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# The phenomenon of work and non-work boundaries in the Age of Information

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## Abstract

*In the academic literature and popular discourses, the issue of work/non-work boundaries emerges as an important societal problem. Analysing this phenomenon using socialmaterial approach allows us to problematise the assumed separateness of both work and non-work domains. We assume these boundaries are constituted historically, through and together with particular social phenomenon and practices. Currently, these boundaries might be seen to be distorted in relation to the ways we manage and use ICT. Therefore, drawing on a qualitative research approach, we aim to explore how organisational ICT practices and policies configure work/non-work boundaries in the Age of Information. Single Case Study Design and semi-structured interviews have been chosen to investigate academics of a UK university towards doing an in-depth analysis, seeking in contributing to the literature on the interactions and constitution between work and non-work domains and activities, filling the gap in considering the problematisation of the boundaries through a post-humanist approach.*

**[ Keywords ]** : work/non-work boundaries; Age of Information; knowledge workers; ICT

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## INTRODUCTION

In the current academic literature and popular discourses, the issue of work/non-work boundaries emerges as an important societal problem. In the Age of Information, there is a perception that specific Information and Communication Technology (ICT) practices may lead to the blurring of the boundaries between work and non-work (re)configuring them and, therefore, requiring specific interventions on the different levels: in the individuals' lives, in the design of technologies, in the broader governmental policies, and narrowly, in organisational policies and practices.

Historically, this phenomenon has involved particular changes in the organisation of work, such as in the movement from farms/artisans (in a Pre-industrial Age) to factories (in the Industrial Revolution), and, posteriorly, towards offices (in the Post-Industrial period). Currently, the work/non-work boundaries might be seen to be distorted in relation to both the ways we manage and use ICT, and to specific organisational practices and policies.

Therefore, this paper is presented as part of what will become a PhD thesis in Management Studies, proposing the investigation of how work and non-work domains configure and are configured by technological and societal relations in an organisational environment. The study seeks to contribute to the literature on the topic of the constitution of work/non-work boundaries related to knowledge workers in capitalist societies, according to specific work arrangements moulded by the Age of Information. I pursue to fill the gap on the existent literature in considering the problematisation of the boundaries through a post-humanist approach, as I aim to use a sociomaterial framework to develop this PhD study. Therefore, drawing on a qualitative research approach, I pursue to explore how organisational ICT practices and policies configure work/non-work boundaries in the Age of Information. Single Case Study Design and semi-structured interviews will be used as a method of data-collection to investigate academics of a UK university towards doing an in-depth analysis.

Overall, this paper is constituted of the review of part of the literature on the phenomenon of work and non-work boundaries in the Age of Information that will support my PhD thesis, and is organised in three sections. Section 1 introduces the theme of work/non-work boundaries and its

historical context. Section 2 outlines the technological digitalization and ICTs in the Age of Information and Section 3 presents the discussion about the literature review.

## **1. Work/non-work boundaries**

Work/non-work boundary is a contemporary subject that has been studied through the lens of different theories such as: Organisational Role Theory (Biddle, 1986; Katz and Kahn, 1966), Role Balance Theory (Marks and Macdermid, 1996), Boundary Theory (Nippert-Eng, 1996b; Ashforth et al., 2000) and Border Theory (Clark, 2000). This is also a topic of interest in different fields of study, including psychology (Boren and Alberts, 2011; Chmiel et al., 2017), sociology (Cruz and Meisenbach, 2018; Nippert-Eng, 1996a) and business management (Kossek and Lautsch, 2012; Perlow, 1998; Schlachter et al., 2018).

Therefore, considering the term work/non-work boundary in this study, (1) work can be understood as the sphere of paid employment including all related and supporting activities such as tasks, projects, travel, meetings, client demands (Bratton et al., 2010); (2) non-work will refer to the sphere of activities outside of paid employment, and not directly related to it, such as family and friends interactions, housework, community activities (Allen et al., 2000); and (3) boundary considers the limit between both of them, a slice of reality created to understand where work activities end allowing non-work activities to start and vice-versa (Ashforth et al., 2000). Besides, there are 2 important factors to consider when studying work/non-work boundaries:

(1) The perception of the boundaries between work and non-work is shrouded by subjectivity (Ammons, 2013). It varies from person to person, according to the social relations they create;

(2) According to the Boundary Theory (Nippert-Eng, 1996b), the way of what the individual transit between both realms and experience the work/non-work boundary is characterised by an integration-segmentation continuum where:

(2a) Integration suggests that work and non-work activities are entirely blurred;

(2b) Segmentation means that work and non-work remain firmly separated.

### **1.1 Historical context of work/non-work boundaries**

Concerns over the configuration of work/non-work boundaries date from many decades ago (Ammons, 2013). This problematic is shaped by the idea of two spheres – work and non-work –, assuming the existence of two realms of experience and activity – the workplace and the homespace (Golden and Geisler, 2000).

However, in a Pre-industrial Era, these two separate spheres did not exist. The workplace at that time was typically the individual's home (Kreiner et al., 2009) and the working time was determined by the length of the day: “[...] families worked together from dawn until dusk, intermingling work and family responsibilities [...]” (Perlow, 1998, p.328). The advent of the Industrial Revolution, especially in capitalist societies, brought a shift at the workplace from the homespace to factories (Kreiner et al., 2009), from agricultural to manufacturing industries (Bratton et al., 2010). In this period, the world witnessed an intense change in the economic and social structures. At this point, the origin of the functional and spatial boundary between work and non-work becomes clear (Kaiser et al., 2011). Employees also went through a change in the working time, now regulated by supervisors and the clock (8am to 5pm), delineating also a time boundary (Bendix, 1956).

In between 1920 and 1970, the industrial employment witnessed a decrease (Ammons, 2013) due to the intensive economic and technologic restructuring process, on what the service sector gained space over the industry, requiring more workers who can deal with customers, information, and technology (Stepansky and França, 2008). This new structure culminated in the Information Revolution, in the 1980s, marking a significant reconfiguration of social relations (Bratton et al., 2010). The working time is again, one of the main changes to be pointed out. From 8-5 factory-time at the Industrial Revolution, it has undergone changes at the Post-Industrial society to 9-5 office-time (Bratton et al., 2010), achieving growth of nonstandard schedules nowadays.

Further than flexi-time, the development of digital technologies, particularly Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has enabled flexi-place of work (Osborne, 2015), shaping the

ways people work in advanced capitalist economies, “with boundaryless organizations, virtual workplaces, and the potential for constant wireless connection to ones’ work” (Kreiner et al., 2009, p.704), allowing people to access information on any device, at anytime and anywhere (Maciejewski et al., 2014; Pižmoht et al., 2017), facilitating work to intrude on non-work life and vice-versa (Ammons, 2013), re-shaping the space-time boundary between work and non-work, which now becomes unclear.

We cannot say that all kind of roles has been affected by those changes over the years. Knowledge workers are the ones who most feel the changes. The type of tasks they perform demands the use of knowledge allied with ICT as a main resource (Horwitz et al., 2003), besides requiring re-shape of employment relations in order to co-create new goal-oriented insights (Bratton et al., 2010). Thus, we can say that ICT, new employment relations, and knowledge work in advanced capitalist societies, have (re)configured the time-space of work: some people work from home, others have nonstandard schedules, and some may even firm short-term work contracts (Hardill and Green, 2003).

## **2. The Age of Information**

The Age of Information is a combination of new, enhanced or modified economic relations based on human knowledge, computer, and networks, signalling the importance of the computer in this new paradigm of society (Mckeown, 2009). The societies have access to any kind of information anywhere and instantly, with portable, modern and ever smaller devices connected 24 hours per day, reducing (and even crossing) distances around the world. It is critical to see this process through the lens of the social changes rather than follow the tendency to objectify the Age of Information and treat this phenomenon as independent and external, like something out there. It shall be seen as a product of the societies, “a product of our own making. As such, it [...] emerges in complex and nonlinear ways from our ongoing efforts, energies, and enterprises, both individual and collective... [it] is a phenomenon that we are, literally, enacting – that is, bringing into existence through our actions – every day and over time” (Orlikowski and Iacono, 2000, p.352).

## 2.1 Technological digitalization and ICTs

In the Age of Information, technology is embedded in people's daily life all the time and everywhere (Miskolci, 2016). The process of technological digitalisation is an important fact that has transformed business and societies (Loebbecke and Picot, 2015), creating new forms of working, cooperating, communicating and, more important, connecting people and organisations (Newell and Marabelli, 2015). The most important example of this revolution is the rise of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), encouraged by advances in computer and internet connection. The fast expansion of wireless communication has allowed a big numbers of users to access internet through mobile devices (Jou and Ho, 2008; Pižmoht et al., 2017), permitting people to effortlessly be in contact with others, share information (McArdle et al., 2008), and extend their social network blurring physical boundaries (Aizlewood and Doody, 2002).

Laptops, smartphones, and other mobile devices in general have (re)configured the ways of working (Hislop et al., 2015). Email, social media, instant messages, and other mobile applications are also responsible for those changes (Diaz et al., 2012; Symon, 2017). On the one hand, work has become more time-space-flexible (Kossek, 2016), that is, the worker ceases to have fixed and standardized schedule to complete their work duties and/or are able to work from home or another place other than the physical organisation (Valcour and Hunter; 2005). Thereby, a connection with family, friends and work can be generated at the same time and space, whether at work or at home (Chesley et al.; 2013). In the meantime, studies show that employees may have overload of both intensity and working hours than they would have working on 9-5 office schedule (Cecchinato et al., 2015), which may imply in taking work home or checking work-related communications during the non-work time (Wepfer et al., 2017).

## 3. Discussion

The advent of the Information Revolution has brought a new configuration of work/non-work boundary, confirming that work and non-work are inevitably linked. It is important to point out that, along with the work relation's history, work has been shaping employment relations, employees' behaviour, and the social relations in and outside the workplace (Hodson and Sullivan,

2002). In this scenario, technology, as the materialisation of our social, economic and cultural arrangements, has played a significant role in this scenario (Vurdubakis, 2012).

Considering that we are in the Age of Information, when the majority part of the population has access to Wi-Fi and mobile devices, both work and non-work take place online: our devices carry work and personal information everywhere, all the time, facilitating the move from leisure to work and vice-versa (Chmiel et al., 2017). Personal and work tasks are mixed along the knowledge worker's day: personal calls and messages may be answered during work-time (Kaiser et al., 2011) as well as professional emails may be checked at home during the weekends (Cecchinato et al., 2015). Not to mention the influence of social media and instant messages apps (Ragsdale and Hoover 2016) on human behaviour's changes.

As I presented in the first section, people try to manage work/non-work boundaries through two different styles: integration and segmentation (Nippert-Eng, 1996b). It may be overly simplistic to argue that separating is always best or integrating is preferable. Managing work-life boundaries involves multiple aspects of people's complex lives. Neither strategy in isolation may be a way to reduce work-life conflict. Effective work-life strategies vary depending on an individual's configuration of identities, behaviours, and level of boundary control over the job and home contexts (Kossek, 2016). By drawing attention to the opportunities of work/non-work boundary-blurring the existence of such boundaries is also brought to attention and re-established. This is a further issue to be considered in my PhD research.

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