Living and Working Confined at Home: Boundaries and Platforms during the Lockdown

Elisabetta Risi ¹*, Riccardo Pronzato ¹, Guido Di Fraia ¹

¹ *IULM University*, ITALY

Corresponding Author: elisabetta.risi@iulm.it

ABSTRACT

The ubiquity of digital platforms has progressively re-structured everyday life, as individuals are embedded within a structure of permanent connectivity and surveillance. A growing literature is exploring how digital platforms play a fundamental role in consolidating platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017). Spreading across the production and reproduction of social life, digital platforms have come to significantly re-mediate social relationships and organizational processes. Digital platforms have colonized multiple areas of social life and remodelled social relations. These trends are likely to accelerate due to the COVID-19 emergency. The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a serious threat to the global economy as containment measures have been imposed to limit human mobility. At the same time, a distinction between essential and non-essential productive activities has been imposed and a new division in labour composition emerged between so called remote working and place-based jobs. In the lockdown context, people experienced the hyper-dependence of sociality on private digital platforms, creating what Van Dijck et al. (2018) call a platform society. Social space, everyday life, and everyday communication have changed. The workplace and the home have converged: the boundaries between leisure time and labour time, the office and the home, have become blurred. For many people, this tendency has meant an increase of their labour time and the necessity to manage multiple social roles at the same time in one location. Indeed, during the coronavirus crisis, many different times, spaces and social roles converged in the home. This period also highlighted again the relevance of digital literacy and of the inequalities connected with the use of digital technologies. Moreover, individuals were forced to act within the affordances of platforms designed and owned by a few private companies.

Keywords: digital platform, COVID19, mediatization

At the beginning of March 2020, Italy was put under lockdown. It was the first country in Europe to implement social distancing and home confinement measures, thereby placing 60 million people in quarantine. To contain the spread of COVID-19, all working activities were shut down aside from essential service industries and citizens were told not to leave their homes other than for non-deferrable and proven health or business motivations. Within a few days, the government obliged most of the people to live 24/7 confined in their houses, either with their families or alone. More than 3 million people had to continue working remotely from home, while another 8 million were not authorised to go to their workplace. Furthermore, for the first time, students, teachers and parents were compelled to deal with e-learning as it was considered the only solution to guarantee the right to education.

Within this scenario, social distancing became a constant feature of everyday life, and home confinement dramatically impacted daily habits and how individuals make sense of their experiences. In particular, social distancing restrictions and the obligation to remain at home affected how individuals perceive their "territories of the self" (Goffman, 1971). As Brooks Gardner and Gronfein (2006) put it, this concept indicates "literal and metaphorical territories that represent defendable personal boundaries". These "physical and symbolic cultural constructions" (p. 83) act, indeed, as a symbolic threshold that delimit our experiences and perceptions. Given that close physical proximity was allowed only inside the home, while all the other contacts were banned, the physical boundaries of these territories were completely redefined. However, social distancing did not imply the disappearance but a radical transformation and reorganization of social relationships, which were completely mediatized (Fuchs, 2020), with digital platforms that became essential tools to communicate and relate with each other. Following Turkle (2011), individuals were alone (in their homes) together (in and through media platforms).

In the 1970s, Lefebvre (1974) argued that space is not a neutral entity but a social outcome. Lefebvre distinguishes three intertwined levels of space: perceived, conceived and lived, and argues that meaning emerges from the perspectives of the actors in space, as well as from the relations that are situated within the ways in which space is conceived, perceived and lived. Digital platforms - which have been widely used for e-learning, remote work, entertainment, and so forth - have not abolished distances, but rather mediatized them (Couldry and Hepp, 2013). During the lockdown, *deep mediatization* (Hepp, 2019) has permeated almost every aspect of everyday life and even people who had only superficially and partially coped with this process were obliged to deal with the pervasive and ubiquitous technological mediation of their everyday experience.

Digital platforms were necessary for workers that had to continue their profession remotely, as well as for the ones that were confined at home to reconstruct their networks of social relationships. Indeed, human face-to-face communications were transformed in mediated social relationships and the boundaries of the territories of the self were re-imagined and mediatized. Indeed, the otherness could only be reached through digital platforms, while contacts outside the home had to be considered a potential threat.

Thus, social distancing restrictions imposed a sort of *reframing* (Goffman, 1974) of everyday life. Frames are "schemata of interpretation" (Goffman, 1974, p. 21), i.e. the categories through which we interpret our experiences. These categories are used by individuals to reduce the complexity and incertitude of social life, by endowing social order with predictability and providing a background through which everyday activities are rendered readable and meaningful (Misztal, 2001). During the COVID-19 crisis, individuals trespassed the boundaries of their houses by using digital platforms that reshaped social relationships and everyday life. These were required to develop new schemata of interpretations to preserve cognitive order. Digital platforms played a key role in this process as they built new frames within which relational spaces could be perceived, conceived and lived.

Today we live in a platform society (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Indeed, in the last decade, digital platforms have colonised several key areas of social life: from training to communication, from production to logistics, up to institutional practices, and so forth, social relations and organisations processes have been dramatically remodelled. The essential role of these infrastructures clearly emerged during the lockdown, as platforms played a crucial role in performing tasks of public interest. Platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) has in fact been certainly reinforced by this period of forced home confinement. As Richard Waters put it in the *Financial Times*: "the forced behavioural change across an entire population is something that Big Tech's marketing departments couldn't have dreamt of".

During the crisis, physical boundaries turned into the ones imposed by social distancing restrictions (the home), while platforms' affordances emerged as the new boundaries of everyday life. Workers that could continue their activities had to do it through platforms, likewise digital devices were the only means with which students and teachers could continue their activities. Video calls became the main and preferential manner to maintain family relations, while there has been a striking growth in the use of e-commerce platforms (Amazon's revenues increased by 40% in the April-June period). The "Amazonification of the Planet" (Merchant, 2020) accelerated, as well as the surveillance logics that were already paradigmatic both at the commercial and government level.

As already highlighted, "platforms do not reflect the social: they produce the social structures we live in" (van Dijck, 2018, p. 2), i.e. they intervene in the definition of social relations through forms of connection in which particular cultural norms and sociotechnical logics are embedded and intertwined (van Dijck, 2013), thereby creating symbolic practices and boundaries that delimit specific ways of relating and being together (and of intending them). Thus, platforms are private products that do not merely reproduce pre-existing offline dynamics, but actively shape the construction and management of sociality through their affordances, which constrain the possibilities and forms of relationships between individuals. Affordances can be defined as the "socio-technical architectures" of platforms, which imply their "capacity to shape the agency of human actors" (Caliandro and Gandini, 2017, p. 11). During the lockdown, when citizens had to stay at home and avoid going out, the affordances of the platforms were the boundaries of their territories of the self, i.e. the limits within which sociality could take place and be reconstructed.

An area of social life that has been certainly affected by platforms during the quarantine is work. Apart from workers in the essential service industries, there are two main categories of workers that emerged from this scenario: locked workers - i.e. individuals that were not allowed to work, following sanitary restrictions - and remote workers - i.e. individuals that could continue working from home through digital technologies. The latter category includes those generally defined as "white collar" workers, but also teachers and knowledge workers (e.g. McKercher and Mosco, 2007).

Before the COVID-19 crisis knowledge workers were used to working from different spaces, while most of the white collar workers had to go to their offices. Despite some forms of partial remote working, in fact, at least in the Italian socio-cultural context, the office was considered a necessity for most of the companies. However, since the beginning of the lockdown, it was taken for granted that workers had to immediately adapt to remote working practices, without considering the management and reorganisation of spaces, routines and family relations, which were implied in home confinement restrictions (Fuchs, 2020).

Indeed, in the lockdown life, the home, the workplace and the public spaces have converged in the same space-time continuum. This can be framed within a wider process of flexibilization and digitalisation of capitalist societies that develop an extended and reticular working space (Risi, 2015), and redefine the spheres and boundaries of everyday experience. The ubiquitous presence of platforms, in fact, has progressively re-structured work, entailing an idea of permanent connectivity that has already permeated all the realms of life (Armano et al., 2017)

Today individuals are increasingly understood as self-governing units that can manage themselves and autonomously reach their goals. This is a typical feature of a *performance* society (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999), i.e. "a society saturated with performances of many and various kinds" (Stark, 2020, p. 2). However, if different performances are generally associated with different places, during the COVID-19 crisis, it appears difficult for remote workers, and especially women, to manage different performances contemporarily, as they have had to remain productive at work, but also to carry out time-consuming activities related to family life.[1] Then, a major concern for remote workers has also been the re-organisation of spaces and the re-compartmentalization of time periods within the same space: the home. During the lockdown, all the realms of social life converged in the same space-time, thus, individuals had to develop new routines and practices to cope with a novel and uncertain scenario. Within this process, platforms surfaced as essential spaces that allowed remote working practices, while modelling and constraining individuals' activities. Indeed, platforms play a proactive role in the shaping of social life. Platforms intervene (Gillespie, 2015), without being neutral and unbiased, but embedded with specific socio-cultural logics and private interests (e.g. Beer, 2017).

Furthermore, it should be noted that while remote workers had to re-organise their spaces and professional activities, on the other hand, locked workers were obliged not to work. For them, digital platforms meant the possibility to cross the physical boundaries of their territories of self and to re-construct social relations, within the affordances of digital platform, which turned into the new boundaries of everyday life.

To conclude, social spaces and everyday life have dramatically changed in the coronavirus crisis. During the lockdown, the platformization of work and everyday life (Casilli and Posada, 2019) unfolded and the key role of these infrastructures for social life became apparent. The boundaries of the territories of the self were disruptively changed by home confinement restrictions and mediatized by digital technologies, with platforms that allowed individuals to re-construct different realms of social life, although the distinction between different spheres appeared increasingly blurred. Within this scenario, platforms' affordances became the new boundaries of everyday life.

REFERENCES

Alon, T. M., Doepke, M., Olmstead-Rumsey, J., & Tertilt, M. (2020, April). The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality (NBER Working Paper No. 26947). https://doi.org/10.3386/w26947

Armano, E., Murgia, A., & Teli, M. (Eds.) (2017). *Platform capitalism e confini del lavoro negli spazi digitali*. Milan, Italy: Mimesis.

Beer, D. (2017). The social power of algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1216147

Boltanski, L. & Chiapello, E. (1999). *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris, France: Gallimard.

---

[1] This is only one of the gendered components of COVID-19. It should be noted, in fact, that women appear as a category disproportionately affected by the consequences of the pandemic (e.g. Alon et al., 2020): for instance, some commentators consider the coronavirus recession a "pink-collar recession" (e.g. Ribeiro, 2020), as job losses for women have been dramatically higher, while others refers to it as a "shadow pandemic", given the growth of domestic violence during the lockdown (UN Women, 2020).

Brooks Gardner, C. and Gronfein, W. P. (2006). Body Armour: Managing Disability and the Precariousness of the Territories of the Self". In D. Waskul, P. Vannini, *Body/Embodiment. Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body* (pp, 83-94), Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Caliandro, A., & Gandini, A. (2017). *Qualitative research in digital environments: A research toolkit*. London, UK: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315642161

Casilli, A. & Posada, J. (2019). The Platformization of Labor and Society. In M. Graham & W. H. Dutton, *Society and the Internet. How Networks of Information and Communication are Changing Our Lives* (2ⁿᵈ ed.) (pp. 293-306). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198843498.003.0018

Couldry, N. & Hepp, A. (2013). Conceptualizing mediatization: Contexts, traditions, arguments". *Communication Theory*, 23(3), 191-202. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12019

Fuchs, C. (2020). Everyday Life and Everyday Communication in Coronavirus Capitalism. *Triple C*, 18(1), 375-399. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v18i1.1167

Gillespie, T. (2015). Platforms Intervene. *Social Media+Society,* 1(1), 1-2. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115580479

Goffman, E. (1972). *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the public order*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay of the Organization of Experience*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Hepp, A. (2019). *Deep Mediatization: Key Ideas in Media & Cultural Studies*. London, UK: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351064903

Lefebvre, H. (1974). *The Production of Space*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

McKercher, C. & Mosco, V. (Eds.) (2008). *Knowledge Workers in the Information Society*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Merchant, B. (2020, March 19). Coronavirus Is Speeding Up the Amazonification of the Planet. *Medium*. Retrieved from https://onezero.medium.com/

Misztal, B. A. (2001). Normality and trust in Goffman's theory of interaction order. *Sociological theory*, 19(3), 312-324. https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00143

Ribeiro, C. (2020, May 23). 'Pink-collar recession': how the Covid-19 crisis could set back a generation of women. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/

Risi, E. (2015). Intersezioni e confini del lavoro, tra spazi e tempi urbani e digitali. Il caso dei knowledge workers a Milano. In E. Armano and A. Murgia (Eds.), *Le reti del lavoro gratuito. Spazi urbani e nuove soggettività* (pp. 59-76). Verona, Italy: Ombre Corte.

Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Stark, D. (Eds.) (2020). *The Performance Complex*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198861669.001.0001

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

UN Women (2020, April 6). Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic. Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/

Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199970773.001.0001

Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & De Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190889760.001.0001

Waters, R. (2020, May 1). Lockdown has brought the digital future forward — but will we slip back? *Financial Times*. Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/