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Smart working is not so smart

Always-on lives and the dark side of platformisation

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the lived experiences of remote workers during the Italian lockdown, and the role of digital platforms in their working and everyday life activities, as well as the consequences of home confinement measures on personal and working conditions. Drawing on 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews, the paper's findings suggest that, following a massive extension of transmedia work, remote workers experienced a 'fractured' and 'always-on' life. During the lockdown, the ever more pervasive role of digital media favoured the convergence of different spaces and times into the home, the erosion of the distinction between private and professional life and the exacerbation of previous social inequalities, especially inequalities in relation to gender and digital access. In this scenario, platform and surveillance capitalist logics were further reinforced, while 'presence bleed' in the experiences of workers increased.

KEY WORDS

Digital platforms, remote work, digital labour, gender inequalities, work–family conflict, social distancing, lockdown, COVID 19, Italy

Introduction

In the last two decades, the exponential growth of online platforms has been re-shaping all spheres of everyday life (Bucher, 2018), the labour market and working conditions (Huws, 2016; Casilli & Posada, 2019), as well as the spatial organisation of cities (Huws, 2014). From training to communication, from production to services and logistics, up to social relations (Gillespie, 2015; Bucher, 2018), all realms of social life have been

dramatically restructured, including work and its social representations (Armano, Murgia & Teli, 2017; Van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2018).

A large and growing body of literature has been exploring the crucial role of digital platforms in these transformations and the consolidation of platform capitalism as a business model (Fumagalli, 2016; Pasquale, 2016; Snircek, 2016; Armano, Mazali & Teli, 2020). Indeed, digital platforms have spread across most areas of production and reproduction of social life, thereby significantly re-mediating human relationships and organisational processes (Risi, 2015). In the hybrid networks of contemporary digital society, matter and information are no longer easily separable (Lupton, 2016; Manovich, 2013), and the distinction between online and offline realms seems no longer relevant (Lupton, 2014).

These trends are likely to accelerate due to the COVID-19 emergency, as containment measures imposed severe limitations on human mobility and physical experience. Following the introduction of social distancing measures, in fact, there has been a striking increase in online media consumption practices (Jones, 2020), while a distinction between essential and non-essential productive activities was continuously iterated every time new restrictions were disclosed by national governments (Stevano, Ali & Jamieson, 2020). Within this scenario, a new division of labour has emerged between *remote workers* and *place-based jobs*, which have been categorised as essential or not according to different national legislations.

Regarding remote workers, the coronavirus crisis showed the possibility and importance of working from home for many employers and employees, especially in the West (Berg, Bonnet & Soares, 2020). In Europe, Italy was the first country to experience this shift (Barbieri, Basso & Scicchitano, 2020; Bonacini, Gallo & Scicchitano 2020). Indeed, the country was one of the first to be severely affected by the COVID-19 outbreak and the first one in Europe to impose a national lockdown, thereby quarantining 60 million citizens (Horowitz, 2020).

Given this framework, this paper focuses on how remote workers experienced their jobs and everyday life during the Italian lockdown, which was imposed by the national government between 9 March and 3 May 2020, to contain the spread of COVID-19. Specifically, this contribution focuses on the intertwinement of work and everyday life and the role of digital devices and online platforms during the home confinement period, and explores the consequences of social distancing measures on remote workers and the potential repercussions for their working and personal conditions. To do so, this article draws on 20 in-depth interviews with Italian remote workers – i.e. individuals who were allowed to work from home using digital technologies during the national lockdown.¹

Theoretical framework: the platformisation of life and work

The coronavirus crisis has certainly accentuated the infrastructural role of digital platforms (Van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2018) and exacerbated some trends that were at

¹ Although the platformisation of work can concern both remote and place-based workers, such as in the case of 'gig economy' workers, given the exploratory nature of this study, we focused only on individuals who could work remotely from home during the lockdown.

work before the beginning of the pandemic. In particular, it has intensified the 'deep mediatisation' of social life (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) and labour, thereby normalising transmedia work and the 'extension of already media-saturated working conditions' (Fast & Jansson, 2019: 2).

To begin, since the introduction of social distancing measures in several countries, it has become more than ever apparent than before that a division of labour has emerged between individuals who can work in a 'footloose' manner, and 'fixed' workers (Huws, 2017), i.e. place-based jobs which imply 'the need for physical proximity to a particular spot' (Huws, 2006: 49). During the lockdown, the latter category was further divided by governments into essential and locked workers. Individuals working in essential industries – such as healthcare facilities, food stores, transportation systems, but also gig workers, such as food-delivery riders – had to go to their workplace, while locked workers – bartenders, owners and clerks of little shops, hairdressers, etc. – were forbidden to do likewise. By contrast, some workers had the possibility (and also the obligation) to continue working from home. For some of these, working remotely was not a new experience, especially for women or knowledge workers. Although working from home has a long history in artisanal production as well as in the piece-work or the putting-out practices of early industrial capitalism, remote working through digital technologies has become an emerging trend in recent years (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017). However, before the pandemic many white-collar workers were used to work remotely only occasionally and often unofficially. In Italy, in 2019, only 500,000 people were recorded as working from home (Gritti & Santaguida, 2020), a number that increased to more than 3 million after the first national lockdown in 2020 (Barbieri, Basso & Scicchitano, 2020). Thus, there were many people who found themselves working remotely for the first time in March 2020. In Italy, the public debate has always referred to this category of people working remotely as 'smart workers', thereby using an umbrella term that includes all the forms of digitally-enabled homeworking, including telework, freelance work, and so forth.

For this latter category, the lockdown implied a 'housewifisation'² of working and personal spaces (Mies, 1986; Fuchs, 2020). Within this scenario, the ubiquitous presence of digital platforms furtherly permeated all spheres of everyday life and normalised transmedia work (Fast & Jansson, 2019). Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis seem to have accelerated and intensified the processes of digitalisation and mediatisation of personal and collective experience, which were already at work (Risi, Pronzato & Di Fraia, 2020b). Since the 2008 economic crisis, platform capitalism has been consolidating at the socio-economic level (Srnicek, 2016) and digital platforms 'have penetrated the heart of societies', thereby 'gradually infiltrating in, and converging with, the [. . .] institutions and practices through which democratic societies are organised' (Van Dijk, Poell & De Waal, 2018: 2).

According to Van Dijk and colleagues (2018), two main types of platforms emerged from this context: infrastructural and sectoral ones. The former category includes those

2 We refer to housewifisation as conceived by Christian Fuchs, as the confinement of 'work, social action, and communication to the locale of the home', although it must be acknowledged that 'this condition has been characteristic for houseworkers since a long time (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen & Werlhof, 1988)' (Fuchs, 2020: 380).

platforms primarily owned by the Big Five (Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple and Facebook), which form the basis of the ecosystem upon which many other platforms and apps can be built. Moreover, they play a crucial role as online gatekeepers, which collect, process, filter and channel data throughout the internet. On the other hand, sectoral platforms work for specific sectors such as food, hospitality, transportation, finance and so forth. During the first wave of coronavirus, sectoral platforms heterogeneously increased or decreased their importance according to their sector of reference, while infrastructural platforms extensively showed their key role in maintaining and producing economic and societal structures.

If several aspects of social life are now conceived on the assumption that online digital devices are pervasively distributed among the population (Huws, 2014; Marres, 2017), social distancing and home confinement restrictions, and the ensuing emergence of the 'stay-at-home' economy, have further accentuated the implicit (and often explicit) necessity of accessing the internet in order to fully take part in social life (Evens & Donders, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis suddenly obliged individuals to reframe their everyday lives (Risi, Pronzato & Di Fraia, 2020a; Pronzato & Risi, 2021) and dramatically change their daily practices and social relationships (Fuchs, 2020) in order to deal with a complex and global mega risk (Giritli, Nygren & Olofsson 2020). This new scenario was rapidly pervaded by digital platforms, especially tech companies providing videotelephony and online chat services. Indeed, many of these platforms, such as Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp and so forth, have seen a dramatic surge in users since the beginning of the pandemic and, therefore, a striking increase in profits and stock prices (LaMonica, 2020).

Specifically, communicating through video conference apps has become a common feature of remote work. Calls follow one another seamlessly and continuously to enable workers to organise their activities and professional relations. This phenomenon fuels two ongoing and intertwined processes.

First, social relations – both personal and professional – become increasingly mediated. Indeed, as Fuchs puts it: 'social distancing is not a distancing from the social and other humans, but communication and sociality at a distance' (2020: 378). Indeed, digital technologies do not necessarily imply a reduction of social life and intimacy. In certain cases, working remotely can even entail an increase of social contacts (Wajcman, 2010). For individuals working remotely, this situation implies a state of 'permanent connectivity' (Armano, Murgia & Teli, 2017) in digital spaces,³ in which social relationships and the workflow are re-constructed and inevitably shaped by online platforms. If digital technologies have often been promoted as devices that can free us from material constraints, allowing us to work in the place we prefer, whenever we want, this shift has already been proved to have dramatic consequences. Indeed, the possibility to be always connected and available can exacerbate a certain compulsion to work and encourage the tendency to consider work as the main focus of

3 In this paper, the term 'digital space' does not refer to the concept of 'cyberspace', which has already been problematised and appears today as 'old-fashioned and clunky' (Lupton, 2014: 39), but is rather used to define a relational context, mediated by digital technologies and constructed by users.

daily experiences and, more broadly, of human life (Gregg, 2011). According to Gregg (2011), this may result in a 'presence bleed,' when managing the expectation and possibility of being capable, inclined and ready to work becomes more important compared to the place and time of one's labour.

The second process regards the proliferation of videotelephony services that generate sales for the tech companies involved, which can rely on two different sources of revenues through their freemium model:⁴ on the one hand, educational institutions, private companies and also some users pay for the premium tier of the service; on the other hand, individuals who also use a free version of the app are constantly tracked for advertising, marketing or other business purposes. Indeed, their digital traces are collected, stored and shared with third parties, such as advertisers (John, 2020), within a surveillance capitalist logic (Zuboff, 2019). Even without taking into account data leaks, privacy violations and security vulnerabilities that have been associated with companies like Zoom (Brooks, 2020; Mahdawi, 2020), consumer reports have highlighted some of the ways that services such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and Webex raise severe privacy issues (John, 2020). Indeed, these three platforms 'reserve the right to store information on how long a call lasts; who is on it; and everyone's IP, or internet address.' They aggregate and combine these data 'with personal details they get from data brokers and potentially create individual consumer profiles that are not directly related to helping anyone make a call.' They are also allowed to access the audio when a user requests a meeting transcription to enhance the service. Another controversial question is whether these apps can collect video recordings of calls to develop facial recognition technologies or other purposes.

The different trends and antinomies regarding work and everyday life highlighted thus far have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. Some of these contradictory developments, especially their implications for labour and social relations, will be explored below, drawing on our empirical research.

Methodology

To explore the consequences of the coronavirus crisis for remote workers, a qualitative and exploratory approach was deemed appropriate. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown presented us with a novel research scenario: social distancing measures had never been applied before in Italy, or elsewhere in Europe, and most individuals in Western countries had not experienced home confinement restrictions since World War II.

It was decided to conduct 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with remote workers with the aim of entering their perspectives and exploring their experiences and the meanings they attach to their personal and working activities (Patton, 2002). Given the lockdown restrictions, interviews were carried out via online video conferencing platforms.

4 The term 'freemium model' refers to a pricing strategy often applied to web applications. Individuals can download and use a free version of the service, but in order to also use its additional features they have to subscribe to the premium version of the software, for which money is charged. A notable example is the videoconferencing application Zoom. The free version of the app allows to videocall up to 100 participants simultaneously, with a 40-minute time restriction, while there are premium versions of the app that allow to call even 1,000 participants at the same time for 30 hours.

The study adopted a criterion sample (Creswell, 2007), thereby selecting participants according to specific variables: gender, age and job. The sample was composed of a balanced group of participants (ten male and ten female) and included two age subgroups (ten participants aged 30–45 and ten aged 46–60). All the interviewees worked remotely and were interviewed during the Italian lockdown (March–April 2020).

Participants were all recruited from regions in the North of Italy – the most populous, productive and digitised regions in Italy, as well as the ones in which COVID-19 spread earlier, such as Lombardy and Veneto. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes and was recorded and transcribed with the authorisation of the interviewee (Wellard & McKenna, 2001).

To analyse the data, Atlas.ti software was employed. Transcripts were coded using open coding techniques, a commonly adopted approach within a grounded theory framework (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), in order to recognise recurring themes, which could shed light on workers' perceptions and experiences.

Results

The next section illustrates our results. Based on the analysis of the interviews, three main themes were highlighted and will be explored in the following sub-sections.

Always-on lives and the normalisation of a fractured existence

During the Italian lockdown, the boundaries between office and home, leisure time and labour time, have become blurred (Risi & Pronzato & Di Fraia, 2020a). Although this issue has already been highlighted previously by several authors (Gregg, 2011; Fast & Lindell, 2016; Jansson, 2016), since March 2020 the overspill of working life into social life (Jansson, 2018) has intensified, and *liquid labour* (Deuze, 2006)⁵ spread on a larger scale, going beyond those occupations in which it was already present to extend into new sectors. Indeed, there has been a convergence of different locales⁶ in the same place: the home, which became simultaneously 'workplace, family and private space, school, nursery, leisure space, natural space, a public space from where we connect to friends and professional contacts' (Fuchs, 2020: 379). In this context, platforms emerge as the space in which relationships are confined and as the means through which the logic of capital is extended into each realm of social life.

Remote working is unavoidably linked with the use of online digital devices which allow individuals to access digital spaces where working relations are re-built and shaped. At home there are new types of job that have to be done, and this results in a

5 Deuze (2006) refers to liquid labour as the shift from a traditional workplace structure to a new arrangement in which time and space are undefined. Digital devices and platforms favour the emergence of a state of permanent connectivity, which facilitate the blurring of labour and private life. Within this scenario, increased flexibility is required of workers, who have to be potentially ready to work at every moment.

6 According to Fuchs (2020: 379): a 'locale is a particular physical or virtual space that is used at particular time, typically in a routinised manner, which implies repetition, for social actions and communication that have a particular goal. Space-time is organised in the form of demarcated and bounded zones or regions (locales) that are the physical, spatial and temporal context of specific types of action and communication. Locales are the places and physical settings of humans' communicative practices'.

greater workload. Indeed, remote work implies a different management of relationships that are no longer based in co-presence – where the same physical space dedicated to specific activities was shared – but mediated by digital platforms. This has implied an increase in the perceived workload.

I usually worked four days out of five and usually I wouldn't go to school on Friday. Now I work seven days a week. (P9, F, primary school teacher, 36 years old)

This convergence of social spaces favoured an affirmation and intensification of neoliberalist logics: work has become liquid, and is not localised in terms of time, but carried out based on objectives and projects, which involve a constant overrunning of the timing intended for work (Gregg, 2018).

Participants in our study experience the 'presence bleed' of contemporary work life, whereby 'the location and time of work become secondary considerations faced with a "to do list" that seems forever out of control' (Gregg, 2011: 2). Thus, work becomes increasingly embedded within each sphere of social life and working objectives become the main concern of one's existence.

I always run out of steam. Given that it is a team effort, a work to reach a goal, in the end we consider not so much the time as the goal to be achieved. So, if we can't finish those two hours, we go further. (P3, F, Educator, 36 years old)

We know the things we have to do anyway, you have to follow the projects, so you work towards goals, you have to complete what you are asked to do, so if you have to do it for tomorrow, it must be finished by tomorrow. So, in this sense, you always have quite intense working rhythms. (P2, F, Scientific director of a pharmaceutical company, 59 years old)

The boundaries of the workplace and the working day have been eroded. This brings several consequences for those working within a range of different business sectors, such as the nature of the workplace and the need to manage work–family integration (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017). Within this scenario, workers are expected to be productive on their mobile phones even during the lunch break: there is a compulsion to work that infuses all moments of everyday life (Gregg, 2011). These are the typical features of a 'fractured' experience (Huws, 2006) in which elements of fixedness and footloose traits are in constant, tense interaction with each other.

I also found myself eating at the computer because at first I worked in the kitchen and I had the computer on the table and in order not to switch off at that time, I found myself eating among the sheets. (P4, F, Office worker, 31 years old)

If you consider the perspective of working from home, by putting myself in parallel to the work at the office [. . .] I sincerely preferred almost the work at the office because there I could really have a break to drink a coffee, here at home, sometimes, after three and a half hours I still haven't moved an inch from my seat. (P13, M, Human resources project manager, 49 years old)

Furthermore, from the interviews it emerged that rooted real-time activities (like helping children with homework or eating lunch) are continuously interrupted by

digital notifications (such as a new email or a video call), while working activities are conversely unsettled by other domestic tasks, linked to the place where the individual is physically located. Following this 'always-on life', the working relationships, often mediated through video-conferencing platforms, take place in spaces that are neither public nor private, but constitute intermediate spaces of connectivity in which daily life, social relations and work are reterritorialised.

People call you whenever they want because for them at the moment you are at home 'doing nothing'. So, I couldn't get set any defined working hours. (P4, F, Office worker, 31 years old)

I'm always connected from morning to night, all the time. (P3, F, Educator, 36 years old)

This is how the 'always-on' experience is fractured and trespasses into digital spaces that are considered the only way out of the domestic perimeter. In the experience of remote workers the growing relevance of always being connected is exacerbated. The spaces and times of permanent connectivity appear introjected and released from external formal control, but this renders them even more extensive and indefinite.

Home was a sort of shelter [. . .] it was a space in which one used to say, 'I go home and I have a break', now this break doesn't exist anymore, because everything, private and professional life, is inside the home [. . .] there are no time-schedules or working days. (P9, F, Teacher, 36 years old)

Participants had to adapt to the unprecedented triumph of technologically mediated work. This resulted in mixed feelings. Some described remote work as liberating and attractive because it avoids travels, and allows people to organise their activities without constraints of space and time and with apparent degrees of autonomy. However, the initial enthusiasm of some remote workers decreased after months of domestic confinement.

If I have an online class, I'm busy, if I don't, I still try to find the morning when the older one has online lectures, in order to be with the child and find some time in the afternoon to do my work, or in the evening. (P9, F, Teacher, 36 years old)

Furthermore, the burden of this fractured experience appears to be dramatically heavier for women with young children. In several interviews, participants highlighted that workers have little organisational autonomy. Companies decide how much and when they have to work, but the projects that have to be submitted often overlap with the need for children to be supported in their digital distance learning experiences. The experiences reported, especially by women, are those of work-related and educational deadlines that coincide, in a unique domestic context and through protocols established by digital platforms, while the 'work-to-family conflict' (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017) increases.

He is in second grade and now does three online lessons, of two hours each, per week. He's a child, if you don't stay with him, he's not going to stay on the computer, or he gets easily distracted [. . .] And then there is homework, before

the quarantine it was once a week [. . .] now it must be done every day. (P1, F, Call centre operator, 46 years old)

Female workers often carry out different types of work, such as waged work, care work, educational work, domestic work, etc. at the same time and in the same place. The burden of these forms of extra work primarily falls, in fact, on women. This uneven distribution of responsibilities between sexes was already present before the pandemic (Wajcman, 2010). However, home confinement restrictions and remote working features seemed to exacerbate such gender inequalities, thereby showing that the impact of the pandemic is not gender-neutral (Pronzato & Risi, 2021).

Finally, the interpenetration of different spheres of life in one place favours the development of a 24-hour economy that allows people to satisfy their needs as consumers at non-traditional times. This process in turn obliges another group of workers, such as delivery workers, to endure exhausting shifts in order to provide these services.

If I have to buy a pair of shoes, I'll buy them online. (P1, F, Call centre operator, 46 years old)

This favours the emergence of a new idea, 'whereby opening hours are slowly extended right across the economy, and with them the expectation that it is normal for everything always to be open' (Huws, 2014: 58). As noted by Merchant (2020: n.p.), 'coronavirus is speeding up the Amazonification of the planet', as well as the platformisation of labour and social relationships (Risi, Pronzato & Di Fraia, 2020b).

The relational poverty of technological solutions

For several interviewees remote working was viewed positively, especially by those who had already experienced it (even if not completely) and by those who had technological resources and digital skills.

There are so many communication possibilities between us, through technology, that it is like not having been at home from that point of view. (P5, F, Administrative employee, 52 years old)

Digital platforms have often been considered as a solution to the necessity to communicate at distance. The imposition of the remote working regime for some types of workers has favoured a shift from work and relationships carried out in a specific physical context to a reterritorialisation of the same interactions in mediated relational spaces. If not being obliged to move continuously to meet and greet customers can be considered a liberating experience, the ideas of 'comfort' and emancipation that some interviewees emphasise stand in stark contrast to the relational aridity of mediated contexts. During the lockdown, transmedia work constituted a diffused social condition that saturated many different types of work. If being always connected to multiple devices for working purposes is also embraced, especially in certain corporate professions, there are workers who question this paradigm, noting that it can even render one's job more difficult. For instance, the lack of some relational aspects of face-to-face communication may imply some difficulties for remote workers. Specifically, elements such as the rituality of some common practices, the dialogue between

colleagues, and the possibility of consolidating empathetic relationships with clients, are difficult to reproduce on digital platforms.

The interaction with colleagues is still there, we talk, we connect but that rituality is missing. We used to meet in the morning; we went out to drink some coffee [. . .] (P2, F, Scientific director of a pharmaceutical company, 59 years old)

Let's say there is no everyday life [. . .] after almost two months it honestly begins to get a bit hard [. . .] within the walls of the house it is a bit like this [. . .] on the spot speaking with your colleagues lightens the work for a moment [. . .] instead from home you are in front of the PC, doing your thing, alone. (P6, F, Engineer, 39 years old)

Further issues are linked to nonverbal aspects of communication and to getting used to the collapse of all the relationships into a single relational space that is mediated⁷ by digital platforms. If the interviewees attempt to re-build working relationships through digital platforms, these new relationships are perceived as lacking and insufficient.

Before, I took it for granted that my colleague or my boss were a few metres away from me and 30 seconds were enough for any doubt or exchange; now you have to organise a lot more meetings for everything, and try to coordinate your work without seeing each other, which for us is not easy, because we have always been used to being together, literally in the same room. (P12, F, Marketing manager, 43 years old)

There is another interesting element that emerges from the interviews. If working remotely can potentially allow for flexible management of time and space, on the other hand the time required to reach a unanimous decision when working asynchronously can lengthen considerably, thus requiring the organisation of online meetings whose planning often requires a considerable amount of time.

Video calling each other is not the same thing; I am having these video calls all the time, so I want to have a break and, honestly, I don't feel like calling a friend of mine via phone. So I have to be honest, relationships have slackened a lot. (P3, F, Educator, 36 years old)

Then, although digital platforms could make possible new ways of declining emotional proximity, during the lockdown, the same platforms were used both for work and family relationships, and some interviewees felt that it was difficult for them to access the same digital spaces again after a working day in order to relate to relatives and friends. Moreover, some participants highlighted that this type of communication entailed a relational poverty that could not be completely overcome.

⁷ We refer here to the term 'mediatisation' as used by Couldry and Hepp (2013: 196) to refer to 'how the communicative construction of reality is manifested within certain media processes and how, in turn, specific features of certain media have a contextualized "consequence" for the overall process whereby sociocultural reality is constructed in and through communication'.

Infrastructural platforms and digital inequalities

During the lockdown some interviewees realised the social importance of apps and platforms, which can be considered as hubs of larger technological infrastructures that contribute to shaping the experience and relationships of users. These aspects emerged especially when problems related to the technological infrastructure arose, such as connection problems or low batteries. Indeed, the infrastructural nature of these technologies is often opaque and difficult to notice until it becomes problematic.

Sometimes some colleagues who connect have issues [. . .] when we talk to her, we don't hear anything. (P2, F, Scientific director of a pharmaceutical company, 59 years old)

It is surely the weak connection, in fact I called the company, but given that they were overburdened and then they stopped because of the coronavirus, they will come on Tuesday 28, so I have held on [. . .] for more than a month, almost two, with the tools I had, and this didn't help me. (P3, F, Educator, 36 years old)

It is only when technical issues, such as an unstable internet connection, prevent or hinder the fluidity of remote work, that the infrastructural role of platforms surfaces. Indeed, platforms only work given some really technical and concrete constraints; hence, their potential use depends largely on the technical and economic choices made by the tech companies.

My working day is much heavier [. . .] I have to deal with a series of tools that I am not used to and which also cause me a lot of anxiety because I feel it's difficult to control them. (P7, F, High school teacher, 54 years old)

The school should have provided training on these tools; in the end I had to learn by myself, as an autodidact. (P8, F, High school teacher, 55 years old)

Furthermore, some problems primarily related to the public sector of education were highlighted during the interviews. Thus, a dramatic difference emerged between individuals employed by private companies and public institutions. Large and multinational companies were often already advanced on a technological level, and workers had already started working remotely through digital platforms and there were already tested working practices in place before the lockdown. On the other hand, public employees, especially teachers, had to suddenly adapt without being trained. They were not prepared either in terms of work organisation (which was totally fixed, i.e. located in specific physical contexts) or in terms of technological equipment.

This led to the division of those who could and those who could not [. . .] Now we work a lot on the Internet and this lack is a problem. (P9, F, primary school teacher, 36 years old)

Thus, those who already had digital devices were able to access relational spaces, such as video calling apps from tech companies, while others were excluded. The colonisation of sociality by the market not only generated a new source of profit for tech companies (in terms of subscriptions or the 'release' of their data to sell to those who plan advertising), but also contributed to increasing divisions in the fabric of social

life between those who possessed these technologies and those who could not afford them, between those who knew how to use them and those who did not and between those who lived in places where technological infrastructures (such as broadband Internet connection) were present or absent.

First of all, there are management issues, because in every family, while I am teaching, there are at least three other people connected to the Internet and this causes misunderstandings, such as weak connections, skipping connections. (P7, F, High school teacher, 54 years old)

The digital divide does not concern only access to the internet but also different levels of digital literacy (Hargittai & Micheli, 2019). In some interviews, this issue emerged as a problematic feature of remote working for both employees and employers, especially in the public sector.

There is a reticence that many colleagues have, because [. . .] having to explain to colleagues how it works and how to do it, many are afraid to touch something that seems as if everything will explode and therefore before doing so you have to confirm to them ten times that that button is the right one. (P9, F, primary school teacher, 36 years old)

My employers didn't give me any help, but I found on the Internet, also thanks to some colleagues, webinars in which they explained how to adapt the cognitive enhancement sessions to the online mode. So how to adapt the work I did [. . .] Because at first it seemed like crazy, impossible stuff. (P3, F, Educator, 36 years old)

Thus, the coronavirus outbreak, and the following affirmation of remote work as the only potential working mode for many individuals, seems to entail a further amplification of social and digital inequalities.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the lived experiences of remote workers during the Italian lockdown, in order to investigate the role of digital platforms in their working and everyday life activities, as well as the consequences of home confinement measures on personal and working conditions. Drawing on 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews, this study highlighted that what in Italy has been widely referred to as 'smart working' is not so smart. Indeed, after an ambivalent initial phase (for some of enthusiasm, for others of bewilderment), the experience of remote workers that emerges is the one that Huws (2006, 2014) describes as 'fractured', which appears as a characteristic feature of forced and continuous remote work. Individuals had to cope with the consequences of an 'always-on' life, in which digital and social inequalities appear exacerbated by the pandemic. In this scenario, platforms emerged as a ubiquitous presence of 'logged labour' (Huws, 2016) and of all the realms of everyday life, which becomes to a greater extent a 'digital life' (Markham, 2020). During the lockdown, different spaces and times converged into the home. This convergence favoured the erosion of the distinction between private and professional life, both of which became saturated by digital media. Consequently, individuals tried

to reterritorialise both their personal and work interactions in mediated relational spaces, but our results support the conclusion that workers felt the lack of some relational aspects of the workplace. In this scenario, everyday life becomes increasingly lived 'in and through' (Bucher, 2018) digital platforms, up to the point that individuals feel the need to avoid video calls. In fact, the possibility to be always reached was experienced as a cause for concern, and the possibility to be in contact with someone else remotely was not always framed as an opportunity, but also as a potential problem or an experience of lack.

The COVID-19 pandemic has implied a massive application of remote working, which is often deemed as a privilege of the affluent classes (Reeves & Rothwell, 2020). Remote work is not a new form of work,⁸ but since the beginning of the pandemic there has been an acceleration and intensification towards a higher level of labour digitalisation (Staab & Nachtwey, 2016) and virtualisation of work organisation (Huws, 2017), which give 'an ideological and material support to contemporary trends towards increased levels of flexibility of the workforce' (Terranova, 2004: 74). Indeed, a general push for digitalisation favours the platformisation of labour and, thus, a further assault on workers' rights (Di Nunzio, 2018).

Our respondents experienced in their everyday lives the dependence of sociality on private digital platforms. This characteristic of the platform society (Van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2018), in which there is a deep mediatisation of social relations (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) and work and their social and spatial implications (Fast & Jansson, 2019) was already present before the pandemic. Nevertheless, the coronavirus outbreak favoured an ever more pervasive role of digital technologies in the texture of social life. During the lockdown, anxiety and fear related to proximity and physical contact have pushed many individuals to accept the mainstream narrative that digital technologies are the best, even the only, possible way to keep a distance and protect lives from contagion. For the interviewees, when social distancing restrictions were imposed, digital platforms appeared as the 'natural' space in which it was possible to continue their work, but also their social and personal relations. However, relational shortcomings and problematic issues remain.

This study has showed that fractured experiences have become common among remote workers, as well as situations in which working and familial lives are in the same place, thereby blurring the distinction between them and exacerbating the 'work-to-family conflict' (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017). The massive adoption of digital platforms has contributed to the development of an 'always-on' life for remote workers, who have experienced 'presence bleed'. However, if Melissa Gregg initially identified 'presence bleed' as a core feature of 'contemporary office culture, where firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply' (2011: 2), during the lockdown,

8 Since the 1970s and the following, continuous technological advancements, telework and remote work arrangements have become increasingly common. For instance, in 2018, almost a quarter of US workers worked remotely on any given workday (Frazis, 2020). However, before the COVID-19 crisis, full-time telework was rare (Galperin, 2017). Indeed, only around 2% of the American workforce actually worked full-time from a remote location. In general, only about one-third of jobs in economically developed countries can be done as telework (Dingel & Neiman, 2020). As discussed in the theoretical framework paragraph, the same applies in Italy.

other working realms have also become involved in this process and this is just one aspect of what the growth of digitally mediated relationships – that many people are experiencing in many work contexts – entails.

The concentration of different activities in the same space and the leading role given to work often resulted in an increase of labour time for many participants and the need to manage different roles at the same time. From the interviews, it emerged that workers are always chasing time as time is never enough. This sensation is typical of the society of acceleration (Rosa, 2013; Wajcman, 2015) and can be interpreted as a corroboration of the practice of associating a positive value with the speed that derives from the commodification of time that took place with the transition to modern industrial capitalism (Wajcman, 2010) and which dominates advanced capitalist economies today.

This appears especially relevant for women with children, for whom the burden of care work and affective labour seems to be greatest and most problematic. Indeed, the coronavirus crisis has affected ‘women more heavily than men not only at the physical level of work [. . .] but also through increasing the division regarding the cognitive level of work’ (Czymara, Langenkamp & Cano, 2020: 1). Furthermore, the diffusion and adoption of digital technologies do not allow a general enhancement of social life for everyone, without distinction as to gender. Indeed, ‘a deeper differentiation in people’s powers to act [. . .] continues in spite of, indeed reinforced by, technologies’ role in extending communications in space’ (Couldry & Hepp, 2017: 97). As Couldry and Hepp put it:

Whereas marketing for smartphones always emphasises their power to coordinate lives for anyone (man or woman), it is generally women for whom technologies of communication lead their family pressures to spill over into the work space [. . .] reproducing a very old division of domestic labour (Wajcman, 2015) in which women have, by default, the primary responsibility for domestic labour and caring, including any unexpected demands. (2017: 97)

Our results support the conclusion that ‘domestic technology has reinforced the traditional sexual division of labour between husbands and wives and locked women more firmly into their traditional roles’ (Wajcman, 2010: 275). Thus, we argue that this issue ought to be a major concern for future studies and policies as the gender gap appears to be further exacerbated by the pandemic.

Moreover, remote work also seems to have greatly accentuated digital inequalities (Nguyen et al., 2020), both in terms of a digital divide (based on ownership of technological devices and access to a broadband internet connection) and digital skills (based on the capacity to use online digital devices effectively). There were even some cases in which workers used their own personal digital devices in order to work at home and other cases in which a slow connection made it extremely difficult to work. Thus, even the capacity to work remotely depends on being able to afford several digital devices and access to broadband Internet, which are both stratified by economic class status (Global Workplace Analytics, 2020).

Furthermore, this study has highlighted how our homes (i.e. workplaces) have become even more digitally saturated environments, following home confinement measures. The increased use of the digital platform has favoured a further strengthening

of transmedia work (Fast & Jansson, 2019), which appears to be reinforced by the spread of narratives of technological solutionism (González & Rendueles Menéndez de Llano, 2020). However, digital platforms are neither neutral, nor free (Gillespie, 2015). Indeed, they are only the tip of the iceberg of a complex socio-technical assemblage (Lupton, 2014; Gillespie, 2016) that functions thanks to the work of miners who extract minerals, factory workers who assemble devices, computer engineers and data scientists who design algorithms, as well as an infrastructure made up of satellites, cabling, and so forth.

More generally, there has been a gradual delimitation of workers within the perimeters of platforms, i.e. the affordances built by a few private tech companies, which have furtherly colonised domestic and relational spaces (Coudry & Mejias, 2019), with a significant increase in their profits. Indeed, digital platforms allow tech companies to implement strategies of subsumption of the need for relationships (work and human) for capitalist purposes. Even video conferencing apps, which are the ones to which our participants mainly refer, can be considered 'advertising platforms' (Srnicek, 2016). The main feature of these apps, dramatically widespread in this pandemic period, is, in fact, that they offer a freemium service to users. Profits occur in any case, both explicitly, through a subscription fee, and implicitly, by extracting value from the data collected by users when they sign up for the platform or download the app. In fact, these data are used to implement advertising strategies and sold to third parties that will use them, through algorithms and predictive models, to structure personalised advertising campaigns. Thus, these technologies impose processes related to surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) and data colonialism (Coudry & Mejias, 2019), whereby everyday life is continuously converted into data streams that are used for opaque and exploitative commercial practices, while digital and social inequalities are reproduced and reinforced within environments saturated by digital technologies.

Thus, even if the communication possibilities, otherwise impossible, offered during the COVID-19 crisis by some platforms and apps were evident, this study has highlighted the dark side of their pervasiveness. The constant surveillance and extraction of value through powerful algorithms that exploit and analyse user data (Rigi & Prey, 2015) – as well as the blurring of different spheres of social life and the following 'presence bleed' – are not side-effects of the platformisation of labour and everyday life, but key characteristics of these platforms, which have become the infrastructures of our daily activities.

All in all, this study has drawn attention to specific dynamics at work in the re-organisation of labour activities and in the domestication of digital technologies that workers incorporate into their everyday lives. It must be acknowledged that some elements that emerged regarding how remote workers experienced their jobs and everyday lives during the Italian lockdown, such as the intensification of a fractured experience (Huws, 2014), the extension of transmedia work (Fast & Jansson, 2019) or the exacerbation of gender inequalities (Gregg, 2011), had been previously highlighted by other authors, especially by those adopting techno-feminist approaches, who have been pioneers regarding these topics (e.g. Wajcman, 2010, 2015). The conditions under which our study was carried out were different because of the scale of the phenomenon being investigated: following the imposition of social distancing measures, millions of people in Italy (and all over the world) experienced remote work, which has now

become a very large-scale phenomenon, affecting not just knowledge workers, or employees in large corporations of the ICT sector. Large sections of the population had to cope with this multifaceted modality of labour for the first time. Thus, by offering important insights into the condition of remote workers during the lockdown this paper adds to our knowledge of remote work more generally.

Finally, some limitations need to be considered. First, with a small qualitative sample, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferable to the whole population. Second, it must be acknowledged that the study was exploratory and focused on the situation of remote workers in Italy; hence, further studies are needed to assess whether these findings can also be applied in other socio-cultural contexts. Indeed, how media are implemented in everyday life are always shaped by specific cultural and economic settings. Taking the view that the aim of qualitative studies is to pursue analytical generalisation, i.e. a generalisation to wider theoretical constructs, thereby providing a richer understanding of certain aspects of human experience (Firestone, 1993; Polit & Beck, 2010), we find these results encouraging. It would be interesting to continue this study with a longitudinal approach and to investigate how the experience of work will change in a different phase of the coronavirus emergency, as well as how individuals will continue their domestication of different technologies, as workers keep incorporating new platforms and devices into their domestic spaces. Future studies on the current topic are therefore recommended.

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