective of digital disconnection due to the everyday routine tasks and work or study efficiency. It is often practiced in personal and business communications due to its simple principle and short but fast effect.

The second type, digital detox, seeks long-term time investment as with an analogy with the body detoxification process. It concerns the practices to control and filter media presence and media consumption and asks individuals a conscious approach to the use of digital devices. As in private life as well as in the business, individuals can practice digital detox in order to lower stress and burnouts feelings, for better bodily and mental health.

Finally, the third and the most complicated type, media asceticism, provides an idea to disconnect from digital culture and digital lifestyle as a complex global trend. It asks for a strong attitude, conscious choice, and long-term attendance and creates some limitations in communication in the time of digitalization.

Many scholars claim that any practice of digital disconnection needs some regulations from an individual and from society. In some countries, there are already existing, institutionally provided methods and ways to regulate media presence and media consumption. Individuals need to learn how to control themselves, how to deal with stress and negative feelings while practicing digital disconnection. There are certain practices, specific literature, and working groups, training that help people to deal with digital addiction today.

In Russia, those ideas are not yet mainstream but slowly and effectively developing according to the global trend for digital minimalism. The institutional practices for digital disconnection in Russia would help individuals to control and filter the information flows, improve communication skills, and improve work or study results. The limitations of the use of digital devices in school, at university, at work would strengthen the value of real interactions, emphasize the ability to communicate in real life as a component of social capital. Moreover, digital minimalism in any environment would positively change human relationships and construct digital etiquette with a focus on specifics of real communication.

5. Conclusions

All in all, this paper explains the idea of how to implement the practices of digital minimalism in personal and business communication. Those practices have a big potential to become a global trend. However, there are certain limitations and research questions that might be further developed in other studies.

For instance, digital addiction today has a mass character; people are much dependent on digital devices, particularly young generations. Young people cannot imagine living in the world without an internet connection and a mobile phone nearby. Thence, it seems to be difficult enough to popularize an idea of digital disconnection among the young generation.

Furthermore, in the business sphere digital technologies play a significant role not only as a working tool to deal with work tasks and manage ideas; digitalization embraces the areas of the financial sector and provide investments for different kind of business structures. So, to provide an idea of digital minimalism (especially of media asceticism) needs a fulfilled complex of arguments and alternative methods to work without digital dependence. Additionally, for people working mostly via the internet, it might be almost impossible to get disconnected, which would mean to lose income, clients, and even reputation.

Regarding the Russian reality, it is difficult to predict when and on which way the trend of digital minimalism would attract the attention and interest of individuals. But it is already possible to denote that this trend will be developing in the next years at the level of international companies presented in Russia as well as in the communities practicing mindfulness ideas, healthy lifestyle, and conscious consumption.

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