The Creeping Advance of Working from Home

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While debate rages around the changing world of work in the era of robots and artificial intelligence, profound shifts in working practices and the way work is organised rarely make the headlines. Yet working from home has seen unprecedented growth in our societies and extends far beyond the legal framework of remote working. A team of French sociologists[1] offer their reflections – with extracts from their field surveys – on how our relationship to work, time, and the home has changed in the past 50 years.[2]

It is 07:50 when Pathana gets up. In the time it takes to make a coffee, still in his pyjamas, he is already at work, exactly three steps from his bed – he is logged on. This daily routine is one shared by thousands of people across France.

The increasing automation of society has made situations like these possible – and, for the most part, people opt for them voluntarily. Long based on the clock-time model, societies are now reorganising themselves around the demands of immediacy and fragmented time. Something of which the sound of notifications on our computers and smartphones constantly remind us.

Over the past five years, our team of sociologists has studied the processes underlying the expansion of working from home, from sending the odd work email to working from home permanently. The aim is to understand the consequences of shifting forms of work on our private and social lives and on how we organise our homes.

Mixed temporal logics

Three interconnected temporal logics of time are crucial to lifestyles and how people use their homes. The sacred, the synchronous, and the asynchronous: these logics are tied up with symbols that represent the ways we create society.

The first of these, the sacred, borrows from religious and secular dogmas. It guides and sets the pattern for life's big moments such as baptism, marriage and burial, as well as for periods like the seasons (through religious festivals and military celebrations) and the week (through masses or days off). The sacred helps to set common norms and put in place prohibitions. When people say that "Sunday is sacred", they mean that Sunday is a time governed by norms that exclude other temporal logics, like that of work.

The synchronous temporal logic occupies times not governed by the sacred and sets their pattern. It helps to legitimise the demands of particular ways of organising work and is normally organised around the times defined by the sacred. It can take different forms, including conventions about starting work, finishing work, and break times.

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The asynchronous is a temporal logic that disrupts patterns, connections, and the hierarchy between the sacred and the synchronous. It denotes, for example, work that encroaches into "sacred family time". It is urgency and immediacy which require that one activity be interrupted to focus on another. The asynchronous imposes its own logic and involves a whole series of adaptations and reorganisations of activities and time, breaking and reconfiguring "normal" working patterns.

On the one hand, the organising logic of industrial time, considered "sacred and synchronous", orders social connections around shared markers of time: clocks and watches. These order and pace the rhythm of the individual and social patterns that serve as a reference for organising time – material, spiritual, and cultural – in different urban spaces. Apart from in a few professions, the organising logic of industrial time considers the home as a symbolic space, with its specific time for rest and privacy to be enjoyed.

In the organising logic of post-industrial time, the sacred loses even more of its aura and asynchronous organisational time gains legitimacy but loses value. Productive logics introduce a sophistication to representations of time in which multiple ways of accessing work (part time, flexitime, night work) are combined with lifestyles and home lives that are becoming partially individualised. Asynchronous life, which in the past was more the result of work in the public interest than the requirements of a productive logic (hospitals, emergency services, show business), is becoming normal and losing its social value. A clock and direct communication are no longer enough for planning meetings. The advent of messages, inboxes, and voicemail leads to different response times and allow the coordinated arrangement of travel and meeting time. The right of the home to be a symbolic (and hence private) space is increasingly called into question by the partial intrusion of these ways of working.

Finally, a cybernetic logic of time implies the temporal existence of a productive world that must be managed 24 hours a day. It marks a clear break with old representations of time, old ways of organising production, and old means of measurement. Whereas the hour was once used to measured working time, that is now less and less the case. Contrary to other ways of organising time, the cybernetic logic creates the illusion that collective time is controlled by individuals and that they are in charge of complex and incessant production processes as well as management of their wellbeing. Smart watches and home automation systems are emblematic of this shift. The home and home life are now destined to internalise the demand for shared time and space that is open to the world and, more specifically, to working from home.

Homeworking: a result of profound shifts

This general framework for understanding temporal logics enables a critical reading of changes in how working time is organised. New information and communication technologies enable the coordination and adjustment, in time and space, of internal and external human resources to meet the needs of production and service on demand. Over the past 20 years, these technologies have led to a mixture of production times and places, allowing production to move beyond the walls of the company towards urban spaces (co-working) and the home (working from home) in a multi-site working model.

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One definition of working from home might be bringing work into the home, either into a permanent space (a dedicated office) or a temporary one (the living room, kitchen, bedroom, toilet). It can include employment that is fully or partially conducted in the home and can be managed either within a legal and contractual framework or in a less formal manner.

The spread of this new form of work calls into question the representation of the home as a place of reassurance, protected and protective because removed from work.[3] At time when the expression "maintaining a good work-life balance" has become a management-speak leitmotif in the healthy management of human resources, working from home has helped work creep into every time and space in the home, shaping the choices of occupants by making them question their priorities. Our research, both qualitatively and quantitatively, confirms this hypothesis and reveals that homeworking concerns a wide range of different work profiles and statuses.

A permanent redefining of identity

When work takes root at home, turning the home into a production unit, a number of paradoxes emerge. The most frequently reported by our interviewees is that they no longer know who they are or in which spacetime they are in.

Laurène is a freelance designer and is married with two children. Working from home, she produces online tutorials for making DIY furniture for streaming platforms. Her subscribers can constantly ask her for advice. One of the criteria used by the platform to rate the quality of her work is her responsiveness. Responding faster allows her to improve the visibility of her channel. This means that when she is with her nearest and dearest, she can at any moment be called away by her work. Sitting on the terrace with a glass of wine, enjoying the company of friends, she is never totally present, her attention immediately focused on her phone as soon as there is a work notification (for which she has dedicated ringtones).

As the process of working from home becomes more entrenched, the idea of reference points, distances, and identity boundaries becomes ever more blurred. It is often suggested that the solution is a room dedicated to work in the home. However, few of those interviewed seem to believe it is effective. Most report that time in their social life is impinged upon by work commitments that they incorporate as if they were their own personal "biological" patterns. Home life, then, can become a "black hole" in terms of identity, despite attempts to keep work within a dedicated space.

Various alternative framings are put forward in an attempt to gloss over this. Homeworkers can "walk around the house in socks" or "stay in [their] pyjamas" all day long, provided they never forget the commitments, temporal in particular, that come with the job. Even if the new requirements of work are only overturning now outdated representations of wellbeing, they nevertheless demand far greater investment in one's work.

Is co-working the solution?

In this process of "work-home" confinement, leaving the house from time to time can act as a sort of safety valve. In France today, private co-working spaces are estimated to host over 100 000 co-workers. And that excludes the explosion in other non-profit locations or places in the social and solidarity economy that offer co-working spaces. Often described as the new workspaces for the post-financial crisis labour force, co-working models are presented as particularly suited to a generation that has never experienced the office cubicle.

Co-working spaces are aimed at the growing number of workers generically classified as freelance. For potentially precarious communities, these spaces are generally seen to promise a strong network for support so they can keep going and share tools dedicated to this alternative form of work. Upon joining a co-working space, a relationship is built with others based on their profession and their work-hard (and play-hard) attitude, but not on the specifics of

their task or the objectives they pursue. Of course you expect to form close bonds with your new co-workers, when a space's key selling point is being a home away from home with a comfy sofa, free tea and coffee, and nap room.

Happy alienation

Most of the people interviewed as part of our research unanimously expressed a real feeling of wellbeing from working from home. But they also had the sense that the urgency of work governed all of their social situations. It is as if several social roles overlap without clearly defined boundaries between them. This sense points to happiness in alienation, or happy alienation. Alienation is understood here to be the dispossession of the individual in the sense of a loss of control to another (be it an individual, virtual collective, network or company). It can reflect an inauthenticity in the existence experienced by the alienated individual.

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Can we then hypothesise that project-based working, which entails a 24/7 mobilisation of the workforce, will undermine representations of sacred spaces as well as shared time and patterns by forcing others to live with and agree to it?

Today, we are already seeing houses shared by groups of homeworkers and housing associations considering the creation of co-working spaces in their buildings. If this logic becomes established in the productive and reproductive order, it will circumvent all current representations of privacy in the home and home life. Then, with the boundaries between the demands of work and the privacy of home blurred, this new form of employment will need only to build the legal framework for its legitimacy before work enjoys primacy over every other social relationship.

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[1] Tanguy Dufournet, Patrick Rozenblatt and Djaouidah Séhili, Université Lyon 2, Centre Max Weber.

[2] Djaouidah Séhili, *Pour une sociologie intersectionnelle du travail*, postdoctoral lecturing qualification, Lyon 2017; Patrick Rozenblatt, *Razzia sur le travail, Critique de l'invalorisation du travail*, Editions Syllepse, 2017.

[3] Monique Eleb, *Les 101 mots de l'habitat à l'usage de tous*, Collection 101 mots, Éditions Archibooks, Paris, 2015.

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