Intrusive media and knowledge work: how knowledge workers negotiate digital media norms in the pursuit of focused work

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses how knowledge workers experience and reflect upon intrusions from digital media in the pursuit of focused work. As a multitude of digital media technologies have become integral to working life, scholars have observed a connectivity paradox in which these technologies are experienced as both helpful and hindering, as integral to but also intruding upon focus and concentration. To understand this important and widespread ambivalence in digital society, we analyze qualitative interviews with knowledge workers in a range of professions. With a theoretical framework drawing on domestication theory, sociology of work and critiques of digital modernity, we highlight how workers negotiate spatial, temporal, and technological conditions, and the conflicted norms that are activated in the process. Our findings indicate that negotiations about digital media technologies come to represent psychological, cultural and social dilemmas that go beyond the individual worker, but are nevertheless experienced as individual cross-pressures to be managed.

Introduction

In recent decades, the proliferation of social media and converging digital technologies have inspired transformations in how people communicate and interact across a variety of societal arenas. Digitalization combined with datafication has been described as a societal turn towards 'deep mediatization,' where digital media permeates all sectors and social processes (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). In the work sector, the multitude of digital media platforms, networks, services and tools has been described as a transformation from 'work' to 'transmedia work' (Fast & Jansson, 2019). In this context, scholars have observed a 'connectivity paradox': tools and services that were supposed to relieve routine tasks and make time for creativity and reflection also cause interruptions and distractions and could even produce new tasks (Fonner & Roloff, 2012; ter Hoeven & van

Zoonen, 2015). Digital detox programs have entered corporate working life, intending to help people manage digital technologies and govern the easily distracted human brain (Guyard & Kaun, 2018), illustrating that disconnection is also part of how we relate to technologies in our hyper-connected society (Karppi, 2018; Light, 2014; Syvertsen, 2020). These conditions can further be understood as part of users' experiences of digital media as intrusive through their pervasive and formative capacities (Mollen & Dhaenens, 2018). In the context of work, the notion of intrusive media refers to how a range of digital tools, from e-mail and social media to collaborative platforms and specialized software, encompass affordances that pervade and shape the working environment, for instance with the potential to cause distractions. Concerning the role of technologies in contributing to experiences of acceleration in a digital capitalist society, Wajcman (2015, p. 87) argues that we still know 'surprisingly little about whether and how information and communication technologies influence the experience of work in the twenty-first century.'

This study advances understandings of the ambivalent position of digital technologies in contemporary working life by investigating how knowledge workers in a range of professions *negotiate norms and conditions* to enable focused work. We argue that creative processes that demand focus and uninterrupted concentration represent a form of *precarious work situations*, that is, situations in which something is at stake for the users, in this case the pursuit of a meaningful activity on which media technologies could infringe. Our starting point is that the possibility for ubiquitous digital connection creates tensions to be managed, both by the individual worker and as part of organizational and societal systems. Thereby, practical considerations and individual reflections on digital technologies in working life shed light on social norms and negotiations. We analyze these negotiations through qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of knowledge workers in Norway, a small Northern European country characterized by high ICT uses, an educated work force and strong welfare state policies and values (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Compared to other Western countries, Norway has a stable workforce with a low share of workers from the 'precariat' class (Eldring & Ørjasæter, 2018). We emphasize that our focus is not on precarious conditions in the work sector on a macro level or regarding labor rights but on precarious *work situations* where the pursuit of focused work is threatened by digital distractions.

The impact of digital technologies on strategies and norms of boundary maintenance have been researched in different work contexts (Gregg, 2018 Mazmanian et al., 2013;). These studies give extensive insights into the cultural and social aspects of the use of new technology but focus less on what kind of situations and affordances are experienced as most precarious or challenging. We therefore aim to shed new light on these aspects by analyzing the interconnection of working situations, technological affordances and the normative self-reflexive process. We further contribute to the literature on knowledge work with a theoretical framework drawing on domestication theory, a tradition focused originally on the domestic sphere but with a high relevance for analyzing reflexive and normative negotiations with technologies. Our research questions and analytical approach takes a step-by-step approach by asking first which types of work are infringed upon by digital technologies, second which measures that are taken to enable focused

work, and third which norms are activated when digital media is experienced as intrusive. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1, conditions: In what kind of work and working conditions are interruptions from digital media experienced as precarious?

RQ2, measures: What spatial, temporal, and technical measures are taken to enable focused work?

RQ3, norms: What kind of norms are activated when focused work is infringed upon?

To answer our research questions, we first discuss relevant perspectives from empirical studies and the sociological critique of digital technologies in modern working life and our analytical framework, domestication theory. We then outline our methodological approach before turning to the analysis, which corresponds to the three-part research question on conditions, measures, and norms. Lastly, the findings will be discussed in a closing section.

Research on conditions for focused concentration in knowledge work

The term *knowledge worker* encompasses a broad range of professions such as civil servants, academics and artists, defined as having a 'high degrees of expertise, education, or experience, and the primary purpose of their jobs involves the creation, distribution, or application of knowledge' (Davenport, 2005, p. 10). This implies that knowledge workers are found in most sectors of modern society but distinct from unskilled and manual work. Knowledge workers are further characterized by a relatively high degree of autonomy in the work situation and frequent uses of ICT (Ojala & Pyöriä, 2018). Combined with declining routinization of work tasks, this demands a high degree of reflexivity by the individual worker regarding uses of mobile media (Helles, 2016), reflection about how and when digital technologies are helping or hindering work, which measures are needed to navigate digital technologies, and what is at stake in the face of such dilemmas.

The dilemmas are accentuated by the technology itself, as work is seldom restricted to dedicated professional tools such as the Office suite or Slack but also involves social media, private phones and other types of software the individual worker finds useful (Fast & Jansson, 2019). Melissa Gregg uses the term 'presence bleed' to describe the always-on office culture where boundaries between professional and private identities no longer apply (Gregg, 2011, 3). The blurring of boundaries is often framed as 'flexibility' and 'efficiency' but invokes ambivalence and demands boundary maintenance for the worker. Instead of being acknowledged as a structural problem from employers, Gregg sees a 'fervor in work place training initiatives' to handle the problem, including workshops on 'time management' and 'dealing with change', indicating that the individual is responsible for handling this situation (Gregg, 2011, 17).

Interruption, multitasking and their effect on productivity are recurring topics in work research (Gregg, 2018; Mark et al., 2017). Interruption hampers work, and constant availability may lead to stress (McFarlane, 2002). However, studies also show that interruptions can be experienced as positive because they convey important information: 'Attitudes toward interruption are marked by a complex tension between wanting to

avoid interruption and appreciating its usefulness.' (Hudson et al., 2002). This paradox pertains particularly to uses of digital information technologies in the workplace.

Multitasking is often described as detrimental to work efficiency because of 'switching costs' or 'attention residue' that deplete people's cognitive resources and ability to engage in new tasks (Rubinstein et al., 2001; Leroy, 2009). However, studies that otherwise support this finding also argue that switching attention away from work may 'replenish one's mental resources leading one to become more absorbed in work' (Mark et al., 2017). A study of email use found that an unexpected consequence of cutting off distractions for people with less self-control was that 'they were more focused and worked longer without taking breaks and therefore, experienced higher stress' (Mark et al., 2017, p. 1). People may also compensate for interruptions by working faster, consequently leading to more stress, higher frustration and time pressure (Mark et al., 2008).

The physical layout the work place is also important. A recent research review (Palvalin et al., 2017) found that the most important factor for knowledge workers to perform well was appropriate spatial conditions for concentration, such as quiet spaces and opportunities to work undisturbed. The second most important factor was appropriate spatial conditions for communication and social interaction such as side-by-side work (Palvalin, 2017). These results may seem contradictory but indicate that context is important concerning what kind of work is performed, the individual worker's work habits, and the environment in which the work takes place.

As these studies indicate, the impact of digital technologies on work seems characterized by contradictions and ambivalences. These can partly be understood in light of psychological processes or organizational structures but also pertain more directly to the technologies themselves and how they intersect in and potentially transform a range of situations, tasks and systems in working life. Here more research is needed. The aim of our study is therefore to explore normative aspects pertaining to precarious work situations but based on the practicalities involved, and adding new empirical data, as well as a novel framework, which we will present next.

Theoretical framework: knowledge work, digital media and domestication theory

Our analysis and discussion draw upon studies of knowledge workers and of digital technologies in working life. However, in order to understand people's negotiations about digital technologies in the work situation, a framework is needed to shed light on practical as well as reflective *processes* of negotiating digital technologies and focused work. We argue that domestication theory also offers a valuable and relevant framework for studies of work life outside of media studies where the theory originated.

Media domestication theory concerns the process of acquiring and integrating new media technology into the 'moral economy of the household' where norms, values, and everyday practices are negotiated (Berker et al., 2006; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). The main focus of the theory is the process from which the media artifact is purchased until it finds its place in the household. Time and space are important dimensions in this process, as practical considerations correspond to and open up spaces for reflection on norms and values. The placement of the medium could signal value ascribed to it, for instance whether the TV set is given a prominent place in the living room or confined

to the garage (Bakardjieva, 2006). Discussions considering proper use, by whom, how and which time of day, also form part of processes of figuring out the cultural, social and personal position of new technologies. If the domestication process is successful the medium will reach a state where it becomes an integrated part of the layout and routines of the household, and taken for granted.

It might seem surprising that a theory that highlights the domestic sphere and originates from a vastly different period in media technology development should be applied in analysis of working life in contemporary digital society. When domestication theory was developed during the 1990s, few media were portable and the household was a natural focal point for studying media use. The growing use of mobile and online media means that other parts of everyday life, including work, have come into focus, and that blurring boundaries between private and professional spheres have become entangled in media use practices and in the study of users (e.g., Gregg, 2011; Helles, 2016; Wajcman, 2015). It is, however, precisely in such situations that core knowledge interests in domestication theory are relevant. First, the theory highlights physical placement of people, activities and technologies in the materiality of everyday life, underlining the moral considerations and conflicting norms in play when people actively figure out how to relate to technologies within everyday contexts. Secondly, media domestication also involves 'segmentation' and boundary-work between spheres like the household and work, both mentally and physically (Pierson, 2006). Third, domestication research also highlights the frailty of the process, where in some cases the medium is rejected and the domestication process reversed (Sørensen, 2006; Karlsen & Syversen, 2016). This is especially relevant to the current analysis, as negotiating how to use media technology during work is an ongoing and sometimes troublesome process.

A central concern of domestication theory is thus to understand how media use is situated and negotiated within complex social contexts (Martínez & Olsson, 2020). Similar themes are highlighted in discussions of key characteristics of digital communication and in scholarship challenging notions of an online/offline-divide, emphasizing social and cultural interactions across and beyond technologies (Baym, 2015). However, digital technologies appear to play an important part in blurring boundaries, for instance between work and other spheres of life, by altering conditions of availability, spatiality, and temporality (Wajcman, 2015). The concept *context collapse* refers to an idea of multiple social spheres and identities being conflated in digital communication, for instance in social media (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), and this corresponds well with Gregg's (2011) notion of 'presence bleed' in always-on working life. In line with domestication theory and our research questions concerning conditions, measures and norms, our analysis will explore these blurred boundaries with special attention on precarious situations and what kind of technological affordances are experienced as intrusive. The next section will outline our method and material, followed by our analysis.

Methods and materials

To analyze how knowledge workers experience, handle and reflect on intrusive media in their work life, we have conducted a qualitative study with 22 participants in Norway. The informant group was fairly diverse in terms of gender, age, education and profession, and included artists (such as authors, composers and musicians), researchers (from PhD

candidates to professors) and various professional knowledge workers including journalists, teachers and administrators in culture, organizations and businesses. Ten of the informants were knowledge workers recruited on the basis of having conducted and spoken publicly about so-called 'digital detox,' which constitutes a specific period of refraining from, or drastically reducing, digital media use (e.g., Syvertsen, 2020). Recruitment drew from a systematic review of the use of the term 'digital detox' in Norwegian newspapers and magazines from 2010 to 2018 (Syvertsen et al., 2019), where these informants had either written or been interviewed about their detox experience.

The other twelve informants were recruited through snowball sampling and advertisements in social media seeking knowledge workers with high use of digital technology. The rationale for this dual recruitment strategy was to provide a range of experiences pertaining to the topic of the analysis. Despite being recruited in two different groups, we found considerable overlap, for instance informants in both samples had experiences with abstention from media technology. Due to this overlap we have not distinguished between the groups but conducted a thematic analysis across the sample. This analytical strategy is in keeping with a key tendency in digital disconnection scholarship (eg. Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019; Light, 2014) to understand digital engagement and disengagement as a continuum.

Six of the knowledge workers were interviewed in a focus group at the start of the study, providing us a range of examples of practical strategies and insight into how digital technology and interruptions were discussed normatively. In the individual interviews we delved deeper into these topics, linking them more thoroughly to specific work experiences and occupations. All interviews were semi-structured and included questions about media use in everyday life, how to manage interruptions in various situations, and management and uses of digital technology at work. There were differences in the interview guides pertaining to the group versus individual settings and to other aspects not in focus in this paper, such as individual narratives of conducting digital detox.

Analysis

The analysis consists of three parts, corresponding to the three-step research question discussed in the introduction about conditions, measures, and norms. The first research question focuses on working situations and tasks that are experienced as vulnerable to interruptions from digital media, while the second focuses on temporal, spatial and technological measures that knowledge workers employ to handle intrusive media. The third question, and the last analytical step, examines which norms are evoked in these situations, thereby connecting findings to the societal critique of digital technologies in working life. This concerns the work environment specifically but also situations when work is in conflict with external demands and other norms in digital society.

The informants encompass knowledge workers in different professions and positions, ranging from workers with a high degree of autonomy to workers juggling many different external demands. Practical uses of social media and ICTs varied, and informants differed in terms of which digital technologies they described as potentially intrusive: Some emphasized workplace communication channels such as e-mail and Slack, some entertainment distractions from YouTube or Netflix, and many social network sites such as Facebook or smartphone features such as push notifications. In light of the

differences, however, it was striking to note a number of similarities cross-cutting most interviews, including the ambivalent positions and normative discourses informants grapple with in negotiating the role of technology in their working lives. For instance, experiences of Facebook as destructive to concentration were combined with a recognition of its value as source of creative impulses, information and network opportunities. This meant that eliminating Facebook from the work situation was seldom a viable solution but that Facebook use rather remained one in a series of dilemmas to be continually managed. We will discuss these findings in more detail pertaining to each of the three research questions, before evoking the theoretical framework in an overarching discussion.

RQ1: In what kind of work and working conditions are interruptions from digital media experienced as precarious?

Resonating with our first research question we investigated which tasks, conditions or roles were experienced as precarious at work – as situations in which something was at stake and potentially threatened by media intrusions. Among the different *tasks* occurring in their working lives, what our informants described as the most precarious varied, but recurring characteristics were *size* and *complexity*. For instance, the author Brandon said that writing a novel demanded focus over longer stretches of time, but given the opportunity to work undisturbed he could be very productive and write a complete draft for a novel in two months' time. Danielle, working for a non-governmental organization, said that writing a response to a governmental hearing was a precarious task due to reasons of complexity: 'I need to get into the topic properly. It is a complicated terrain and I have to evaluate our mandate, trying to chisel out what we, as a human right's organization, should say.' These tasks were, then, characterized in terms of intense and potentially exhaustive creative processes, and analytical and strategic work involving multiple considerations and perspectives. A few informants diverged from the emphasis on size and complexity by rather mentioning routinized, itemized and potentially tedious tasks as vulnerable to disturbance. For most, however, the pursuit of artistic or academic core activities demanding concentration appeared most precarious to interruptions, also because these activities were cherished by the individual.

Dedicated space and time

In describing *conditions* for focused work, a recurring topic in all of the interviews was dedicated and uninterrupted time. The musician Kevin explained that all types of distractions were detrimental to work 'especially if you need to work creatively and come up with new ideas or melodies', as he said. While undisturbed time was crucial for all of the informants, the needed time slot varied from a few hours to several months depending on type of task and occupation. Space was another aspect repeatedly mentioned. The author Brandon said that being in a room by himself where no one could watch him was crucial to being able to 'work properly.' Some informants needed quiet surroundings, while others preferred to be surrounded by other people when engaging in challenging tasks. The historian Zoe explained that she had earlier worked in open plan offices and loved to discuss ideas with other researchers during work. Now, having a separate

office, she used Facebook to much the same purpose: 'I usually have Facebook open all day beside the text I am working on, asking questions and receiving help from other people.'

Several informants further detailed what the physical conditions in the workspace should be to enable focused work, but with considerable variation, and often with connections to emotional experiences of being comfortable and free from other concerns. To Kevin, the musician quoted above, the absence of perceptual and emotional noise was crucial: He wanted 'absolute silence,' but also other worries, like unpaid bills, had to be out of the way. Amanda, who had an administrative position in a research facility, said she always needed to have something to drink to be able to focus, and to this statement (in the focus group) historian Zoe replied that she had 'her own unique eating disorder' by always needing something to eat when concentrating. The PhD student Naomi combined these considerations of time, space and wellbeing as she said she needed 'quiet environments, a quiet period with enough space for in-depth thinking. Empty calendar, no other deadlines or such things to worry about, as well as a stimulating room to work in.'

RQ2: What spatial, temporal and technical measures are taken to enable focused work?

The second research question concerns the measures that informants took to enable focused work from interruptions and distractions. Building from the emphasis on time and space in domestication theory, we highlight informants' considerations about spatial and temporal integration of digital technologies in the work situation. Extensive use of laptops and smartphones means that knowledge work is less physically and temporally restrained than before, which individualizes the need to manage time, space and technology to enable focused work.

A frequently mentioned temporal measure was to set aside dedicated time for especially demanding tasks, as well as finding a work rhythm in line with how the 'brain worked,' for instance by scheduling meetings that demanded less focus in the evening. The journalist and author Isaac explained that he, in order to be able to cope with the demanding work situation he was currently in, which included writing the outline of a book, went to work 30 min earlier than usual to clear his e-mail inbox. While he tried to hold work and private life separate, he sometimes also spent 20 min during the evening 'answering emails really quickly just to get them out of the way, as a form of cleansing ritual, which I share with many others believing that it will stop, but it never stops of course.' Emails are commonly seen as a source for stress and related to phenomena such as 'email apnea' or shallow breathing instigated by attending to emails (Mark et al., 2012). Other studies show that their impact on the total workload, however, may be overrated. While synchronous types of communication such as meetings and phone calls can take up the majority of the workday, the worker will often be warier of the number of emails and notifications that has piled up while attending to these activities (Wajcman, 2015). According to Barley and colleagues, the mail provides workers with a 'culturally sanctioned rhetoric of complaints about overload as well as a tangible ritual for regaining control: to cope with overload, trim you inbox' (Barley et al., 2011, p. 903). Isaac seems explicitly aware that his 'inbox trimming' is not really

solving his problem of time restraint and interruptions but still engages in this 'cleansing ritual' as a measure of gaining control.

In terms of spatial measures, some informants talked about putting away the smartphone or changing physical work environments to foster concentration. Victoria worked as a teacher and journalist but was also writing a novel, with a final deadline approaching rapidly. In order to keep distractions at bay she would turn of the phone and place it in another room. The historian Zoe said she would sometimes print out a manuscript she was working with and 'place myself in a special reading chair and read.' Some, however, pointed out how comfortable material surroundings might be beneficial to concentration but not really sufficient protection from digital distractions. Talking about answering emails, PhD student Naomi stated that 'I can find peace and quiet in the physical room where I work, but the digital room is knocking on the door.'

Technological hurdles and app maintenance

The need to manage spatial and temporal dimensions in the work situation was mirrored in considerations of which digital technologies informants utilized for different purposes, particularly in how they managed their smartphones. Turning off notifications was a strategy mentioned by a majority of the informants. Kevin was among the more adamant: 'I have turned off everything, all notifications! Recently, a friend of mine made me aware of the 'do not disturb' option on my iPhone and now I have it on ALL the time!' A few family members and work contacts were exempted from this regime, he added. Removing and reinstalling apps was a more radical but also common practice. Eva, who worked as a social media consultant, said that she deleted Instagram and Snapchat 'all the time' to avoid temptations. Since they were important for her job, they would soon be reinstalled, finely articulating how these were not final actions but part of a process. Careful selection of which apps to have on the smartphone was mentioned by several informants, particularly in reference to Facebook. Victoria was one of those who had removed the Facebook app, but since important information was sometimes only shared on Facebook, she would log on via the web browser instead. These strategies resemble the creation of physical distance described in other studies (Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016; Bakardjieva, 2006), but instead of placing the media technology in a different room or locking it inside a cabinet, the strategies center on creating technological hurdles. These hurdles might shield the user from external interruptions but are also intended to make it harder for themselves to indulge in digital distractions when tempted.

Going analogue

One of the more drastic means of creating a distance to digital technology was described by Brandon, who had recently bought a vintage typewriter where he had written his latest novel.

> One of the reasons I acquired a typewriter was to get away from digital distractions. To sit and work on a physical machine and write a text on a sheet of paper. Like, when I type, actual typebars come up and press letters on a physical sheet of paper.

He underlined the simplicity of the technology as its strength, stating that 'the only thing you can do with that machine is to write. It's like a guitar, you cannot use a guitar for other things than playing the guitar.' This strategy of managing digital overload and interruptions points to a rising trend where analog artefacts like typewriters, vinyl records and even the Filofax journal are back in vogue (Sax, 2016). The challenge may be to strike the right balance between digital and analog media, as trading the PC with a typewriter is not really a feasible strategy (Rauch, 2018). Brandon would also eventually return to his Mac, retyping the manuscript and dealing with external digital demands.

Our analysis so far underlines how informants take temporal, spatial and technological measures to protect focused creative work from digital interruptions and distractions. The interruptions that enter the work situation illustrate the existence of conflicting demands and the pressure on the individual to manage these. In addition, focused concentration demands a battle with the self to avoid distraction. Some of our informants have high autonomy over their daily schedules and activities, but engage in very demanding creative processes, while others juggle many simultaneous and sometimes unpredictable tasks and working roles. However, a shared experience is that digital media technologies represent a series of new entry-points for such conflicting demands and distractions to pervade focused work. The various conditions and measures under discussion further illustrate the on-going nature of the problem of situating digital media technologies in the working situation: people develop strategies for improving their work situation and actively work to avoid slipping back to unwanted habits. Our next step is to analyze what these experiences might tell us about different norms in conflict.

RQ3: What kind of norms are activated when focused work is infringed upon?

Media history is full of concerns about the impact of media on society, and recurring concerns are that media can lead to a decline in people's morals, learning abilities, social norms, democratic engagement, enlightenment, as well as mental and psychological health (Syvertsen, 2017). During our interviews we asked our informants whether they thought any norms or values were threatened by digital media. The concerns of our informants covered many of these categories including the fear of declining knowledge levels in society, mental health issues such as stress, and a growing inability to be present in the moment. In the context of work, two aspects were especially prominent. The first concerned tensions between work and private life. This was again divided into two sub-topics: family life versus work life and conflict between their role as a knowledge worker and private person on social media. The second aspect concerned 'deep work' or the ability to stay in focus long enough to produce results that had the level of creativity or quality required (Newport, 2016). In both cases, ideals and communicative modes made possible through digital and online technologies, such as 'always on' or 'constant connectivity', were experienced as conflicting with the need to retreat, disconnect or make oneself less available.

Work – life balance

So-called work-life balance and tensions between work and family time is a topic that has received considerable attention in research on knowledge workers (Derks et al., 2016;

Kreiner et al., 2009; ter Hoeven & van Zoonen, 2015) and on time management in digital society (Wajcman, 2015). This tension was also visible in our interviews. Photographer and designer Barbara said she was tired of work intruding into her private life and that she and a colleague had made a deal to alternate between checking email outside of working hours so the other could take some time off. Blogger and coach Ian said that he had strict rules regarding personal time-management and would be completely offline after 15:00, when he picked up his children from kindergarten. Getting home he would place the smartphone 'at the side desk in the hall, furthest away into a corner, face down' and not pick it up until the kids had gone to sleep. Ideals of being present in the moment and a good parent mandated the implementation of this strict media policy, in which spatiotemporal rules for smartphone use became a proxy for work-life boundary maintenance. Other boundary maintenance involved creating rules pertaining to different digital communication types where, for instance, job emails and Skype for Business would be left untouched after work hours, but where other channels could be used. Elsa, who worked on various projects in a non-governmental organization, had strict rules for emails after work but said that if something urgent came up and her leader needed to get hold of her 'he can call me or send me and SMS', in this case indicating that the smartphone is always within reach and that an SMS and phone calls can bypass the work/private life boundary.

Context collapse and presence bleed in social media

In contrast to Barbara, Ian and Elsa, the historian Zoe stated that 'I'm very happy that I have a job where my private and professional life is just smeared together. I have, sort of, made that choice, and I find pleasure in it.' Being available for her kids during work hours or being able to comment on Facebook posts in working hours were examples of things she appreciated. These are examples also found in other studies, where micro-management of both private and work life is made simpler with digital technologies (Thorhauge & Lomborg, 2016). While Zoe found pleasure in blurring aspects of personal and working life, she was more troubled when work expanded into private networks through social media. Her employer and marketing department wanted the staff to promote projects and publications in social media, and she questioned whether this really was part of her job: 'I find it uncomfortable and sometime I feel the need to separate between the two, to draw a line.' Accordingly, the teacher and journalist Victoria, who also worked on a novel, stated that she was frustrated about the 'increasing belief that people doing anything vaguely creative have to market themselves as a product on social media for their product to become known.'

This role conflict was something the informants had not foreseen when they started using social media and also saw no easy way out of. Some expressed frustration at being unable to quit Facebook as they faced professional and practical demands to seek information, network and self-promote there. The musician Kevin explained that he wished he could delete Facebook completely, but this would hurt his career too much as he had accumulated a large number of contacts over the years: 'to get all their emails over to another platform would be hell.' As Gregg noted already a decade ago, people from creative occupations may experience Facebook as a 'compulsory

friendship' where they need to be present in order to cater to fans and to maintain a necessary network (Gregg, 2011, p. 95).

One of the informants who had managed to quit Facebook was Anna. She was working with social media but had come to a point where she decided she needed a 'digital detox' to delineate work from private life: 'For a long time I had had this feeling of not being present. I sort of didn't manage to turn my brain off and be the private me, if you see what I mean.' Constantly having to check or respond to activities on social media reduced her ability to separate work and private life both on a practical and psychological level. She eventually returned to working with social media but with stricter rules on how and when they should be used. Kevin, Victoria, and Anne represent informants from various occupations who described social media as a struggle between personal and professional roles, where the need for inward concentration clashes with expectations of outward and ongoing promotional activity connected to their work.

Communicative and creative ideals

At a deeper level, informants were concerned that digital media not only distracted in the moment but more fundamentally changed conditions for creativity, learning and development. This concern was sometimes expressed in relation to children and youth, arguing that they would not be able to engage in in-depth learning when bombarded by media, especially from the smartphone. Danielle said she was worried about schools who 'throw tablets at small children who get socialized and learn to communicate and share information in ways which are very commercial and not motivated by what the children need to learn.' This worry also extended to herself and other adults, explaining that she was no longer able to finish a book she found boring, but just stopped reading and did something else. She longed back to a time with fewer options and less digital distractions. 'The depth you experience by meeting resistance and not giving up, we have lost that, I think,' she explained. The author David expressed similar sentiments and said that avoiding distractions was crucial for his writing process.

> It's about the ability to concentrate, to walk into something, and to keep walking without any waver. It's about training a skill. You need to train the brain's capacity or ability to carry on and the longer the text, the more it needs you to hold on to the subject. It means that, if you have trained yourself to hold a text inside your head you can expand and expand and eventually you have a whole novel in your head.'

Many of the norm conflicts expressed by our informants are characterized by being centered on the individual. The conflicts concern distinguishing between different roles, or wishing for a more cognitive sustainable work situation, trying to avoid digital distractions and cultivating more in-depth working habits. Both practically and cognitively, this implicates ongoing boundary-management on several levels: between private life and work life, between being available and being focused, and between including and excluding digital media technology in the work situation. Digital media technologies appeared as expressions of these dilemmas, and as practical entry-points for attempting to manage them, but fundamentally the dilemmas referred to deeper psychological and sociological processes and ambivalences in society.

Concluding discussion

In this article, we have analyzed interviews with knowledge workers, investigating which work conditions the informants regard as especially precarious to media intrusions, which measures they take to enable focused work, and which norms are activated when digital media infringe upon focused work.

The findings indicate that the strategies knowledge workers employ to handle intrusive media mirror techniques found in the domestic sphere, including temporal, physical and technological measures, such as designating timeframes for a specific task, physically removing digital media out of sight, and adjusting notifications, settings and Wi-Fi connections to create a well-functioning working space. This is in line with domestication studies showing that intrusive media technology may prompt the individual to develop strategies for disentangling themselves and reversing the domestication process, rather than letting it reach its end-point. To create conditions for focused work further mandates the maintenance of borders between domains such as family and work, namely different roles, but also internally in the work situation between different tasks. For the most demanding tasks such as writing on a novel or composing music, the creative output phase is the most precarious, where demands from external parties and digital interruptions have the strongest potential negative impact. To even reach the level of focus and flow the task demands, distractions must be minimized. Continually managing conditions to optimize concentration becomes another individualized task blurring with other aspects of work. Very few of these processes have any clear end-points; instead, they mandate continual awareness and self-management in order to keep new distractions at bay and not slip out of routines.

Digital and social media are integrated into the work process as sources of information, creative and practical tools, and as spaces for promotion and networking. Concerning the latter, they are also experienced as normatively contested arenas, due to a tension between their role as knowledge worker and private person. Capitalizing on social networks to 'sell' a product, even if it is their own creation, was described as problematic. These experiences could potentially connect with broader critiques of neoliberalism or work in capitalist societies by questioning the underlying premise of why work should take a premium position over other social roles. However, in relatively comfortable work conditions with high autonomy, and in emphasizing their creative and academic pursuits as meaningful, informants rarely made these connections.

Knowledge workers are part of an increasingly digitalized society, and a widely shared concern is that this reduces our power over our work situation, where digital media are seen as 'natural', 'inevitable' or 'common sense' (Fast & Jansson, 2019). Such notions are also visible in our interviews, where informants describe how a steady stream of new digital tools such as Slack and Microsoft Teams are added to an already extensive list of tools they are handling on a daily basis. None of the informants seemed to think that this process was a societal development they could influence in any substantial way, laying the main responsibility of coping with it on themselves rather than their employer, the tech sector or other external actors. But instead of accepting the technologies as becoming 'naturalized,' the informants regularly evaluate how and when these tools shall be used, and actively notice problems and ambivalences, as an example of what Wajcman describes when she writes that 'work practices are being reshaped as employees negotiate

the constant connectivity intrinsic to their work' (p. 2015: 88). The COVID-19 pandemic has made this issue even more acute as the home office has become almost the norm among knowledge workers in many Western countries (Dingel & Neiman, 2020). Moreover, while problematic aspects of working from home are also becoming visible, not least concerning the balance between private life and work life, knowledge work will probably not return exactly to the pre-pandemic state as benefits in terms of flexibility and cost efficiency are also observed. Research on negotiations of digital media in working life will most likely also be a pressing issue in the future, increasingly considering new conceptions of workplaces and working life boundaries.

There is a critical potential in observing problems of this intrinsic connectivity, also made visible by the analytical framework drawing on domestication theory. Some of the digital tools they are offered simply do not reach the 'taken-for-granted' status, which marks a 'successful' media domestication. Instead, they are in a perpetual process of being evaluated, sometimes struggled with or reversed, pointing to the possibility of domestication processes never reaching their endpoint. To some of the knowledge workers in our study, this ongoing and important aspect of their work situation clashed with what they considered the main purposes of their work – creative expression or fulfilment of complex tasks. In describing these work situations as precarious, we also underline their centrality to the experiences of the workers. This highlights the deep-seated normative conflicts experienced through and expressed within considerations of uses of digital technologies in everyday life.

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