

Revisiting the past, being in the present, preparing for the future

Making sense of a digital-free holiday camp for adults

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we explore how participants experience disconnection in practice at a digital-free summer camp for adults. Underleir is an annual week-long camp originating from discussions on the Norwegian social network Underskog and draws inspiration both from Silicon Valley disconnectionist ideology and Scandinavian traditions of friluftsliv [outdoor recreation]. When the camp was first organised in 2014, digital detoxing was not a well-known concept in the Norwegian context, and such camps are still rare in Scandinavia. The study is based on fieldwork, interviews, and online material. In the chapter, we discuss how camp experiences relate to the participants' life course along three temporal dimensions: the past (nostalgia, play), the present (freedom from status games, relaxation), and the future (survivalism, utopianism). The study contributes to the disconnection literature by moving beyond the media-centred issue of how users relate to their gadgets. Instead, the chapter explores how being digital-free is made meaningful within a concrete and unusual holiday setting and relates to the societal and personal values of those attending.

KEYWORDS: digital detox camp, disconnection practices, tourism, camp school, outdoor recreation, friluftsliv

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Introduction

A literature review of disconnection and digital detox articles from the last decade reveals that studies within the subfield of tourism are among the more prominent (see, e.g., Ayeh, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016; Egger et al., 2020; Floros et al., 2021; Jiang & Balaji, 2021; Li et al., 2018; Neuhofer & Ladkin, 2017; Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021). Alongside a sustained focus on megatrends such as digitalisation and globalisation, increased attention is given in tourism studies to alternative trends such as “responsible”, “slow”, “low-tech”, and “activism” tourism (see, e.g., Doorly 2020). Varley and Semple (2015) criticised scholars’ emphasis on high-tech, immersive holiday products and argued for a greater focus on “slow adventures”, closer to nature and with a less frenetic pace (see also Jorge, Chapter 16 in this volume). From the vantage points of tourism and disconnection studies, in this chapter we discuss Underleir, an annual week-long summer camp for adults originating within an online social network site called Underskog. The camp is inspired by Silicon Valley disconnectionist ideology, and more specifically, Camp Grounded (Beattie, 2020; Sutton, 2020), but it also draws on a Scandinavian tradition of outdoor recreation [friluftsliv], particularly the tradition of camp school [leirskole] as an inclusive and compulsory element in Norwegian primary education (Repp, 1977). Based on collaborative rule-making, smartphones and digital gadgets are discouraged, which places the camp within an international segment of digital detox tourism. Still, the camp is unusual in the Norwegian context. Although tourism in offline areas is common, few sites explicitly promote gadget-free holidays (Syvertsen, 2022).

Despite this aspect, we argue that the absence of smartphones and digital gadgets is not the main point of the holiday but rather a condition for facilitating positive experiences. This study is important because it answers scholarly calls to research disconnection in more domains and in concrete settings where participants interact with each other and not just appear as individual respondents (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021; Sutton, 2020). Through the dimensions of past, present, and future, which emerged during the analysis of the material and are present in the literature, we not only grasp the short-term reasons for needing a digital break, but also how the choice of holiday relates to participants’ memories, current situations, and hopes for life.

We conducted the study in the pre-Covid summer of 2019. It is based on four-day fieldwork at the camp, field dialogues with thirty participants, an interview with the initiator, as well as three in-depth interviews with participants after the camp. In addition, we draw on social and mass media items and online material (see also Syvertsen, 2023; Karlsen, 2023). The research questions are: How do participants implement digital detox practices at the holiday camp? And what are the dominant framings invoked to explain its value? Framing here draws on Goffman’s (1974) social interactionist approach in which meaning is the result of individual and collective negotiations (see

also Kitzinger, 2007; Vliegenthart & Van Zoonen, 2011). It implies that people understand and organise their reality according to how they categorise events, “paying attention to some aspects rather than others” (Kitzinger, 2007: 134).

We begin the chapter with a literature review and a discussion of inspirations and context. Then we discuss methods, before we turn to the analysis of frames invoked by organisers and participants under the headings of past, present, and future. Past includes how the camp activates memories and the possibility of recreating childhood freedoms; present describes how the camp offers participants the opportunity to be in the moment; while future explores motivations related to self-reliance skills and utopianism.

Digital-free holidays and camp school

Disconnected tourists

Although tourism research regarding digitalisation mainly focuses on the benefits, the field is increasingly enriched by studies mapping tourists’ ambivalence to 24/7 connectivity. A standard view is that the virtual element distracts tourists and detracts from environments and people in physical proximity (Aye, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016). The motives identified in tourism studies are concurrent with themes identified in studies of digital disconnection elsewhere (see, e.g., Brennen, 2019; Syvertsen, 2020). Studies in this field identify experiences of technological overload and positive motivations involving relaxation, mindfulness, health benefits, nature appreciation, and improved social relations as benefits of a digital detox holiday (Dickinson et al., 2016; Neuhofer & Ladkin, 2017; Rosenberg, 2019).

The motivations found in these studies are predominantly about here-and-now presence; digital tools are restricted to experience JOMO – the Joy of Missing Out (Putra & Bandung, 2019). However, some studies also mention motivations concerning the past and the future. Floros and colleagues (2021: 258) pointed to how a digital-free holiday can function as a “reset button”; a way to travel back in time and invoke positive memories of childhood. Sutton (2020: Chapter 7) showed how Camp Grounded’s participants subscribe to the idea that they live in a “broken America” and discussed how their perceptions are tied up with evaluations of past, present, and hopes for the future.

Cai and colleagues (2019) mentioned four research gaps in digital-free travel based on a survey of disconnection literature: most studies gathered data after the experience; there are few studies of actual tourism experiences; most studies focus on negative emotions and the distress of being unplugged; and few studies focus on named locations and the experiences at these locations. We acknowledge these gaps and contribute to the literature by situating experiences of disconnection in a concrete geographical location approached through ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore, drawing on the broader tradition of disconnection and digital detox studies, the chapter

emphasises positive motivations for going offline and travelling to the camp, including ambivalent perspectives on the role of digital media in everyday life. This is an area where digital-free holiday and tourism studies can benefit from insights from disconnection research.

Context and inspiration: Silicon Valley meets Norwegian camp school

The first Underleir camp was organised in 2014 and has been arranged annually since, including during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The first occurrences of the concept digital detox in legacy media in Norway was in 2010. Use of the concept increased rapidly the following years, but it was still not in widespread use at the time the camp was initiated (Syvertsen et al., 2019). Underleir hence represents an initiative from a period when digital detoxing was not widely understood in the Norwegian context.

Situated in the valley of Øksendal in the western part of Norway, the camp is surrounded by farmland and snow-covered mountaintops. It radiates a camp school atmosphere, and the presence of a goat kid on the site adds a flavour of rural tourism (Hjalager et al., 2018). The main building is a lodge dating back to 1899, currently operating as a hotel. There is also an addendum adhering to standards from the 1970s with bunk beds, shared toilets, and showers. The buildings are surrounded by lawns and areas designated for various activities. Figure 15.1 shows the main sign pointing to the camp area.

FIGURE 15.1 The sign on the main road showing the way to the camp



Comments: On your way to camp? The home-made sign placed on the main road signals to participants that the camp is a temporary experience, set in nature, with an opportunity to relive childhood experiences.

Source: photo by Trine Syvertsen

The camp lasts a week in July when most Norwegians are on summer holiday. Between 40 and 50 participants usually attend, many of whom have participated in earlier Underleir camps. During the camp, no other guests stay at the hotel; the camp is responsible for meals, and participants take on kitchen chores to reduce costs. There are also tent spots available at lower prices; the idea is that costs should not be an obstacle to attending. The camp facilitates a range of free activities such as ball games, painting, and beading, in addition to professional classes such as wood cutting and archery, where an extra fee is payable to the class holder.

The camp draws on two major sources of inspiration: the disconnectionist ideology of Silicon Valley, and Camp Grounded in particular, and the Scandinavian tradition of nature-based and practice-based education taught through folkehøgskole [folk high school]. Eir Husby, the primary organiser, described how she heard an American podcast about the Californian digital detox event Camp Grounded and posted it on the Norwegian social network Underskog, asking: “What if we had something like this in Norway?” The response was immediate and enthusiastic: “In a matter of half an hour, I had 20 potential attendants and 70 people engaged in the conversation”. Fascination with the idea of a screen-free event and nostalgic memories of past camp experiences were recurring topics. Digital detox, mentioned in the podcast, was part of the discussion from the start, and later also part of the camp rules.

Camp Grounded was established in 2013 as a pioneering event in digital detoxing, known for its ban on work-talk and smartphones and the use of code names to encourage a break from everyday life. In her analysis of Camp Grounded, Sutton pointed to the camp’s proximity to the global technology hub and the Californian historical and ideological heritage of utopian and dystopian sentiments. The Californian tradition of “eco-villages” and ideals of less technologically dependent societies are important backdrops for Camp Grounded (Sutton, 2020). In his analysis of Silicon Valley disconnection activists and technological appliances invented to log off, Beattie (2020) pointed out how the disconnectionists are not technophobes or neo-Luddites; they have a sophisticated view of technology but reject a culture of constant connection and explore practical means of remedying the perils of the attention economy.

While the discussion of camp rules started with Camp Grounded, Eir said they “made it more Norwegian, as it was very American”. They needed to tone it down, “make it more pragmatic, so Norwegians don’t freak out completely” (see also Karlsen, 2023). For Underleir, the Scandinavian tradition of friluftsliv, as simple outdoor life, is an important context. Gelter (2000) argued that although outdoor recreation is found worldwide, a particular word for it and the philosophy is unique for Scandinavia, especially in Norway and Sweden. Friluftsliv is associated with the public right of way – the opportunity for all to appreciate and be in nature with simple everyday means.

With the notion of *friluftsliv* as a backdrop, Eir pointed specifically to the Scandinavian traditions of folk high school [folkehøyskole] and camp school [leirskole] as essential to establish the context. The tradition draws on cross-national inspirations, specifically romanticism and reactions to urbanisation and industrialisation (Repp, 1977). From the late 1800s, experiments were conducted with nature as a learning arena, and from the 1970s, camp schools gained a place in the Norwegian curriculum. Hence, camp school is an essential reference point for millennials, but also other age groups would most likely have visited one. Repp showed how camp schools combine utilitarian and romantic views of nature with a recreational perspective and beliefs in the positive impact on mental and physical health. He argued that the importance of camp schools lies in integrating past, present, and future: cultural heritage, reflections on current society, and reflections on what should change for the future. Camp schools should last several days, encourage togetherness, and represent a genuine change of environment (Repp, 1977).

Since 2019, going on a four-day trip in natural surroundings is a right by law for Norwegian children (NLF, 2021). The Association for Norwegian Camp Schools states that having nature as a learning arena is important for understanding “Norwegian history and culture”, enhancing “social skills and strengthen friendships”, as well as preparing the pupils to meet “competence goals in the future school” (our translations), in effect illustrating past, present, and future (Setlo, 2020).

Methods

This study is based on a four-day fieldwork at the camp, around thirty field dialogues, four in-depth interviews conducted before and after the camp, and online material from social networks. We both took part in collecting the material and field dialogues. We participated in activities alongside participants during our stay, including meals, classes, and kitchen chores (see also Karlsen, 2023).

The empirical material consists of notes from the field trip, transcribed interviews, and online discussions from the social network Underskog from 2014 to 2019. The combination of material allowed us to contextualise the event in a longer timeframe, including unsolicited discussions concerning what activities the participants wanted in the camp and the experience they referred to when describing their preferences.

Permission was obtained from organisers prior to the camp, and information was given to participants at the opening meeting run by the organisers. We emphasised that we would take no names and that the participants could refrain from talking to us if they were unwilling to be part of the study. No one expressed any need for that, neither at the meeting nor during our stay. Journalists had visited every year, and the participants generally seemed comfortable being observed by outsiders. In the camp, most were on a first-name

or nickname basis, and we do not know the full names of most informants. We allocated code names to every participant immediately after the camp; thus participants are anonymised except for the leader and initiator of the camp, Eir Husby, who has approved the use of quotes from the interview and read a draft of the chapter. We have translated field notes, as well as statements from participants, from Norwegian to English.

Concerning online material from Underskog, the participants use nicknames, and information about their identity is not revealed in their profile. We have not obtained or stored any other information about the participants, and their nicknames are not used in this text. The motivation for using the material was to provide a historical context of the camp, and the bulk of the material is from 2014 and 2015. One important consideration to take when using online material is whether obtaining informed consent is necessary. In our case, the material does not contain sensitive topics or information about the participants and scores low on other criteria for obtaining informed consent. The use of the material therefore concurs with ethical standards on Internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2017). Several participants at the camp also do not have a profile at Underskog and we did not try to match camp participants to online persona.

Notes, interviews, and online data were analysed using NVivo and manual close reading. Our analytical approach draws on thematic analysis (Johannessen et al., 2018) and analysis of how issues and grievances are framed in social movement studies (Benford & Snow, 2000). We aim to identify how the experiences at Underleir make sense within the analytic framework of past, present, and future, and how digital media absence help facilitate these experiences.

Analysis

As an introduction to the analysis, we start with a note on the role of smartphones. Norway is a country with high uptake of digital technology, and 99 per cent of the population between the age of 9 and 79 owns a smartphone (MedieNorge, 2022). Unsurprisingly, the smartphone was a recurring topic at the camp, and the participants held diverse views about their intrusiveness and usefulness. We witnessed a few occurrences of smartphone use during the camp, usually by first-timers, where veterans, in a friendly manner, reminded them of the guidelines that state smartphones should not be used during joint activities (Underleir.no, n.d.).

Although not completely out of sight, a common thread was that the absence of smartphones was significant for facilitating camp experiences, but not the primary motive for attending. Some participants warned us to not focus too much on the restrictions, but rather on the attractive experiences and atmosphere. These warnings are a welcoming corrective to the media-centrism that tends to dominate discussions about disconnection and digital-free tourism, and they encourage interpretation of events in a broader context (Hesselberth,

2018; Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen, 2017). What, then, is the experience that people buy into, and how is it facilitated with smartphone restrictions?

Past: Camp memories, retro activities, and childhood freedoms

The Underleir we visited in 2019 was the sixth instalment of the camp. Although the camp is located at the same place, with many returning participants and organisers, it is a fluid construct subject to changes inspired by earlier camp experiences, new ideas and participants, and available resources. This section explores three aspects relevant to the context of the past: camp memories, retro activities and media references, and the possibility of recreating childhood freedoms.

First, regarding camp memories, the online discussions before the first Underleir camp included numerous recollections of camp experiences. Memories from camp school, scout camps, youth camps, Christian camps, and summer camps with the Red Cross were fondly shared: nature walks, ghost stories around the fire at night, and togetherness flourished. The camp aspect was a pull factor for many participants, associated with a positive atmosphere, although less memorable moments were mentioned, such as abysmal food standards.

References to camp experiences were also rife in conversations at Underleir, including memories of adult camps. One participant described a one-week summer camp at a Danish folk high school with no firm smartphone rules, but where puzzles and board games were preferred over digital activities. Others recalled similar settings associated with togetherness and fellowship. One participant told us how her grandparents shared a cabin with three other families and offered pleasant memories of companionship with family, friends, and neighbours. A central element in the recollections was how people stayed together for several days, sharing activities and chores; hence, the experience embodies the characteristics of a classic camp school practised in Norwegian schools (Repp, 1977).

The second aspect where participants related the camp experience to positive memories concerns retro activities and media references. Participants ranged from teenagers to people in their 60s, but the majority seemed of Western, and predominantly Norwegian descent in their 30s and 40s. Hence, most were Millennials (born 1981–1996) or Generation X (born 1965–1980). Compared with earlier generations, Millennials are distinguished by their tech use, well versed in various digital technologies and tools (Vogels, 2019). However, Millennials and Generation X comprise people who remember life before the Internet and attended camp school before digital media became ubiquitous.

A typical conversation piece was cultural artefacts of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, and there was much talk about previous media forms and technologies; at times, the “nerd factor” was high. At the large beading table, which is a central part of the camp, Super Mario (from 1985) in 2D

was a popular motif. Participants evoked old games with joy, poor Internet connection, old standards, the early IT industry, IRC communication, and old phone models. A participant showed his yellow Nokia fold-out, a lightweight version, which only allows for phone calls and SMS. Since the network and mobile connection is volatile and sometimes absent – as it is in many Norwegian mountain areas – the volunteer network running the camp used yellow walkie-talkies, joking about them, saying they are helpful, but also “cool” and “retro”. Hence, as Sax (2016) has noted, users’ relationships with gadgets are often ingrained with beliefs that retro technologies are somehow better and more authentic (see also Jorge, Chapter 16, and Fast & Syvertsen, Chapter 3 in this volume).

The level of self-reflective playfulness was very high in these, as in other conversations. However, there were also several references to analogue culture and the joy of reading paper books and comics, playing board games and doing puzzles, and role-playing face-to-face (Sax, 2016). One participant described her love for printed newspapers and how she and her husband subscribed to several and read them daily at breakfast. Part of the experience was walking to the mailbox to get them, although she missed meeting her neighbours there: They seem to have switched to digital news. The fact that old media cropped up in conversations is interesting in the context of the absence of references to modern media and news items (below).

A third element discussed under the heading of “past” is how participants use the camp to recreate childhood freedoms and escape from the status games of adulthood. We observed that the arrival at the camp did not seem coordinated, even though many had been there before. Most arrived alone, seemed tentative about meeting others, and did not seem to connect with a group. It is very different from your typical conference or seminar, where people immediately look for “their” crowd and use their communication devices to find people they know. Conversations and interviews reinforced this impression. In a conversation with two participants, they agreed that the best thing about Underleir is the lack of cliques: It is uncommon for people to agree beforehand to take the same class, for example.

A key factor to this carefree atmosphere is that the camp removes peoples’ responsibilities. As the organiser Eir explained:

We free people from having to plan the day. Food is served at a certain time, and you get that childhood feeling that things are taken care of around you. [...] We remove so many of the choices people have to make regularly so they don’t need to think about adult stuff. [...] What we talk about is facilitating playfulness, to create that certain “Let’s do something fun!” Then people suddenly become very playful!

According to camp guidelines, the participants must refrain from talking about their jobs. Several participants stated that this probably is even more important

for the experience of social inclusiveness than the ban on smartphones. The absence of work-related talk contributes to the experience of pre-adulthood freedom, and participants elaborated on how this rule enables them to “be themselves”. The first participant we encountered immediately told us: “It is a relief not having to talk about work. You meet people differently, on an equal level”. When we asked what people talk about, he said: “Instead of asking: What do you do? I ask: What are the things you like to do?” A woman later said that what she likes so much is that at Underleir she escapes the questions she dislikes, such as: “What is your job? Do you have children? Do you have a boyfriend? Do you own a house? You know, those things”.

What we can discern so far is that the “past” is present at the camp in various ways. Childhood and carefree summer holidays serve as important reference points for the participants, embodied in physical, analogue activities and references to retro media and technology. Having to refrain from talking about their jobs and status outside the camp also means that sharing memories and earlier experiences is a way for the participants to become acquainted.

Present: Structure, spontaneity, freedom from media, and mindfulness

Reclaiming presence emerges as an overarching goal in studies of digital detox (Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020), and participants described how they use the camp experience to stay in the present. There are four aspects discussed under this heading: A structured time–space design freeing the participants from having to micro-coordinate, an emphasis on autonomy and spontaneity, freedom from media and topical events, and an overall possibility to de-stress and relax.

As noted, having meals served reminded participants of childhood, and structural aspects are also important to facilitate presence. Space, time, and activities are the main structuring principles of the camp – all familiar elements to liberate participants from the strain of coordination. Like a typical digital detox retreat (Hesselberth, 2021) and a typical camp school, Underleir takes place in a remote location and is structured around a daily schedule with fixed mealtimes and activities. Spatially, Underleir draws on the site’s facilities and characteristics: a network of physical meeting spaces where one can meet others and perform various tasks, enabling participants to take a break from daily coordination.

The roofed terrace in front of the lodge was a vital hang-out space; here, one can always drop in and watch life go by, talk to others, or wait for the food bell to ring. Some people hung out there for days, reading and talking to those who dropped by. Gradually, the beading table emerged as an important arena in the evening for drop-in conversations and low-threshold activities. Even later, the outdoor fireplace became an important social hub. As noted by Floros and colleagues (2021: 759), there are many physical barriers to taking

a digital-free holiday: People give up because they cannot navigate the site or access activities without their phones. Destinations “play a fundamental role” in enabling or preventing participants from disconnecting on holiday. At Underleir, there was a high degree of consciousness about spatiality and facilities, and the need for workstations as nodes were discussed in threads, such as “Fiberverksted” [“Fibre workshop”], on the social network site Underskog.

The temporal structure is equally important – meals at 9:00, 13:00, 17:00, and 21:00 structure the day. Even if much is unorganised, the kitchen works perfectly; food is ready on time, there is (almost always) enough, and morning coffee is ready from early on. When we first arrived on Sunday afternoon, everything seemed a bit chaotic: Organisers were setting up activities and several participants seemed a bit lost. We were getting hungry but were far from shops; the pre-camp information had indicated that a fire would be lit for a barbecue, but this did not happen. It suddenly started pouring rain, and since we had put away our phones when we arrived, we had not checked the weather. However, underneath the unorganised atmosphere, the kitchen

FIGURE 15.2 The lawn with the tables outside and the zipline in the background



Comments: Ready for lunch? The four daily meals served at fixed times are important structuring elements. The long tables are typical of camp schools and hiking huts in Norwegian mountains and invite participants to meet and talk with different people rather than forming subgroups. In good weather, the tables are moved outside.

Source: photo by Trine Syvertsen

was coming to life with the smell of freshly made waffles. From then on and throughout our stay, meals and mealtimes were the most important structuring activity of the camp (see Figure 15.2).

Creating extraordinary experiences has had high priority in tourism development, but as Large and Schilar (2018) argued, this is no precondition for a meaningful holiday. Adventure is meaningful within the context of individual life stories and tied up with identity and sense of self, and rhythms are recreated in the holiday that resembles everyday life. It is not necessarily about risk, excitement, and adrenaline, but “seeming *unadventurous* and ordinary aspects” (Large & Schilar, 2018: 337) may be as central to the experiences. Temporal rhythms enable awareness of what is going on, presence, and sensitivity towards the place. At Underleir, the time–space structure with meeting places, mealtimes, classes, and activities creates a relaxing and predictable rhythm, which was also useful for creating opportunities for observation and conversations.

Although the structuring elements are important, there is also an emphasis on autonomy and spontaneity, the second aspect relevant under the heading of “present”. Seasoned participants told us that there is a lot of flexibility, and one doesn’t need to get up for meals, go to class, or attend the second-class day; one can spend their days reading in solitude if they wish. As one participant, who described herself as an introvert, told us in an interview: “I’m not someone who sits around the campfire for very long. I’ll rather take the dog for a walk and go early to bed”. Another self-described introvert appreciated “no pressure to be with others. You can read or go for a walk alone. Calm down”. The phrase, “I’m going for a walk”, even functions as a code, signalling that the participant doesn’t want to be disturbed, a code suggested during the first discussion about the camp at the social network site Underskog in 2014 and later incorporated into the camp practices.

Hesselberth (2021: 258) noted a similar point from one of the retreats she visited, stating that “everything at the retreat was explicitly presented as optional with ‘no pressure’”. In contrast to more commercial retreats, however, there is at Underleir also a strong current of spontaneous co-creation, where participants themselves initiate activities and surprises happen. New initiatives are announced at mealtimes, welcoming people to join at no cost: croquet, yoga, walks, beading, exercise, and a role-playing game are among the activities that popped up during our stay. A woman who on her fifth camp stay emphasised the positive encouragement from the organisers who, as a response to most initiatives from the participants, say, “yes, of course, just do it”. However, we also experienced spontaneity as a bit unsettling in our case. We had been promised that organisers should inform participants about us beforehand, but they had forgotten: “We have not informed about you because we mess around – we mess around a lot”, one answered when we asked. Another “red-shirt” [a nickname for the organisers] characterised their style as “anarchic” but emphasised that they cooperate well and always land on their feet.

The third aspect concerns freedom from media and topical events. Although participants stated that the absence of smartphones is not the most important feature, it is considered necessary for facilitating camp experiences. Many participants commented that conversations are better when uninterrupted, as they can move faster to a deeper level. One woman said she loves that people do not use their phones at Underleir, as they become more sociable: “There is always someone to talk to”, she said. One of the more eager supporters of the smartphone restriction told us that Underleir represents his ideal concerning how smartphones should be used, or rather, not used.

Overall, we observed that conversations lasted longer at the camp than in everyday life. Obviously, this is a holiday setting, but people also seemed to continue talking to each other for a long duration despite apparent differences in mentalities and sentiments. Although some people told us that they were carrying a phone because of an aging parent or other responsibilities, we did not observe circumstances where social or professional obligations from the home environment interrupted participants. This contrasts with tourism experiences where social and professional interruptions diminish the possibility of a digital pause (McKenna et al., 2020).

Participants described how the media pause provided a break from aspects they dislike about their lives. Underleir provides a week of escape from “endless choices”, one woman said. She described how she continuously ponders whether she should change her job, her lifestyle, or what film to watch, and wishes there were only two films on television so she could have some time off. A few wrong choices in the past made her vigilant, but the constant evaluation and rethinking was experienced as “the paradox of freedom”. Other participants used similar examples, talking about how they want to get away from a lifestyle of constant scrolling and choosing, lamenting that everything is getting more superficial, lacking focus and depth.

Participants talked about unrealistic expectations in partnerships, how friends disappear when new families are established, how people are defined by status games and social categories, such as, if you are a woman around forty, people assume that you are desperate to have a baby. Participants said they relish the opportunity at the camp to meet people without having to relate to these categories, which they consider reinforced by social media and dating apps. A man said apps and social media destroy dating and social life. Asked whether there is nothing positive about it, he said, “yes, no shame, you can just play around”, but on the other hand, he noted that “everything is transient”. It is interesting to observe how Underleir, which is also transient and passing quickly, provides a pause from transiency elsewhere.

Another observation is that the conversation culture at the camp contained very few references to topical events, entertainment, news, sports, or politics. Even though we were there on 22 July – a notorious day in Norwegian history where a terrorist killed 69 people at a political youth camp and a further 8

people by bombing the government headquarters in 2011 – the significance of the terror attacks was mentioned by no one. The absence of television and radio, in addition to smartphones and laptops, created an effective boundary to events outside the camp. Hesselberth (2021) observed one digital detox resort where participants endlessly chattered about ongoing television series, but we noticed no such talk. When participants were asked about this, they confirmed our impression: “Yes, we usually talk about other things, a bit more important things regarding you as a human being”.

The fourth aspect concerns mindfulness and relaxation: Participants go to the camp to slow down. Yoga is free and on offer in the evening, and we practised it on the lawn in beautiful surroundings, retreat-style. Underleir generally represents a sedentary lifestyle, and we moved around very little during the days we spent there. Some went for walks, but seemingly short ones. Participants wore basic summer clothes, and few had professional hiking equipment, training clothes, or tracking watches. The emphasis was not on high-performance but relaxation. As one participant said: “you get this whole other kind of presence, just to sit on the terrace on the lodge and look across the valley. You could really just sit there for a week and enjoy the view”.

One participant described meditation retreats in other parts of the world where she experienced more hard-core mindfulness, including one with several hours of silence every day. However, participants also talked about the classes and activities as “meditative”, such as the three-day wood-carving class. One of the attendees stated in an interview: “It is incredibly relaxing. I almost fell into a trance, very relaxing to focus just on one simple, physical activity. I never experienced that anywhere else”, underlining the argument with reference to his three jobs and “something happening all the time”.

Several people running classes and workshops shared similar descriptions; participants often expressed relief from getting away from their phones and doing something contemplative and focused. In several conversations, participants described familiar aspects from studies of disconnection: how they constantly check their phones in everyday life, how they have lost the ability to read longer texts and concentrate, and how they must do something tangible, with their hands, to get away from constant interruptions and self-interruptions.

In sum, the physical and temporal organisation of the camp are important for participants to be in the “present” – to become immersed in activities and to experience relaxation and focus. This, combined with the absence of media, implies a drastic reduction in situations where they need to choose between different activities and things, which, again, facilitates a carefree and playful experience.

Future: Self-reliance, “dugnad” versus holiday, and utopianism

A crucial notion in camp school and friluftsliv is that the skills of the past are also helpful for the future. Under the “future” heading, we discuss three

aspects: Underleir as a place of gaining self-reliance skills, the tension between Underleir as a place of “dugnad” [voluntary work] versus a paid holiday retreat, and third, Underleir as a site of community-building and utopianism.

In discussions on the social network site Underskog and during the camp, associations with prepping and survivalism cropped up, and the first aspect concerns how the camp trains participants to become more self-reliant. The organiser Eir told us, “My life goal is to become the ultimate digital nomad”, referring to how she might start the day driving a tractor at her parents’ farm [close to the Underleir camp], and in just a few hours, by plane, be sitting in a coffee shop in the middle of Oslo. “It’s like prepping for academics”, she said and laughed. On Underskog, similar sentiments were expressed. One person stated that he wants classes in “all kinds of life skills” referring to what his parents had knowledge of, including “how dairy products are made, butchering, how to make or repairs furniture, to understand electricity and how to troubleshoot before you call the electrician”.

Studies of preppers show how they value “self-sufficiency, self-reliance, personal responsibility, and independence” (Sims & Grigsby, 2019: 93). Although preppers can be found worldwide, the US is the only country “where it exists as a visibly widespread subculture” (Mills, 2021: 338). Mills (2021: 336) defined prepping as,

a coordinated set of activities undertaken by those preparing to independently survive periods of social collapse: medium- to long-term scenarios in which food is not available to buy, electricity and water supply chains are interrupted, and many people may be dead or dying.

Norway scores high on interpersonal trust and trust in political institutions (Newton, 2001); thus, prepping is not widespread. The scenarios underlying the discussions at Underskog are, accordingly, less alarmist and more about self-reliance and sustainability, indicated by classes teaching traditional skills for gathering, preserving, and preparing food. Participants at the camp were fascinated by what one can get from plants growing in the wild, and they discussed the processes of yeasting and fermenting. Other activities involved learning tools and machinery to make clothes and furniture, build shelters and fireplaces, and restoring and recycling skills. Several commentors on Underskog indicated a wish to become less alienated from everyday objects and machinery and to learn how they work and how to repair them.

Learning new skills, preparing food from scratch, repairing, and constructing requires a certain dedication, and the second aspect concerns a potential tension between contributing to the future and having a holiday here and now. The activities at Underleir connote “dugnad”, a Norwegian expression describing working together for a common good. Some of the work requires sustained efforts over several days, such as constructing a new campfire site or building a sauna down at the riverside. However, as noted, there is also a

relaxed ideology at Underleir: “no pressure”. We noted in several instances a tension between the future-oriented “dugnad”-type expectations and the fact that people had paid to join and felt entitled to a good time.

Several participants commented on classes and activities being too demanding. One participant who had signed up for both the drywall class and sewing was concerned about the long workdays, noting that the local builders who were summoned to help were thorough and build for future solidity, “but this is my holiday”. Taking an active part in the drywall class meant that most of one’s stay consists of hard physical labour and little time to enjoy the sun or talk to others. Some cooking classes are long, and the emphasis on recycling and using available resources means a lot of sorting and other boring tasks. This tension can, to some extent, be ascribed to the disparate ideas and motives for participating in the camp. A relevant reference is Hesselberth (2021), who has described a continuum from the commercial and heavily branded digital detox retreat to a simpler monastery-type retreat, also distinguishing between participants who seem to consume retreats as a product, an entertaining holiday experience, and those who use their stay as an opportunity to nurture inner growth. Maybe as a result of this tension, participants also told us that the sentiment has gotten more pragmatic over time: Making jam used to start with picking berries, but now they are brought in. In a sense, the survivalist aspect is toned down, although some said they miss the old style – doing it from scratch.

The third issue concerning the future is utopianism: To what degree is Underleir a place where participants can realise utopian ambitions? McKenzie (2021) distinguished between two types of utopianism: a left-wing version of millennial utopianism and a right-wing version of doomsday prepping. They “both offer a demonstration of what ‘taking the future seriously’ might look like in the contemporary West” (McKenzie, 2021: 1) and can be understood as “a response to the deep ambivalence involved in contemporary future thinking. In both cases, active engagement with the future is empowering in an age where modernity feels ambivalent, aimless and out of control” (McKenzie, 2021: 6). In contrast to the doomsday preppers described here, the Underleir prepping seem entirely playful and un-secretive: There is no evidence of distrust or disbelief in institutions, and the potential of “doomsday” is treated like a science-fiction scenario. The emphasis on weaponry was equally playful. A participant talked enthusiastically about an earlier class where two-metre-high trebuchets (a type of catapult) that could sling melons and cabbages 100 metres were built. Eir said that the shooting class did not work: “But bow and arrow is a great success”. Arguably, you cannot really defend yourself with a trebuchet or a bow and arrow. In that sense, Underleir is in line with the Millennial utopian spirit, but combined with the traditional ideals of mastering self-reliance skills that are part of the friluftsliv and camp school traditions.

The sauna built on the riverside used an old hot water tank as an oven, whereas old duvets from a recycling site were used for isolation. References to saving the environment and recycling were common, although people were also self-reflective about their practices and stressed that they are not fanatics. People talked about belonging to a “counterculture”, one saying she believes in Underleir and Underskog because she is “a good socialist”. She mentioned the element of “dugnad” and examples of people helping each other, stating that “things like Underleir can save the world”. Another participant told us in an interview that “this is a type of holiday we need more of, the community-building aspect”. She also emphasised the importance of group connections taking place in “real life” instead of online. This mentality is future-oriented and has an element of idealism: Through learning, praxis, and sharing, a better future can be built.

Elements of science fiction cropped up in the conversations, resembling Californian and Silicon Valley utopianism (Sutton, 2020). Rather than just consuming, there was an interest in experimenting and construction. People of the future look beyond today’s technologies, beyond the frenzy and craziness, and seek to develop better practices. When it comes to obsessive smartphone scrolling, one of the participants volunteered that she believes we have reached a turning point: User patterns are in a kind of puberty, “but now they are maturing” she said. In many ways, the participants described themselves as ahead of the curve, critical of today’s technology, and believing that better versions can be developed.

Concluding discussion: Tying together past, present, and future

In this chapter, we have explored how participants at Underleir implement digital detox practices and how their experiences can be framed under the headings of past, present, and future. The negotiations of frames we observed during the camp incorporate a long range of perspectives concerning media use and its impact on society. The camp participants had a “shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need for change” (Benford & Snow, 2000: 615). The solutions they articulated, however, is a mesh of topics that do not only revolve around media technology.

Refraining from talking about work is one important element, as well as the opportunity to engage in creative, sociable, useful, and playful activities. These represent alternatives to everyday life and invoke pleasant memories of activities once enjoyed, treasured experiences of being in the present, and preparations for a future they yearn for or want to influence. In a more practical sense, these activities occupy their attention and fill the void that the absence of media might create – a need mirrored in other disconnection research (Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019).

The chapter contributes to the disconnection literature in two important ways. First, by doing research in a concrete geographical setting, it is possible to deepen the understanding of what digital detox represents. As noted by others, disconnecting from digital gadgets is almost always temporary and partial, with blurred boundaries between online and offline practices (Light, 2015). Yet, researchers rarely study what those concrete online/offline interrelations entail within the same group of people over several days. At Underleir, the digital-free element contributes to a physical and temporal sphere different from everyday life and ordinary media habits. The absence of topical media consumption adds to this effect, conjointly creating a boundary to the outside world and current events. Yet, knowledge of and interest in retro technologies and media forms strengthen the bonds between participants.

The second contribution is linked with the concepts of past, present, and future used in the chapter to explore participants' experiences. While it is common in disconnection research to stress how digital detoxing is about being "in the moment" (Syvertsen, 2020), this chapter shows that the experiences are framed within a longer lifespan perspective. All three concepts are multi-dimensional, for example, invoking the past is about reliving childhood experiences but also about nostalgic fantasies about a better "before" (see also Gandini, Chapter 11 in this volume). Furthermore, experiences related to past, present, and future are both interlinked and a potential source of tension. For participants, learning about ways to cook food from scratch may invoke childhood memories, teach skills for the future, and be experienced as a meditative in-the-moment activity. On the other hand, being in the moment and relaxing may come into conflict with the more strenuous tasks of mastering actual skills or doing things "the traditional way".

Finally, the study confirms that taking a digital pause does not imply that participants identify as media resisters or protesters (Brennen, 2019). Of course, participants were aware of the stigma of being considered Luddites or anti-Internet activists; as shown elsewhere, this is not perceived as a tenable position in the twenty-first century (Syvertsen, 2017, 2023). Yet, by putting away digital gadgets and conducting a social experiment, the participants at Underleir produced valuable nuances as to how one can understand online/offline demarcation lines, and what is both gained and lost in a society of 24/7 connectivity.

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