

Taking a Break. Some Thoughts about Media Consumption.

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Abstract: This article examines the structural characteristics of media consumption as a routine break from habitual activity. While acknowledging the existence and importance of “taking a breather” in everyday life, one may ask if and when it is possible to characterize taking a break in today’s media field. The “media break” refers to communications consumption that is not directed at finding out what is occurring in the outside world, correlating between parts of the social and/or political system or responding to the environment and/or passing on the social heritage to the next generation. During the media breather, individuals cut themselves off from their obligations to surveillance, adaptation, connection, continuity, and enlistment. They isolate themselves from systemic constraints and needs and delay any overt contribution to the system. The media break can occur at any hour of the day, or even several times a day. In light of the contribution of routine activity to the stability of the social fabric, this article suggests that media consumption of the “breather” type can provide a structural basis for social stability.

Keywords: media theory, mass communications, media consumption, consumer behaviour

More and more we are gradually becoming aware of the importance of the break. Whereas until today modern thought has concerned itself with action, doing, current social thought (and not necessarily that which considers itself post-modern) tends to deal, to a greater extent, with inaction rather than with action. The most striking example of this is taking a break by watching television, stopping what one is doing in order to give one’s brain a rest in front of the flickering screen. Whereas until now media researchers have tended to concern themselves with passive viewing, the time has come to examine the structural characteristics of the “break”. The purpose of this article is to examine the advent and establishment of media consumption as “taking a breather”.

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Break Research

Although academic research has rarely dealt with the break as an independent topic, it has appeared in various studies and in assorted contexts. These include: using the break as a coping strategy; the advantages and disadvantages of taking a break at work; gender and cultural distinctions involved in taking a break; the problematic nature of taking a break from ideological-ethical obligations; the importance of the intellectual-study break; the break as a tool for social bonding or distancing and of course the space where the break takes place.

Taking a break as a coping strategy: Research relates to taking a break as a strategy having possible added value (Simister 2004). Taking a break is a way of calming down, a “time out” that aids anger management, distancing oneself from others, etc. (Lundeberg, Stith, Penn and Ward 2004). By means of taking a break, people can stand back from complex issues, potential quarrels and unpleasantness and they can also get a new perspective on these problems (West, Watts, Trepal, Wester and Lewis 2001). Taking a break also promotes learning (Dyson 2008) and can even help in the mourning process (Golish and Powell 2003).

Taking a break in the workplace: Taking a break is part and parcel of professional company routine (Lammers and Garcia 2009). Short breaks are considered less detrimental to the worker’s efficiency and effectiveness, thus they are regarded more profitable. Furthermore, skipping “time outs” or preventing them is perceived detrimental to workers’ efficiency (Gray 1999), as they are an effective way of coping with various pressures that build up during the day (Lea, Auburn and Kibblewhite 1999). In certain circumstances, taking a break can serve as a technique for coping with crises and disagreements in the workplace and may even be a way of creating a dialogue between the warring parties (Wall and Druckman 2003). Organizations can also convey positive feedback to workers during meals with their superiors (Farrell and Geist-Martin 2005). However, the break can also put pressure on the workers, since it might deter them from keeping up with their workload (Farrell and Geist-Martin 2005) and employees might even be fired for taking too many breaks (Roscigno, Garcia and Bobbitt-Zeher 2007).

Taking a break - gender differences: Women take relatively few breaks so as to rest or take care of themselves. Since they see home and family as their chief responsibility, they hardly ever take time out and consider it a luxury. Many women find it impossible to stop working, but if they don’t take time out to recharge their batteries, they may have trouble putting their household tasks in perspective. They feel guilty about having a rest since there are not enough hours in the day to complete their chores even if they work straight through. Women consider taking a break as an indulgence and not as a basic human right. In fact, in order to cope with hardships, they must learn to have a breather and acknowledge that this is essential for further functioning (Hallman, Thomsson, Burell, Lisspers and Setterlind 2003).

Taking a break - ideology-ethics: In some cases people take a break from ideological-ethical responsibility (Halley 2006). Although it is debatable whether individuals can actually allow themselves to do so (for example, an obligation to feminism), there is an obvious difference between stopping activity altogether or temporarily taking a break from it (Jagose 2009).

Taking a break - intellectual activity: An academic or a student might take a break from intellectual activity as a result of mental exhaustion (Chakravarty and Zhao 2008). A “time

out” may be beneficial in successfully coping with the pressure that builds up from long hours of studying (Schmid and Abell 2003)

Taking a break - social life: Taking a break could be an excellent chance to socialize with work colleagues (Farrell and Geist-Martin 2005). During a rest period, people can take a break from the “symbolic play” (Hutton 2004) and become engaged with their surroundings. It seems, then, that the break can serve both as a bonding technique and also as one that serves as a respite from irritating social interaction or role play.

Taking a break - the recreational space: A break can be taken in a space where it is possible to rest or even take a shower (Lammers and Garcia 2009). Many times the break takes place in a coffee shop (Ertep 2009) since people tend to take time out in semi-public spaces (Hampton and Gupta 2008). According to Gofman (1963), spending time in such places justifies “having no purpose”. In certain circumstances, taking a break can involve sitting down (as opposed to standing or dancing) or indulging in an activity such as smoking (Bhavanani 2008). In other cases, the break involves nothing more than leaving the room, drinking a glass of water, etc. (West, Watts, Trepal, Wester and Lewis 2001).

Taking into account the importance of the break in daily routine, one may ask if and how one can characterize the media-related break. What is a “media break”? When and how does it take place? What needs does it fulfill, etc.? But before approaching definitions and aspects of the media break, this concept must be placed in a social and media context.

Taking a break - the structural-functional theory

The idea of taking a break is stimulated by the structural-functional works of anthropologists such as Malinowski (1922, 1926/1970, 1945) and Radcliffe Brown (1952). According to structural-functional theory there is a large degree of integration between different parts of the social system; all standard social and cultural forms and structures perform a positive function; all normal aspects of society are essential to the integrity of the system; and all structures and functions make a socially necessary contribution. The basic assumption of a structural-functional society is that the existence of the social system is contingent on a structure that regulates and controls the social order. This is accomplished, among other things, by means of the functions that human beings fulfill, functions that must be performed in order to preserve that social structure (Parsons 1937, 1951, 1961, 1967; Merton 1949, 1957; Coser 1975; Parsons and Shils 1976; Ritzer 1983; Craib 1992; Holmwood et al. 2005). The performance of the various functions contributes to a sense of activity creating a kind of learning curve, promoting progress and meet individual needs, while also making a contribution to the collective. It is thus obvious that by “taking a breather” from performing any function within the system, individuals can improve their efficiency. Just as societies employ symbols to cope with doubts, worries and tragedies of human existence that threaten the social order (Toby 1977), taking a break helps individuals to cope with doubts, worries and pressures that impair their ability to function over time.

The structural-functional approach to media was greatly influenced by the work of Talcott Parsons and his ideas regarding the social system as a homogeneous unit striving to achieve social goals and achievements and preserve the social order (Parsons 1951, 1967). The media, according to this approach, creates communal values, symbols and norms, and disseminates them to members of the system. As a result, the system preserves its stability over time: “...a stability which must extend between individuals and over time, [and] could probably not be

maintained unless it functioned in a communication process in the interaction of a plurality of actors” (Parsons 1951, p. 11).

Inspired by this theory, social research has focused on the roles of social institutions and their accepted behavior in society, especially the relationship between social behavior and social institutions (Adams and Sydie 2001; Wallace and Wolf 1995; Ritzer 1992), based on the assumption that people act according to their values and that their actions are deliberate and accord with the norms and values of those around them: *“People act on the basis of their values; their actions are oriented and constrained by the values and norms of people around them; and these norms and values are the basis of social order”* (Knapp 1994, pp. 191-192).

Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the social structure to construct and disseminate meaning and the communicative processes generated by human beings (Luhmann 1986; Parsons 1968; Maturana 1978). While not denying the strong link between behavior and values, the present article suggests that human beings sometimes do take a break from deep ethical commitment. The idea of the break does not necessarily collide with the idea that mass communication describes and broadcasts social values and norms and correlates between values and behavior. It does, however, direct attention to the fact that while the media construct and broadcast values and norms, they also legitimize “taking a breather” from those same values that they support. Moreover, since Parsons, influenced by Weber, emphasizes the importance of social action (Turner 1991) while legitimizing taking a personal (but also a social) “breather” from responsibility and activity, this can be a way for individuals to reinforce their commitment to future collective action.

Systemic social action is represented in Parsons’ book *The Structure of Social Action* (1966) as depending on a basic action unit containing four elements: “actor,” “ending,” “situation” and “normative orientation.” By normative orientation, Parsons refers to the strategy the actor chooses in order to achieve his desired end (King 2009). At the end (and perhaps also at its beginning), the action unit is directed at solving problems that arise in the social order (Holmwood 2006a; 2006b). In other words, the social fabric is preserved intact by the deliberate actions of the actors, who strive to achieve goals that accord with their ethical and normative attitudes, performing these actions as a way to self-determination (Graça 2008). According to Parsons, the performance of a certain actor is influenced by both rational-economic and normative pressures (Heiskala 2007).

Later on, the question naturally arose regarding reciprocity between the environment and the actor. For example, is this an “up-down” process or one involving mutual construction, is it two-way or is there simply no connection between the structure and the actor? Ritzer (2006) identifies four prominent promoters of current European social theory who can shed light on the integration between structure and action. The first is Anthony Giddens (1984), the second, Margaret Archer (1982; 1985; 2007)¹, the third, Pierre Bourdieu (1977)² and the fourth, Jurgen Habermas (1985; 1987)³. The work of these thinkers indicates that later social thought

¹ Archer (1982, 1985, 2007) rejected the idea of the dual nature of action and structure and preferred to view them as entities that could and should be divided, since only thus was it possible to study the connection between them. Internal conversations, for example, mediate the influence of the social structure on culture and actions. In her opinion, one must examine the relationship between culture, actions and structure, and among other things deal with the nature of reflexive communications that aid in coping with problems and maintaining the stability and continuity of social structures.

² Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1994) translated the matter of structure and action into the connection between “habitus” and “field”. Habitus is the internal intellectual or conscious structure by which we deal with the social world. Habitus creates society while being created by it. The field is the network of interactions between attitudes; a dialectical relationship exists between habitus and field.

³ Habermas (1987) dealt with the connection between structure and action by relating to the “life-world,” a microcosm in which interaction and communication are maintained. The system stems from the life-world, but in the end it develops structural traits of its own. The greater the power and independence attained by these structures, the greater the control they establish over the life-world. In modern society, the system “colonizes”

also dealt with the systemic dynamic between structure and actors, examining wider aspects of this dynamic, for instance language. Despite the great interest aroused by the work of the theorists indicated above, the present article will focus on the implications of Giddens' ideas regarding the importance of the break in general and the media break in particular. According to Giddens, action and structure are entities that cannot be divided. Action necessarily stems from structure, while structure is inextricably linked to action. Giddens (1984) claims that social structure is reciprocally constructed by means of action: "*To enquire into the structure is constituted through action and reciprocally how action is constituted structurally*" (Giddens 1993, p. 169). Furthermore, Giddens is convinced that social structure is supported by daily routine activity: "*In all societies the vast bulk of daily activity consists of habitual practices in which individuals move through definite 'stations' in time-space*" (Giddens, 1981, p. 38).

Based on the assumption that habitual performance contributes to the stability of the social structure, the present article suggests relating to media consumption as a routine break from routine activity. Accordingly, media consumption of the "breather" type can provide a structural basis for social stability.

Traditional media use in light of the structural-functional theory

The Structural-functional theory led Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) to concentrate on the contribution of the media to systemic social activity. The media grant status to public issues, personalities, organizations and social movements. But parallel to contributing to the enforcement of social norms and conformity, they also drug the public and encourage superficiality and indifference (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948). The basic tendency of communications is to engender trust by means of anchoring social objectives in close-knit value networks. Conversely, in certain social situations, newspaper coverage and public debate can engender cynicism and undermine the trust that has been established (Simonson 1999). In the words of Lazarsfeld and Merton: "*Many make the mass media targets for hostile criticism because they feel themselves duped by the turn of events*" (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948, p.96).

Charles Wright may be identified among the prominent thinkers that formulated an approach to the communications system. In his book, *Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective* (1959), he defined the roles of the media as supervising the environment, correlating between parts of the system in reacting to the environment, transmitting the social heritage to the next generation and of course providing entertainment. Over the years these became accepted as the four classic functions of communications. Wright (1959) and his followers based their theories on the assumption that media used is performed in a social, cultural, institutional and organizational context (Pan and McLeod, 1991). Meaning, watching TV, reading the paper or listening to the radio is an expression of civilian's participant position rather than of consumers' preferences. If so, taking a break from current affairs and news broadcast basically allow individuals to overcome a sense of hostility and cynicism; to better deal with the constant stream of events; to rethink the political positions and to reassess civic obligations.

Inspired by Giddens' ideas regarding the contribution of routine to social stability, researchers of functional media theory determined that people relate to broadcasting as part of their daily round. Scannell (1986, 1988, 1996), for example, suggested examining media use in terms of a broadcasting schedule adapted to the media consumer's timetable. In his

the life-world; in other words, gains control over it.

article "Radio Times: The temporal arrangements of broadcasting in the modern world" (1988), he broadened the structural-functional aspect of "time-space" and later illuminated the importance of routine processes of dissemination and consumption of mass communications: "...a daily service that fills each day, that runs night through the day, that happens as a continuous, uninterrupted, never-ending flow through all the hours of the day, today, tomorrow and tomorrow tomorrow" (Scannell, 1996, p. 149)

Moreover, perceiving the media as having a ritual function and expressive significance on a daily cultural basis gave rise to creative processes producing content directed at day-to-day needs of individuals whose purpose is, according to the functional-structural theory, to create an emotional routine for the viewer (Morres 2005). Television in particular plays an essential role in constructing cultural sources that run parallel to everyday patterns, the domestic interior and exterior of the media consumer (Silverstone 1993). It even appears that the location of the TV set in the domestic space has a considerable influence on media use patterns (Holloway and Green 2008) and the number of receivers in one's home encourages the development of an individualistic viewing pattern and weakens family supervision of consumed content (Holloway and Green 2008).

New media consumption in light of the structural-functional theory

Development of new information technologies significantly changed the manner of media use as well as the nature of the break. While at the era of traditional media, i.e., TV, Radio and Newspapers, the main role of the media use was the construction of well informed, involved and active citizen (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007) the new media era is much more socially oriented. Social networks, for instance, have a considerable influence on the way news as well as infotainments are consumed (Hagen and Wasko, 2000; Hornik, 1989; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). For instance, immigrants appear to maintain contact with their countries of origin through media consumption of information emanating from their homelands via satellite (Karanfil 2009) and/or through the Website, including Facebook, Twitter and other social media. Doing so helps such individuals to overcome a feeling of isolation (Greenwood and Long 2009) and continue to be involved in the life of those whom they left. Research also shows that media consumption has the ability to develop a sense of community (Downey and Koenig 2006) and hand in hand with the social media they encourage social integration, affording diffusion of information and knowledge about values, meanings, and identity. They also support linguistic preservation, communicative competence and the reduction of loneliness aroused by social distances (Arnold and Schneider 2007). At the same time media consumption is also a day-to-day activity associated with the way of life a person establishes for himself/herself (Scannell 1996) [sometimes alongside his/her political and public existence (Couldry and Markham 2008) but other times at the expense of civic and political commitment]. Hence, it generally appears that the current trend today is focused on specialized, polarized, individualistically-oriented media consumptions (Ots 2009, Morris 2005). It is thus necessary to seek broader common characteristics of media consumption that deviate from labels such as news seeking vs. entertainment seeking and it seems as conceptualizing media consumption as "taking a breather" could provide such common ground.

To sum up, traditional communications devices were planned to convey information from one to many. The service provider controls media in terms of information, production, distribution and consumption, whereas lately as a result of widespread technological changes (including Internet Protocol TV, digital radio, on-line media) we are witness to significant

changes in consumption patterns of mass communications (Trappel 2008; O'Neill 2009; Pyungho 2009). These changes have resulted in new anxieties, for example, the fear that media information gathering will infringe on the individual's right to privacy (Baruch 2007), but it is clear that such innovations have led to the demand to rethink traditional ideas regarding production and consumption of mass communications (Hartmann 2009).

Features of the media break

When examining the status, power, and roles of the media as a separate sub-structure in the social system, it is worthwhile examining the reflexive nature of media consumption as taking a break. Inspired by Habermas, one could claim that despite the fact that the media, as part of the system or as a sub-system, developed structural qualities, thus gradually consolidating their power in the "life-world," they simultaneously offer the option of taking a rest from it. Since the "post-modern" life-world blends different elements of the private sphere (work-study-home) with the public-political sphere (activities within the social-civilian framework), taking a breather by means of mass media consumption almost becomes a necessity. But first let us start with some definitions of the media break.

The media break refers to any period of time during the day in which communications consumption is not directed at finding out what is occurring in the outside world, correlating between parts of the system responding to the environment and/or passing on the social heritage to the next generation. During the media breather, the individuals **cut themselves off** from their obligations to surveillance, continuity and enlistment, **isolate** themselves from systemic constraints and needs and **delay** any overt contribution to the system. The media break can occur at any hour of the day, or even several times a day. The media break can be taken by means of consuming specific media genres or avoiding the consumption of genres or other content. The duration of the media break is not consistent, nor is its frequency. The media break may serve as a technique for coping with personal, social, public or political pressures, as a tool for increasing social closeness or distance, as a way of preserving ethical-ideological commitment and even as a tool for enhancing intellectual abilities. The space in which the break takes place can be domestic, organizational or even public (such as a coffee shop or mall). It is important to clarify that the media break does not refer to an advertising break.

Relating to media consumption as a break serves to compensate for the structural-functional theory's neglect of the individual's need to rest on a daily basis and not as part of a planned vacation. In order to preserve the furthering of social solidarity and stability, the communications system generates legitimate rest channels for individuals through media consumption that does not demand identification with the state/society or accepted social order. Thus it is possible to establish that the main "roles" of the media break are: cutting off, isolation and delay. To the degree that it succeeds, each of these functions contributes to the success of the break, thus helping individuals return to their active and functional roles.

- **Cutting off** – the cut-off function means the disturbance of the free flow of internal interaction between the actors and themselves. An actor might take a break by media consumption through cutting off, interrupting, or breaking the line of communication between himself/herself and his/her internal and/or external world. i.e., thoughts, ideas, feelings, results from their physical and psychological needs. The nature of the situation, the beginning, as well as the ending, is self determined, but once it operates, it allows sustaining order and stability. Hence, the content, the genres, the duration, the span and the rhythm of cutting off is subject to the actor's characteristics. There is

evidence that cutting off by means of communications (especially the internet) is perceived (especially for young people) to be a negative, unwanted activity that damages the interaction of the youth with their surroundings (Sourbati 2009). The act of cutting off is surrounded by negative and violent contexts and connotations (Groebner 2004; Shenhav 2008). But today we generate information at a faster rate than we are able to consume it. This situation has been called “infoglu,” “data smog” or “information overload,” and its implications are that a sense of pressure is engendered that can influence the work quality of individuals and organizations (Hahn, Lawson and Lee 1992; Shenk 1997; Eppler and Mengis 2004; McShane and Von Glinow 2005; Thomas et al. 2006). If so, it is suggested that cutting off allow individuals to recover a bit from the amount of data engulfing them, to rest by taking time out, and then to “plug themselves back in” to the media flow.

- **Isolation** – the isolation function refers to the loss of the environmental context, the inability to be in touch with one’s surroundings – either social or political. Thus, actors take a break by media consumption through isolating themselves; withdraw the external world, the social surroundings, as well as the political surroundings. The nature of the situation, the beginning, as well as the ending, is self determined, but once it operates, it allows sustaining order and stability. Media consumption through *isolating, withdrawing from* contact between the actors and their *social surroundings* -- their spouse, family, friend neighbors -- results from the actors’ physical and psychological needs. Similarly, the nature of media consumption through *isolating, withdrawing from* contact between the actors and their and elements in the *political surroundings* -- their ideology, political activity, political engagement -- is a result of the actors’ social and normative orientation. Hence, the content, the genres, the duration, the span the rhythm of isolation is subject to the actor’s characteristics. Accordingly, mass communications consumption isolates the individuals from social, political, and other contexts to which they are accustomed during active periods. While in the past a clear line was drawn between individuals' private life and their social existence, in today’s information community there is actually a tendency to blur the boundaries between private, social, professional and political life. According to the isolation premise, individuals' private lives are conducted in what has been called the private sphere, whereas their professional and social life takes place in the public sphere (Friedlander 1994; Ely and Meyerson 2000). The differentiation between these two spheres has led to the assumption that abilities that are demanded in the private sphere are not relevant to the public one (Fletcher 2005). In actual fact, it is clear today that drawing a line between the private and public sphere is no longer viable and that activities inside and outside the home are interconnected (Dominelli 1991). The information community has made it possible to encompass both these spheres within the Internet. The result is a society suffering from occupational, emotional, and social overload. Therefore, media consumption constructs a unique kind of break which allows individuals to isolate themselves from both the private and the public sphere. By means of such temporary isolation, the loss of contact with one’s surroundings, both social and political and the inability to connect with those around us, individuals can cope with the pressures that build up in both their private and public existence.
- **Delay** – Delay is the period of time that passes between two events, two actions. Actors might take a break by media consumption through delaying, creating a time interval between two events – one that the actor has taken part in the past and one that

the actor has to take part in the (near) future. The nature of the situation, the beginning, as well as the ending, is self determined but once it operates, it allows sustaining order and stability. Delaying, creating a time interval between two events in the actors' internal and/or external world appears when a need to propound decisions or actions - personal, social, professional or political -- appears. Once again, the content, the genres, the duration, the span the rhythm of delaying is subject to the actor's characteristics. According to this definition, mass communications consumption creates a time interval in which individuals delay their functioning and utilizes not to create an event, to refrain from action. Unlike the cutting-off function that has negative connotations, the delay function is sometimes linked with organizational advantages, at other times with economic or communication failures (Steinmaurer 2009; Hibberd 2001) and yet at other times as a factor hindering interaction (McMillan and Hwang 2002). In any case, it is generally accepted that temporary delay is a kind of necessity (Linden 1999). The view that media consumption is a type of break facilitating delay is expressed by Compton and Pfau (2005), who claim that delay is the time interval required by a person in order to formulate a position, therefore rendering it essential. It is important to clarify that this does not refer to ignoring the need to take a stand, but a necessary personal coping process. Media consumption of the "breather" type can provide the conditions for such a delay, to act more slowly, to postpone an activity or decision and to let some time pass between two events, two actions.

In conclusion

As previously mentioned, the structural-functional approach established the idea that one of the basic functions of mass communications is the distribution of information (Merton 1949; Wright 1959; Schramm Lyle and Parker et al. 1961). Later on it was claimed that through this information, the citizen as media consumer could acquire tools for active participation in social, media, cultural and political life (Carpentier 2009; Cammaerts 2009). However, the theoretical basis of the participation function -- encouraging involvement -- did not always correspond with the actual behavior of the media consumer (Sparks 2007). It appears that the media consumers do not necessary seek involvement in public life. It could be that they simply need a break from pressures in their personal life, active participation in society, politics, etc. Meaning, traditional media consumers as well as new media consumers might take some "time out" by means of media consumption whose chief aim is to take a break. Furthermore, since social research has related to taking a break as an activity having positive added value when it is necessary to deal with personal and public difficulty (Simister 2004; Lundeberg, Stith, Penn and Ward 2004; West, Watts, Trepal, Wester, and Lewis 2001; Dyson 2008; Golish and Powell 2003) it is clear that media breaks are a popular tool available for self-treatment.

It seems that that when individuals are exposed to a variety of sources that do not fulfill their needs, complex structures are formed that generate weak cognition (Lang 2000; Fox 2004; Fox, Park and Lang 2007; Lang, Potter and Bolls 1999). Namely, a person who is subject to a pressure system and experiences rational, emotional or cognitive overload can help himself or herself by taking a media breather according to the model described above. In the same way as political, cultural social organizations can sink into overload of demands (Rossi 2009), so can individuals find themselves swamped by demands from themselves, their families, their social milieu, and generally from the society they live in. In such situations the added value of taking a media break becomes apparent. Moreover, since the cutting off function lets the

media consumers to temporarily discontinue the stream of communication within themselves and with their surroundings, the isolation function enables them to detach themselves from their private and social environment and the delay function allows them to put off their need to act individually, professionally and politically, it appears that the media break is a simple technique that can aid people in dealing with mental and personal overload.

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