

Nomadcity – Bug or Feature?

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Abstract. This paper takes an auto-ethnographic approach, focusing on my own nomadic work practices as part of a sabbatical year. A diary excerpt is used to illustrate an example of working “anywhere, anytime” motivated partly by deadlines, but also by project interdependencies, as well as by urgency and by the desire to make space for some leisure time. Work happened seamlessly at different places, mobilizing various artefacts and involving various collaborators as a result of coordination efforts ‘over trajectories of time and distributed in space’ (Rossitto and Eklundh, 2007).

1 Introduction

Academics are generally seen to have a ‘good life’: teaching, grading, reading, writing papers and presenting them at conferences. And sometimes, getting sabbaticals. Although some believe that a sabbatical is a one-year holiday, I personally happened to work more hours than usual during this sabbatical year. Of course, the schedule was completely flexible and I could work from anywhere I chose to, but this didn’t make life a lot easier. The privilege of travelling around, meeting people and attending events came with a price. I had to permanently negotiate travel arrangements, a bed to sleep in, the daily meals, the Internet connection, and many other things one tends to take for granted when they are at home. My sabbatical wasn’t the smooth experience Kristina Höök is talking about (Fitzpatrick, 2017) as an ‘*amazing invigorating experience, time for reading, writing, connecting with the passion, sitting under a tree talking philosophy*’. For me, it was just work – satisfying, renewing, interesting work, but away from my nest and my routines.

2 Nomadic practices

With the ubiquity of mobile communication “anytime” has evolved into meaning literally anytime, nights, holidays and weekends included, while the “anywhere” concept is expanding as well. Perry et al. (2001) showed how this “access anytime anywhere” construct can be problematic, as it is playing only on opportunities and not taking into account the difficulties encountered by the nomadic workers.

Nomadic practices require holistic studies. As de Carvalho et al. (2017) put it, “*nomadicity goes beyond spatial movements, work on the move, or access to technological and informational resources anytime/anywhere*”. In the case of academics on sabbatical leave, their mobility is rather a matter of choice and opportunity, than obligation. In this day and age, the majority of practices are technologically mediated and artefacts are mainly digital. Accessing and sharing resources (Rossitto and Eklundh, 2007) can be easily done through online repositories or accessing intranets and libraries at distance.

Perry et al. (2001) speak of ‘planful opportunism’ as one of the key factors associated with mobile and nomadic practices, often connected with a wish to enhance productivity or with the unpredictability of the environment. Academics taking sabbaticals commonly expect more relaxed office hours, choosing the venue they want to work from, and (almost) total freedom on determining what they want to work on. In these situations, enhancing productivity might take other nuances, as in getting inspired by the environment, or responding to mood changes (de Carvalho et al., 2017). Sometimes, urgent tasks coming from ongoing projects and collaborations shape the academic’s workday in unexpected ways.

In the absence of a 9 to 5 rhythm, the blurring of work and non-work is often accentuated by nomadicity, as also observed by de Carvalho (2014).

3 Two days in the life...

During my sabbatical leave, I spent time in three different European universities and travelled to visit about 10 others. Working together with my colleagues there was the exception, and not the rule. I was permanently connected to my home university, to the artefacts I carried on my laptop, to tasks I had on other projects, collaborating with people located in other places around the world. The local context influenced my work, but not in a major way. If the necessary infrastructure was available, it didn’t count if it was morning or night, or if I was waiting for a flight on an airport somewhere or in a proper office.

My plan was to take time off for learning new things and finalizing a number of publications. As coordinator of a networking action that just started, in the last few months I had to deal with more administrative work than usual.

In the three universities I visited, I usually got a desk in someone's office and access to wifi. I enjoyed going to talks and lectures, giving some talks and meeting people.

As this was for me a long-awaited opportunity to introduce some method into my workaholic madness, I chose to document my practices and take time periodically to reflect on them. At the beginning of my sabbatical, I made the decision to keep a diary, where I jotted down notes on both work and life events. The following fragment shows a succession of my work/life events over 48h.

'I woke up at 6am, obsessed by the amount of things I had to finish before leaving. My temporary living place was a tiny student-like room at the back of a conference centre, with a motorway running next to it and a factory with heavy machinery nearby. I started with emails and invitations that had to be sent through a project portal I was afraid I couldn't access on the move – and they were all urgent! At 11am, I packed in a hurry, and went to my office at the university that is hosting me, where I changed hats and worked on the country report that we had to submit on behalf of Ireland for the same project. I was hoping I could have a lunch break, but when I looked at my watch I saw it was time to go and catch my train. I managed to download a few papers on nomadcity just before leaving, so that I could make a start on a draft in case I finished the other things I had to do.

I bought a sandwich on the way to the station. At 2pm I got on the train, ate my sandwich and went back to the final review report for a EU project I had been working on over the weekend. I had promised to pass it on to the other reviewer the next day, as it was due in a week. The two hours flew, and my report was advancing, but very slowly. At 4 pm when my train arrived, I went to the Airbnb apartment I had booked in the closest city to the airport, met with the host, connected to the wifi and went back to work. Around 7pm, I decided to go out for a meal. The plan was to go to the city centre, but I was far behind with work, so I had a salad in the first corner joint I could find. And back to work. Around midnight, I couldn't keep my eyes open. Of course I was far from finishing. I set the alarm for 6:30 am, but woke up at 4 and went back to work. At 7 am, I had a shower and a coffee before going to the bus station. Work on the bus wasn't easy, but I managed most of the way. I slept for the roughest 15 min of the way, when we left the motorway. I have this magic gift that I can fall asleep instantaneously whenever I am in a vehicle on the move. Closer to the airport, I checked my email – it looked like there was a glitch in a system: someone was trying to put in an application due today and was unsuccessful. It dawned on me that this could have been caused by the form I was putting off filling, as it required a bit of thinking. Once in the airport, I grabbed another coffee and sat down to fill out that form. It took me about 30 min, but I managed to do it. The moment I pressed "submit", the airport wifi connection vanished. No cache. Wifi came back, and I started again. I did it in 12 min this second time. I went through the luggage check and immigration. The other passengers were already queuing at the gate in the tiny

airport. In the queue that wasn't yet moving, I opened my laptop and sent an email to the applicant to try again. Oops! Another email landed- "who has access to the generic email of the project?" I thought for a minute, managed to remember the password, and sent it just as the queue started moving. Once out of the airport building, we spent another 10-min queuing on the tarmac. A few more emails answered on my phone – a link to Erasmus Mundi sent to a student who would like to visit us in autumn, additional information to an invited speaker to help her decision to join us for a meeting. Good, no more fires to fight now! Just in time for boarding the airplane. Three more hours to work on my report. Maybe I could finish it tonight! I spent the take-off and landing time, when laptops were not permitted, sketching ideas for the current paper on my notebook. I felt I was very productive.

At the other end, my friend picked me up at the airport. I dropped my luggage and went to a meeting with some project partners that I had scheduled in advance for 4pm. Two hours later, I had dinner with my friend in her kitchen. While speaking about her work, my work, travel, kids, life, I surreptitiously managed to share information on my afternoon meeting on Facebook and Twitter. At 11pm, when she went to bed, I connected to her home wifi to answer a few more emails and finish my report. At 1am, I had to stop- my eyelids were heavy. The 6 am start finally brought me to a complete draft. At 9am, I finally clicked "Send" and started my day off – quality time to be spent with my adult son, who had taken a day off work and got on a plane at 7am to come and meet me. We often find ourselves simultaneously in the same country around Europe for work, but do not manage to meet. This day was different.'

4 Discussion and conclusion

The short episode above is a sort of extreme example of working "anywhere, anytime" motivated partly by deadlines (the review report), but also by urgency (filling out forms, answering emails) and by the desire to make space for some leisure time.

Work happened almost seamlessly at my temporary accommodation, my host university, in the Airbnb apartment, in the airport, at my friend's house. I had everything I needed on my laptop and phone and planned my off-line work by downloading everything I needed. "Bridging places" (Rossitto and Eklundh, 2007) was straightforward, as most of my shared work was stored on Google Drive. As the task of writing the review report took a lot more time than expected, it spilled over what was supposed to be personal and travel time. Interdependencies made it impossible to postpone, as my colleague needed time to write his part and the report had to be submitted. This could be seen as an instantiation of knotworking, defined by Engeström et al. (1999), and cited by

Rossitto and Eklund (2007) as ‘a changing orchestration of people and artefacts over trajectories of time and distributed in space’.

Different types of work tasks got interweaved, from a large report with a strict deadline, to filling out forms that were not-so-urgent but required due to interdependencies and promptly answering easy-to-clear emails. Also, a visit with a personal character offered the opportunity of a short work visit.

Another insight that came out of the reflection exercise showed priority given to sorting out interdependencies, while my personal work gets often shifted to nights and weekends.

This short paper aimed to shed a light on my own nomadic practices and create some space for reflection and possibly for change.

5 References

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