

Boundaries in a Space of Flows

The Case of Migrant Researchers’ Use of ICTs

Key Deliverable
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Executive Summary

The study detailed in this report was conducted as part of the EMTEL II network work on “living and working in the Information Society”. The general aim of EMTEL is the exploration of how ICTs are embedded in everyday routines and practices. One way to frame expected changes in this domain is through an understanding of processes of time and space distancing and compression. Within this frame, new ICTs are interpreted as the latest instance of technologies that since the beginnings of modernity increasingly enable the detachment of social interaction from corporeal co-presence. The space of time-space compression/distancing is social space, which implies a temporal aspect. Similarly to Hägerstrand's time-space diagrams, it is a space of distances and proximities between humans, but also of co-presence or absence, enclosure or disclosure. Within this perspective, place is defined as “meeting place”. Although place is often imagined as locale of corporeal co-presence, a study trying to explore fundamental changes in daily routines to do with “meeting places” - be they online or offline - cannot presuppose that the restricted understanding of 'meeting' as face-to-face encounter is still applicable. In terms of time-space compression/distancing this is rephrased as a question of how spaces and places are (re) organised in daily lives of users of new ICTs. Which difference does it make to routinely 'meet' people globally on a daily basis? Does it make any difference at all?

In order to answer these questions the everyday life of a professional group was explored. They group can be characterised not only as “heavy users” of electronic networks but also as socially networked on a global scale: *Migrant researchers* are among Europe's most “wired” and at the same time most mobile individuals. As such, we can expect them to be living under conditions of extreme time-space compression/distancing. An exploration of their daily routines encompassing their technically mediated and non-mediated communication as well as work and leisure activities and social context provides insights in social implications of new ICTs that are to do with new patterns of the organisation of social space(s). The exploration of the role of new ICTs in time-space distancing/compression carried out here focuses on two pairs of specific “meeting places”: the local versus the global and the home versus the work place.

The findings are based on 20 in depth interviews carried out in Trondheim, Norway (12 interviews) and Darmstadt, Germany (eight interviews) between October 2001 and

January 2002. These interviews reveal a broad variety of practices and routines, which point to a far-reaching *detritorialisation* changing temporal and spatial structures of daily life:

- Households are distributed transnationally,
- interpretations of national and regional differences are transcending the dualistic pattern of homeland and hosting society,
- the transnational language English is the pragmatic choice in work and non-work,
- social networks consist of other foreigners, present or remote,
- the establishment and fostering of transnational networks clearly is accepted as prominent task,
- a broad variety of media is used routinely on a daily basis to sustain transnational networks, and finally
- the institutional context of work allows far reaching freedom in terms of time, space and content of work.

However, none of these observations is only about disappearing boundaries. Barriers remain, which I propose to call *residual boundaries*. They are left after many other boundaries were removed. So, if we for instance study flexible work under the condition of missing extrinsic restrictions, we notice that intrinsic restrictions like the need for co-ordination of different schedules in meetings, deadlines, or material rhythms in experiments still can exert quite a lot of structuring power. Furthermore, we can observe that in some cases the structure of agendas of other institutions, (for example, the kindergarten's schedule) takes over. Residual boundaries appear as intrinsic restrictions, they are imposed by other institutions, they are dependent on characteristics of the specific location, and are evoked by the migrants themselves in rational considerations of efficiency and problem definitions.

Particularly when we explore cases, in which many of these residual boundaries are lacking, the result is not necessarily a greater degree of *detritorialisation*. On the contrary, routines and deliberate efforts to create *secondary boundaries* are the result. For instance local specificities that support *detritorialisation* both on the macro (global-local) and micro

(home-work) level, like cheap Internet access at home sponsored by the employer, are countered by manifold self-imposed spatial and temporal restrictions regarding media use. Particularly the home, though it is not the only place, in most instances rules out certain kinds of media use. “Home-making” as special case of place making typically involves the deliberate configuration of media use. Moreover, certain types of social relations are excluded from technically mediated communication, at least normatively. A recurring topic within the interviews is the discontent and psychological stress following from physical distance from family and close friends.

Workload is a key to the understanding of benign and malign impacts of flexible work and nearly universal accessibility through ICTs. Under the condition of a high workload, for example if someone is involved in several projects (that is, collaborations with the need for meetings), necessities imposed by residual boundaries can become major forces structuring the whole life of the worker. An important strategy to achieve control is place making, which always involves restriction of media use. Again it is most often the home, which is fortified as stronghold, but other places - as in one instance the laboratory - can function as protected places as well. In these cases other institutions, material circumstances and actors do not support the individual’s efforts of an “artificial” creation of boundaries. Which amount of work is sufficient is weakly defined in flexible research work. The individual’s “attitudes towards work”. (For example, “The results of my work become better, when I have enough quality time outside work”) are the only resources the individual can draw on and thus become important. They are then the only boundaries against a high workload.

Migrant researchers, like many other groups in contemporary societies, are exposed to increasing spatial and temporal flexibility, indeed. The struggle to re-establish control over one's life is fought at the barricades of residual and secondary boundaries. However, the locale of these fights is the everyday life, the unspectacular domain of repetition and routine. The point made here is that the story of deterritorialisation and re-territorialisation has not necessarily to be told assuming an ubiquitous space of flow that is violently disrupted by patriarchalism, fundamentalism, (counter-) revolutions, and other new forms of identity (Castells). The focus on the unspectacular routines of everyday life reveals how

transnational migrants silently learn to deal with new spatial and temporal flexibilities applying all different kinds of tools. We are witnessing a new round of time-space distancing, which is enabled by ICTs - among other (social) technologies, like for instance modern air travel. The close examination of the daily lives of individuals inhabiting the resulting “networks of flows and obstacles” (Negri/Hardt) neither gives cause to assume that a fundamental historical shift is taking place, nor justifies the assumption that everything remains the same. Many of the topics emerging from this study's interviews are well-known themes of social science: the home, the family, the working conditions, to mention only a few. However, within an everyday life that is adapted to the forces of increased de- and re-territorialisation the meaning changes. Some aspects become less important, some gain importance. The home is more than ever the threatened sanctuary of the individual, the family becomes the only domain, which is normatively excluded from technically mediated communication, whenever this is possible (and often it is not), and the workload determines the professional well-being of the worker on an unprecedented scale.