

TALK

Politics in the ruins of digital interactivity: Digital detox and permacomputing

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Talk given at the STS-ing conference, Bochum, 2025

Collections Demos

ABSTRACT

Digital infrastructures increasingly serve people other than those whose everyday lives they infrastructure. This talk proposes infrapolitics (everyday politics too small to be seen) and ultrapolitics (politics of infrastructures too large and ubiquitous to register as political issues) as a way to look for non-nostalgic political options in the ruins of the 1990s promises of digital liberation, captured by platforms after 2000. Two cases are explored: digital detox, through 49 Guardian articles from 2011–2026, which after 2018 turns from commodified self-care toward infra- and ultrapolitical responses; and the permacomputing movement, which combines descent-ready everyday practice with political agitation and a concern for collapse, reckoning with ruins rather than returning to a life without digital tools. (abstract prepared with the help of gen AI, the manuscript itself is 100% written "manually")

Keywords ruination · infrapolitics · ultrapolitics · digital detox · permacomputing · platformisation

How to cite Berker, T. (2026). Politics in the ruins of digital interactivity: Digital detox and permacomputing. *ruination*, 1. <https://ruination.kultwiki.net/article/view/6>

In this talk I want to discuss political options in relation to digital infrastructures that are increasingly serving other people than the ones having their everyday lives infrastructured. Infrastructures do this all the time, of course, just think of surveillance networks or infrastructures used in war zones, where at least one party does not benefit from a well-functioning, invisible infrastructure. In the cases studied here, however, the digital infrastructures were introduced with the promise of making the lives of their users better.

I will argue below that in order to understand how both infrastructures and their discontent users act in political ways we have to slightly reorient what we understand as the political. This is the first part where I introduce the terms infra- and ultra-politics.

Then, I describe the case of the once beneficial digital infrastructures more in depth, their original promises and how they turned to ashes after platform infrastructures have started to capture their material and ideological substrate. I present two types of resistances against this capture in digital detox movements and permacomputing, and discuss them in light of the definitions of the political that were introduced in the beginning.

In sum, the argument unfolded and exemplified here is meant to mark the beginning of a line of thought which prepares us for a good life in the “ruins of digital interactivity”.

A. Perspectives

Actively resisting nostalgia

Raymond Williams has coined the fascinating term “pre-emergent property” for not yet articulated phenomena which exist “in solution” in the “structure of feeling” of a historical period. There are many candidates for such a property of our times, but one prominent contender might be “nostalgia”, the wish to go back in time where the time aimed for is completely imaginary. We see this at work in the affective drive to make something great “again”, which aggressively seeks to recreate the 1950s. And nostalgia qualifies for more than just a political movement due to the way how it powerfully unites different fractions, be it the young that wish to grow up in a time without smartphones, be it in the technocratic governments which promise that after the next big crisis we can go back to how it was before. Nostalgia, in this sense is just under the surface of the present at any time and is ready to crystallise around whichever phenomenon.

In light of ruinations of all kinds, be it materially, through drones or welfare cuts, be it morally through the breaking of self-imposed norms, nostalgia is a tempting offer. However, as political option, due to its imaginary character, nostalgia is naive at best and violent at worst. Are there alternatives when facing the destruction of the current order?

Extended politics

Once in a while infrastructure development is discussed in national parliaments, in Norway one famous instance is the creation of the railway line between Bergen and Oslo in the 1870s. But in between these instances, infrastructuring is seen as economic, administrative, and technical task. To capture the politics of infrastructures before and after it has become a national issue, thus, we have to look elsewhere, which slightly changes the meaning of “politics”. My first proposal here is to adapt the term *infrapolitics* (Scott 2012) which would cover the everyday politics of living with an infrastructure. For instance, the negotiations about children’s screen time, which are familiar to every parent in the 2020s, are about how to relate to digital platform infrastructures long before they reach the parliament which discusses a national social media ban for teens. These “subpolitical” (Beck 1997) acts, unfold in everyday life through the domestication of infrastructures (Berker 2023). Scott calls this *infrapolitics* because these acts are ‘too small’ to be seen, and outside the visible spectrum. But infrastructures, due to their temporality (Karasti et al. 2010) and extended reach and general scope (Star and Ruhleder 1996), are also political in another way, which I here propose to call *ultrapolitical*: effects and negotiations that relate to infrastructures being ‘too large’ and ‘too ubiquitous’ to become registered as regular political issue. Here, particularly the relation between infrastructures and the ‘conventions of practice’ (Star and Ruhleder 1996) and what is seen as normal is relevant: as SL Star has reminded us frequently, infrastructures never do support everyone equally, which makes them complicit in exclusions and other political respects (Butler et al. 2016).

What are non-nostalgic (extended) political options responding to destruction?

Returning to the pre-emerging nostalgia of our times, both infrastructural *infra-* and *ultrapolitics*, can have nostalgic overtones in reaction to creative - or just destructive - destruction of existing infrastructures. How could non-nostalgic infrastructural politics look like?

B. Topic: Ruinous digitalisation

In this talk I am interested in one specific infrastructural destruction: the platformisation of digital networks between 2000 and today.

The promise of digital networks ca 1996

I am not talking here about material destruction, the material substrates of 1980 and 90s digitalisation are very much alive and keep the proprietary service layers that have been created by platform economies running. Instead, what is kaput is promises that were deeply embedded in what was called the Californian Ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996). One of many ways in which they can be summarised is as a threefold liberation: First, they were supposed to free citizens from the monopoly of state media. Second, society's social relations were supposed to be liberated when everyone could connect with everybody. And third, individuals were supposed to be freed from the constraints of their social position and identity, when they could become someone else in the virtual domain. If these descriptions seem hyperbolic, it is because they were. And obviously already in the 1990s there were controversies around new information and communication technologies, e.g., the fear that people would be lonely atoms in front of their computers. But the general mood was optimistic and digitalisation seen less as inevitable but rather as desirable progress.

Enter the platforms

Admittedly simplifying a good deal, this hope for threefold liberation was instrumentalised and eventually destroyed by the large corporations that after the Dotcom bust started to capture immense wealth from the three liberations: from non-state controlled media, from the digitalisation of social relations, and from digital identity formation. Increasingly, these platforms which were designed as walled gardens acted as infrastructures, turning the promises around into the threat of exclusion if one would not become their member. This cost made them ultra-political in the sense described above: Not having a mobile phone is then suddenly more than non-use, it is a political act and is treated as such.

What kind of ultra-political landscape exactly resulted from this capture is debated and secondary for this talk. It surely has characteristics of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019), sometimes mixed with fascist statism and a pinch of feudalism.

C. Non-nostalgic political options in/before ruins?

Looking for non-nostalgic political options in the ruins of digital liberation, I have had a closer look at two cases. First, there is infrapolitical digital refusals of the sort of people trying to do digital detox once in a while. Second, I looked at proposals for alternative digitalisation, where I will present a preliminary exploration of the permacomputing movement.

The question posed in both cases was: Which kinds of infra/ultra-politics do they perform in the ruins of digitalisation?

1. Digital detox

To find out more about digital detox I collected 49 articles in The Guardian between 2011-2026 mentioning digital detox directly. These articles were coded inductively focusing on "what stayed the same" and "what has changed" during the period explored. In terms of quantity, we see a roughly linear increase of the number of articles per year.

Findings 1: Constants

There are at least two constants on the reporting on digital detox in this newspaper. The first one is commodification, which is present almost from the beginning with retreats marketing their venues as free of digital interruptions - in an early case in Scotland making the best out of the fact that there is no broadband access in the area. The products and services sold become more and more varied during the time period: websites and books make the beginning, apps and specific training programs are added later. The second constant is that detox is connected to a concern about the children, psychologists warning are quoted almost from the beginning, and scientific studies about the harms done by screens are present in almost every article.

Findings 2: Changes

Around 2018, i.e., seven years after the first mention of the term digital detox, a juncture is reached. Google employees signed a petition demanding Google pull out of the Pentagon AI contract in relation to project Maven and former Big Tech employees launched the “Truth about Tech” media campaign, aimed at “escalating concerns about digital addiction” specifically targeting children and teenagers. These and similar events were covered in *The Guardian* widely in relation to digital detox, which also introduced for the first time analyses of the strategies to make people addicted to social media. In addition, we see articles that report on the author’s “experiment in living” (Marres 2012) without mobile phones or social media, which often conclude along the lines of ‘it was better without but disconnecting is too disruptive in a society where platforms have become infrastructure providers’. Finally, also articles appear that report on collective counter-strategies, such as “offline clubs”, where mobile phones are banned, and manuals about how to make your phone less addictive (switch off push notification, switch to black and white, etc). Taken together these developments after 2018 can be seen as a turn to infrapolitical and ultrapolitical responses to increasingly alienating online environments. Where the years before remained unpolitical or nostalgic, now in addition to these earlier approaches questions of agency and resistance are pursued.

2. Permacomputing

The second case that is explored here, is a social movement, which calls itself permacomputing.

This movement was here studied through a close reading of the movement’s central online resource, the permacomputing wiki. In addition, I participated in a half day permacomputing workshop in Amsterdam in 2025. And I have conducted preliminary script analyses of some of the technologies promoted by the movement, namely Collapse OS and the FORTH programming language.

According to the permacomputing wiki “Permacomputing is both a concept and a community of practice oriented around issues of resilience and regenerativity in computer and network technology inspired by permaculture.”

The “getting started” section of the wiki presents as examples for achieving resilience helping a school to work with recycled computers, learning how to repair and replace components in computing hardware, discussing the use and impact of smartphones in the household, or data centers in the workplace, getting involved with initiatives to create energy efficient and accessible local libraries of information, engaging with politics and policy making to advance tech and environmental regulation in their institution, town, or region, or also writing own FORTH for a chip reclaimed from e-waste.

The inspiration of permacomputing is obviously from permaculture, the agricultural movement which reaches back into the late 1970s. They share central principles of small-scale, convivial, anti-industrialist, and regenerative prefigurative practice. But there are also important differences. Where classic permaculture has charismatic leaders and canonical texts, permacomputing has a wiki. Permaculture is sometimes quite nostalgic in its reference to pre-industrial agricultural methods, whereas permacomputing refers to permaculture as example for a movement which enacts prefigurative politics against extractive methods. Another difference is that permacomputing is much more pessimistic as it focuses on what it calls “collapse- and descent-ready” conviviality and is explicitly seeking alliances in other political movements such as the degrowth communities, and is not afraid to call itself anti-capitalist, feminist, etc.

The contrast between the today largely depoliticised system of design principles of permaculture and the explicit political approach to digital infrastructures in permacomputing is relevant in the context of this talk. As the list of ‘getting started’ activities shows, permacomputing activists combine prefigurative political practices of developing and using ‘descent-ready’ digital tools in everyday life - what corresponds to infra-politics - with more traditional political agitation, and a concern for the long lines of what they describe as ‘collapse’ - which could be called an ultra-political approach. In all three forms of political action, they avoid a nostalgic

return, e.g. to a life without digital tools. Instead, they refuse the narrative of innovation and progress, instead they ‘reckon with ruins’ (Tsing et al. 2019; DeSilvey and Edensor 2013).

Conclusion

Concluding this talk, I hope I have managed to give a brief introduction to an ongoing investigation into the connection between digital infrastructures and politics which is able to capture the pre-emergences of the current historical moment. Digital detox after 2018 and the emerging permacomputing movement contain seeds of a non-nostalgic political responses to the ruination of digital infrastructures through big-tech-driven platformisation after 2000. To argue for this I have introduced the pair of infra- and ultra-political processes that are meant to capture politics in relation to the daily use of infrastructures.

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