

When digital media becomes a social problem

At a time when digital media has become an indispensable part of everyday life, we also see major challenges with excessive use of it. The Digitox research project has addressed the problem and contributed to greater awareness and more dialogue about digital disconnection in society.

kvinne ser på mobil på en togstasjon

Through the Digitox project, it has been revealed that 67 percent of the Norwegian population feel that they are too much online (photo: Unsplash).

Project manager for the basic research project "Digitox: Invasive media, ambivalent users and digital detox", Trine Syvertsen, says that the researchers in the project have followed the historical development from a time of great optimism related to digitalization, to a growing concern about the negative consequences.

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Do you ever completely disconnect from the digital spheres?

"We have seen a development from people previously blaming the media, to now blaming themselves to a greater extent for excessive use. This leads to shame and guilt," explains Syvertsen, professor at the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Oslo.

The project has received NOK 10.1 million in funding from FRIPRO in the Research Council of Norway, a national competitive arena for ground-breaking research in all disciplines and topics.

A social problem that concerns everyone

Digitox has revealed that 67 percent of the Norwegian population feels that they spend too much time online. This reflects not only an individual experience, but also a recognition that excessive screen use is a societal problem.

"Excessive use of digital media has become an issue that people talk about and that leads to conflicts at home, at work, at school and in their spare time," says Syvertsen.

kvinne viser fram en mobilsovepose på et bibliotek

The "Take time back" campaign at Deichman Library in Oslo was a success. By handing out mobile sleeping bags, they helped visitors put away their mobile phones, shown here by Deichman director Merete Lie (photo: Deichman).

Dialogue and awareness raising

The researchers behind the Digitox project chose an unconventional dissemination of the research results. They travelled around the country arranging free working lunches and breakfast meetings in addition to attending traditional conferences. In the meetings, they shared knowledge and contributed to dialogue about the challenges associated with digital disconnection in various arenas, such as doctors' surgeries, libraries, schools and cultural institutions.

Concrete examples of meeting places, experiments and collaboration:

- **Library stunt:** The researchers have turned up at libraries with paper envelopes and offered people to put their mobile phones in the envelope while they work or read books. This has created engagement and reflection on their own mobile phone use.
- **Museum of Science and Technology:** At the Museum of Science and Technology, conversation tables were set out with various objects, such as old mobile phones and newspapers. The audience could sit down and reflect on their own media use in dialogue with the researchers.
- **Advice and guidance:** Digitox has contributed with advice and guidance to various actors who want to implement measures for digital disconnection. Among other things, they have been in dialogue with Deichman Bjørvika about the campaign they have with mobile sleeping bags and they have arranged a workplace breakfast meeting in the Ministry of Culture.
- **Collaboration with schools:** Working closely with schools to raise awareness about digital disconnection and to promote healthy digital habits among students.

Mobile sleeping bags at the Deichman library

The Digitox project's research has not only inspired reflection, but also concrete measures. Deichman Library launched the campaign "Take Time Back" in April 2023, with the goal of helping Oslo residents put away their mobile phones. The core of the campaign was the distribution of mobile sleeping bags – simple neoprene pockets that symbolise the need for a break from the screen.

"Trine Syvertsen's research and supervision have been crucial from the very beginning of our campaign. Her insights into people's relationship to screen use and digital detox methods have been the very foundation of our communication. Thanks to the Digitox project, we were able to design a campaign that really hits people's needs and shows how the library can contribute to a better digital balance," says Lars Schwed Nygård from Deichman Library.

The campaign was a success, with over 23 500 mobile sleeping bags distributed and a positive response from the public.

Talks at the Museum of Science and Technology in Oslo

In collaboration with the researchers from Digitox and Marianne Lien with the project "The limits of privacy", the Museum of Science and Technology launched a new format for research dissemination called the "Kitchen-Table Society". In an intimate setting around kitchen tables, researchers and visitors discussed topics related to digitalisation in everyday life. The conversations were based on questions developed in research projects, and the participants shared experiences and reflections.

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Is digital interaction worth less than physical contact?

Some of the questions this evening were: Is digital socialising worth less than physical? Does nature become something else when it is experienced through a screen? How do you touch the screen of your mobile? Do you ever completely disconnect from digital?

The museum wanted findings from the research to spark conversations, and that the participants' stories, thoughts and critical reflections were shared.

"The museum created a space where the visitors' own experiences became an important part of the research, and in this way we aroused a commitment to socially relevant topics," says Gro Ellefsen, event manager at the Museum of Science and Technology.

At the Museum of Science and Technology in Oslo, conversation tables were set out with various objects, such as old mobile phones and newspapers. The audience could sit down and reflect on their own media use in dialogue with the researchers (photo: Teknisk Museum).

in political discussions.

"We have been frequently represented in the media and have had the opportunity to shed light on the topic from different angles, everything from consequences for cabin life to mobile phone use at concerts. Digitox has also participated in political discussions and contributed knowledge to decision-makers. Although we have not taken a position on specific political solutions, our research has been important in showing how complex the problem is and the need for a holistic approach," says Syvertsen.

New Norwegian term: Digital disconnection

The project has also contributed to the development of a Norwegian terminology for digital disconnection. The term "digital detox" has been replaced with "digital disconnection", and it is now included in the Great Norwegian Encyclopedia.

Although the Digitox project has now ended, research and dissemination work will be important in the future. The project has contributed to increased awareness and dialogue about the challenges related to digital media and thus laid the foundation for creating positive changes around digital disconnection in society.

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