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When is a bed not a bed? Exploring the interplay of the material and virtual in negotiating home-work boundaries

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Abstract

Working from home is often associated with possibilities of anytime-anyplace working and

with a fusion of work and home. In this empirical paper, we explore how the sociomaterial

contexts of home-working define and tether what is possible for home-workers in their

negotiations with others. Drawing on qualitative data sets, Wengerian concepts are used by

exploring the role of boundary objects and brokering in negotiating temporal and spatial

boundaries around and across work and home. The home-workers' bodies are shown to be

the key boundary objects, through which technology objects and furniture objects are

sometimes fused. Yet, such fusion is shown to be only temporary, always precariously

situated and also mediated by identity-regulating norms and values of home-workers. The

contribution of the paper is to highlight the limits of what is technologically possible by

emphasising the role of the body and material objects in the home-working context.

Key words:

Working from home – materiality – virtuality – boundary objects

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Introduction

The contemporary landscape of work has brought changes in how and where people work, has seen increased erosion of boundaries between work and non-work times and places through technologies such as smartphones, and has coincided with a number of ways of flexible work developing (Kingma 2016; Felstead, Jewson and Walters 2005; Gregg 2011). Popular discourses around the possibilities of anytime, anyplace working i.e. virtual working are increasingly centred on notions of home and work fusing or becoming integrated, especially when people work from home. However, these notions of fusion (Haeger and Lingham 2014) require closer inspection and questioning of the extent to which such fusion is possible and whether the objects through which we navigate our working lives allow for seamless integration (or not).

Rather than adopting a simplistic view of home-working and its potential for fusion as a positive or negative experience for those who engage in it, this paper is located in a body of literature which conceptualises home-working as a complex phenomenon. By this we mean that home-work is treated here as constantly contested, negotiated, and fluid in its boundaries because it challenges established meanings and cultural spheres, values and roles around how the domains of home and work are structured. The contribution of this paper is to highlight the limits of what is technologically possibly in the world of home-work, by emphasising the role of the body and material objects in the negotiation of boundaries between work and home. In particular, we show the body to be a fusion-enabling boundary object, while simultaneously being disciplined to accommodate work roles and demands. This view of home-work is quite a departure from much of the existing home-work research we are about to review.

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Working from home is associated with a rise in employee motivation, commitment and job satisfaction (Armstrong-Stassen 1998; Bailey and Kurland 2002; Collins 2005), an elimination of workplace distractions and improved productivity of the home-worker (Baruch 2000; Sheehy 2008). Working from home is also equated with better work-life balance (e.g. Felstead et al. 2002; Kurland and Bailey, 1999), partly through autonomy in scheduling work demands (Hill, Ferris and Märtinson 2003). This paints a picture of working from home as a balanced, efficient, and autonomous pursuit. Indeed, recent concepts around work-life fusion (Haeger and Lingham 2014) suggest that work and life issues are now commonly managed concurrently through technology.

However, the practice of dissolving temporal and organisational boundaries of when and where work is conducted is not without challenges. Negative outcomes of home-working include isolation, worry, guilt, stress and alienation from office-based workers (Collins 2005; Haddon and Lewis 1994; Kurland and Bailey 1999; Mann and Holdsworth 2003). Home-workers may be disadvantaged financially compared to office-based workers and suffer impaired career progression due to low organisational visibility (Haddon and Lewis 1994; Tietze 2002). Home-workers become outsiders in the organisation and can struggle to be taken seriously as a worker (Mirchandani 1998a). Some home-workers report a lack of support from their companies and miss out on informal opportunities to learn (Furnham 2006; Mann and Holdsworth 2003). The flexibility inherent in home-work, enabled by technology, also creates risks of work-life conflict, work intensification, workaholism, and 24/7 connectivity (Leonardi, Treem and Jackson 2010; MacCormick, Dery and Kolb 2012; Derks, van Mierlo and Schmitz 2014; Greenhill and Wilson 2006; Kelliher and Anderson 2010; Russell, O'Connell and McGinnity 2009).

While the investigation of positive and negative home-working outcomes we have just summarised provides interesting glimpses of the experience of home-working, in our view it neglects to capture the very core of home-working, which is aptly described as an "ontological limbo of being neither here nor there" by Tietze and Musson (2005, p.1344). The body of research which acknowledges the 'ontological limbo' underpinning home-work demonstrates that home-work complicates the construction of a clear sense of belonging (am I at work or at home?), partly because spatial cues are ambiguous and because it is possible to be simultaneously present and absent at home and at work (Halford, 2005).

This paper is aligned with the body of research acknowledging the 'ontological limbo' and adds a contribution to this line of inquiry by offering a theoretical conceptualisation of the role that material aspects of home-work such as technology objects and physical human objects (the human body) play in negotiating that 'limbo'. We thereby add a clearer explanation of the 'doing' of the popular notion of fusion – how it is negotiated with and through a variety of objects – that go beyond technological functions to include the socially- and bodily-mediated usage of objects, e.g. families arguing over whether a technological object (laptop/smartphone) should be used in bed and in which capacity.

Our conceptualisation is important for progressing this field as existing explanations of how home-workers and their families negotiate the presence of work at home have been somewhat two-dimensional in their analyses – there has been a focus on the agency and intentions of the home-worker, and attention has been paid to what is technologically possible when working from home. However, both technological usage as well as psychological intentions/agency are bound by the physicality of a human body: for example, how this body co-habits and negotiates space with others when working from home, and how this body is constrained in its physical ability to pay attention to two spheres.

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As we will show, analysing the third dimension of the body as boundary object through a practice theory lens enables us to show how the virtual possibilities of anywhere, anytime working are grounded in the concreteness of somewhere, sometime, and someone. Specifically, drawing on Wenger's (1998) concepts of brokering and boundary objects allows us to clarify the relationship between virtuality and materiality, and illuminate the unfolding processes, negotiations, paradoxes and failures concomitant with the popular, simplified notion of fusion.

Literature Review

Working from home is associated by some with blurred boundaries between home and work, which has both positive and negative outcomes. For example, blurring of home and work is associated with notions of work-life balance and with allowing home-workers to combine work and family duties in a more customised manner (Ahrentzen 1990; Baruch 2000; Felstead et al. 2002; Hill et al.2003; Mirchandani 2000; Russell et al. 2009). As such, home-work blurring can liberate workers from the traditional home-work dichotomy because new ideas of what constitutes work emerge and the division between home and work is re-evaluated (Mirchandani 1998b; Musson and Tietze 2004). This is in keeping with concepts of work-life integration (Lewis, Rapoport and Gambles 2003), work-family enrichment (Greenhaus and Powell 2006), and most recently work-life fusion (Haeger and Lingham 2014).

However, blurring is also associated with difficulties in distinguishing between home and work (Hill et al. 2003), encroachment of work on family time, work-home conflict and work intensification (Haddon and Lewis 1994; Hecht and Allen 2009; Kelliher and Anderson 2010; Russell et al. 2009; Sullivan 2000; Tietze and Musson 2003; Wapshott and Mallett 2012). A

blurring of boundaries is viewed as more emotionally demanding than segmenting each sphere (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate 2000; Clark 2000; Marsh and Musson 2008; Tietze 2005), or as creating dis-ease (Richardson 2012) because the proximity of home and work upsets the traditional home-work dichotomy (van Amsterdam 2015; Greenhill and Wilson 2006; Halford and Leonard 2001).

By its nature, working from home is ambiguous and allows home-workers to participate both in work and home communities. Existing research shows that home-workers use boundary management strategies to align themselves with either the work or the home community, e.g. boundaries aid the uninterrupted pursuit of work and protect the domestic sphere from being invaded by work concerns (Baruch 2000; Mirchandani 1998a; Sullivan 2000; Tietze and Musson 2003). Boundaries also define the parameters of both spheres and provide order, regularity and the psychological security of knowing what sphere one belongs to and how to act appropriately (Cohen, Duberley and Musson 2009; Tietze and Musson 2003; Tietze and Musson 2005). By emphasising the differences between paid and caring work, boundaries reinforce the legitimacy of home-workers as workers because they do not mix work and play (Halford 2005; Kylin and Karlsson 2008; Mirchandani 1998a; 1998b).

Clear positioning as a worker reaffirms their place in the work community to both themselves and others. It affirms legitimacy and on-going participation in such a domain and keeps open the trajectory of moving to a more central position within that community (e.g. promotion). Extant research thus highlights the extent to which home-workers engage in boundary work and how this functions in the home-work context to manage ambiguities (of place, time, identities etc.). Such findings cast doubt over the popular portrayal of home-work as the golden opportunity to seamlessly combine home and work demands (e.g. Furnham 2006; Haeger and Lingham 2014).

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Some existing research also highlights that negotiating work-home boundaries depends very much on the actors who partake in the negotiation, and rarely is it up to a lone home-worker in a vacuum to decide how, where, and when to work. Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep (2009) suggest that people have preferences regarding the interplay of home and work, but such preferences are weighed up against what is possible in a person's environment. Sometimes, there is a mismatch between what is desired and what is possible, which is conceptualised as boundary incongruence (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep 2009).

Anderson (2009) similarly highlights that people make sense of their home and work boundaries by interpreting the demands made on them and adapting their work-home boundaries based on demands. Demands can be asymmetrically adaptable, which indicates that some home or work communities will budge and accommodate the home-worker, whereas others will not. Tietze's (2005) and Brocklehurst's (2001) work showed that taking up the subject position of the worker anchors home-workers in the world of paid work, granting them authority and bargaining power in the household, which legitimises their work.

Continuing the theme of positioning, Marsh and Musson (2008) observed that home-working men positioned themselves in three ways: 1.) privileging professional issues, 2.) privileging parental issues, 3.) attempting to have it all. Marsh and Musson (2008) concluded that prioritising one sphere is less emotionally demanding than trying to have it all. Tietze and Musson (2010) found that telework success is related to issues of identity, such that if teleworkers continue to align themselves with the office work identity, their home-work arrangement will fail. This implies that it is important to achieve a positioning within the spheres of home and work that accommodates home-work. It suggests that the identity work of legitimising their work arrangements is necessary for home-workers. Based on Tietze and Musson (2005; 2010), continuing to identify with the office can lead to failure of home-work

arrangements, yet embracing one's identity as a home-worker can lead to the ontological limbo of being neither here nor there.

The research reviewed thus far usefully points out the experience, and consequences, of blurred boundaries in home-work. It also shows us that home-work requires identity work on the part of home-workers, which is negotiated with others. Much of the research reviewed draws on boundary theory (Nippert-Eng 1996; Clark 2000; Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate 2000), which proposed that people engage in boundary work to segment or integrate between home and work. Boundaries can be of a temporal, spatial, psychological, behavioural and social nature (Tietze and Musson 2003; Felstead, Jewson and Walters 2005; Sullivan 2000; Halford 2006; Ahrentzen 1990; Kylin and Karlsson 2008; Knapp et al. 2013). By highlighting for example the spatial nature of boundaries (Felstead, Jewson and Walters 2005), some researchers have contributed insights into the materiality of home-work.

We now move from our review of boundary blurring and types of boundaries, e.g. spatial boundaries, into a distinct, but related field: that of specific materiality, i.e. technology objects, and how these are used for work. Much of the research we attend to here focuses on how technological objects are used to negotiate boundaries between home and work, but not always by home-workers. We extend our review beyond those who work from home exclusively in order to understand broader patterns of technology use in other settings (e.g. by knowledge workers), as challenges encountered there may inform our reading of the home-work data we use.

Those who focus on how technology is used in home-work (Besseyre des Horts, Dery and MacCormick 2012; Golden and Geisler 2007; Matusik and Mickel 2011) have begun to make the role of objects more explicit: for example, Golden and Geisler (2007) suggest that four interpretative repertoires are used by knowledge workers when managing the work-life

boundary. Each interpretative repertoire is aligned with associated discursive moves (e.g. the language people might use when containing work), practices of using technology (e.g. how somebody containing work might use technology such as a Blackberry), and forms of boundary management (segmentation or integration). Golden and Geisler's (2007) approach is unique in combining the discursive, the cognitive, and the material aspects of boundary management.

Those who focus explicitly on how technology objects are used (e.g. Mazmanian, Orlikowski and Yates 2013; Cavazotte, Lemos and Villadsen 2014; Leonardi et al. 2010) debate whether workers exercise choice and control over how and when they use devices. More nuanced patterns of managing connectivity demands through technology have been suggested by Matusik and Mickel (2011) and MacCormick et al. (2012), who categorise workers along a spectrum of being constantly available and resisting constant connectivity. Symon and Pritchard (2015) add to our understanding of these debates of how smartphones are used by workers by examining the material context of how identity is constructed in such a setting. Villadsen (2016) further contributes useful alternative analysis of autonomy and constant connectivity by adding the lens of employee subjectivity, through a psychoanalytic interpretation. Instead of viewing individuals as either exercising choice or being enslaved to technology, he demonstrates that smartphone users are reflexive of their own practice and can dis-identify with corporate discourses and thereby evade the autonomy paradox.

We build on the literature cited here which offers careful and nuanced examination of how technology is used, in which contexts, under which social constraints, and which includes the users' interpretation of their practices. We do so by focusing on the specific context of home-working and considering the handling not just of work related objects (e.g. smartphones and laptops) but also home related objects (e.g. a couch and bed).

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We pay close attention to the experiences of home-workers and their accounts of handling objects, negotiating demands and boundaries with work and home others, and attempts to establish legitimate identities. By attending to the unfolding assemblage of practices, objects, and norms across domains we seek to deepen our understanding of the experience of home-workers and how the interplay of the material and virtual in actual experience can both create and tether possibilities for being, not just for the home-worker but also for home others. We do so by drawing attention to the objects which unravel the existential questions the home-working process raises. Objects in the home-working context limit what is and what is not possible, drawing attention to the fact that home-work sits between the seemingly limitless possibilities of virtuality and the constraints of materiality. Specifically, we highlight the interplay between different boundary objects and brokering in the home-working context, two concepts we take from Wenger (1998), which help us to understand the interplay between the objects and the negotiation behaviours that tether the possibilities of anytime/anywhere working.

Theoretical background – understanding virtuality through its material objects

Home-work is a form of virtual work. While virtual work can happen at any time and anywhere, and appears not to be reliant upon particular locations, virtuality cannot exist in and of itself. It needs to be embedded and enacted in particular contexts. This means it cannot exist without material expressions. In other words: virtuality and materiality are in a mutually constitutive relationship. Thus to understand virtual working one must understand the concrete, material forms which underpin and constitute it and vice versa. Materiality can be defined as "the arrangement of an artifact's physical and/or digital materials into particular forms that endure across differences in place and time" (Leonardi 2013; p. 69). Materiality

"derives from action" (Star 2010; p. 603), as "people act toward and with" (Star 2010; p. 603) objects.

In line with ideas borrowed from sociomateriality (Orlikowski 2007; 2009; Wajcman and Rose 2011; Leonardi 2013; Mutch 2013; Hislop Bosch-Sijtsema and Zimmermann 2013; Symon and Pritchard 2015), we view the physical composition of objects as inextricably linked with the social worlds of those who develop and use them. For example, Rinkinen, Jalas and Shove (2015; p. 871) contend that "the social significance of material objects lies in the ways in which they are 'handled'". We follow Orlikowski's (2009) notion of a relational ontology and entanglement in practice, whereby technological artifacts are treated symmetrically to humans. Technology is neither seen as a driver, nor are humans seen as having absolute agency over objects. Furthermore, humans and technology are not seen as essentially separate (Orlikowski 2009; Bowker and Star 1999), which in the home-working contexts means that the daily practices of people are inextricably linked to the technologies and objects that constitute their surroundings, such as phones, computers, and furniture.

Given our focus on the interplay between materiality and virtuality, a number of theoretical frameworks are informative, including Social Studies of Science and Technology (e.g. Hackett et al. 2008; Wajcman 2006), Actor Network Theory (e.g. Latour 1996), and Practice Theories. They have in common a view of technology and society as mutually constitutive. While any of these theories would have been a valid choice for examining our research focus, we have found two concepts within Wenger's (1998) communities of practice – those of brokering and boundary objects – to be analytically illuminative of how the virtual work of 'anywhere, anytime' gets grounded in the concreteness of 'somewhere, sometime' and especially 'someone' (brokering). These two conceptual tools help us to understand the fusion between virtuality and materiality, and the unfolding processes, negotiations,

paradoxes, and failures concomitant with fusion. Special emphasis is therefore dedicated to practice theories over other possible frameworks.

Practice theories (Wenger 1998; Bourdieu 1990; Schatzki 1996; 2010; Giddens 1984) help to illuminate the significance of the material world in understanding social relations. Objects play an important part in how social domains are negotiated:

> *"The physical composition of humans, artifacts, organisms, and things of nature [...] structure what actions can and might be carried out when, where, how and for what ends"* (Schatzki 2010; p. 137).

Approaching the home-working scenario through practice theories allows us to analyse how objects are 'handled' in embedded negotiations and social relations. We pay attention to how the actions of home-workers and work and family others create connections and distinctions between domains and examine the creative tensions emerging from the interplay between the material and the virtual in home-working. We take particular inspiration from two concepts articulated in Wenger's (1998) conceptualisation of the community of practice: boundary objects and brokering.

Boundary objects connect people to practices to which they do not belong (Wenger 1998), e.g. the house in which a home-worker works also provides the site for the family's home practices and the physical objects contained in it, such as a laptop or a work desk, can connect family members to a work practice to which they do not belong. Wenger's (1998) understanding of boundary objects is a slight departure from Star and Griesemer's (1989) original articulation of the term, which they defined as "objects which both inhabit several intersecting social worlds and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them" (p. 393). They are "plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several

parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites" (p. 393).

While we mobilise Wenger's (1998) definition of boundary objects, rather than Star and Griesemer's (1989) original articulation of the term, we acknowledge that the history of the concept is useful for understanding the idea that boundary objects hold different meanings for the different social worlds which address them and that these differences become topics of negotiation. Bowker and Star's (1999) further development of boundary objects explicitly incorporates Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of communities of practice by highlighting that membership of any particular community is about encountering and becoming familiar with the objects that constitute it.

In summary, different iterations of the notion of boundary objects highlight that material 'things' are constitutive of interactions in a particular social domain, and that these things are particularly visible when two communities of practices negotiate relations at their boundaries.

The second concept we use to frame our research is the notion of *brokering* (Wenger 1998). Conceptually, brokering places more specific emphasis on the behaviours and positionings of people across different communities of practice than on objects; nonetheless, as we will show, brokering behaviours are inextricably linked with material enactment. Brokering refers to the behaviour of people who are members in multiple communities, who bring elements of one community into another community with them (Wenger 1998), such as efficiency norms learned at work that are transferred into the home.

Brokering requires a degree of legitimacy to influence the development of a community of practice and requires membership in multiple communities in order to transfer elements between them (Wenger 1998). Negotiating participation across practices is therefore intricately linked with power relations and how one is positioned in a community. The

experience of belonging to several communities is called multi-membership and can lead to people being caught between communities of practice. This, according to Wenger (1998; p. 161) is "the living experience of boundaries". Defining and enacting such boundaries is a significant sense-making activity, as it is through negotiation of boundaries that "individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality" (Lamont and Molnar 2002; p. 168). Multi-membership might be unavoidable for a home-worker: because of the co-location of work and home, one is a member of a multitude of home and work-related practices at once.

Multi-membership, while facilitating brokering (transfer of norms and behaviours), can lead to the ambivalent experience of participating in many communities at once, but not really belonging to any of them. This experience is described as uprootedness (Wenger 1998), and is reminiscent of Star's (2010) understanding of the boundary as the space "where exactly that sense of here and there are confounded" (p. 602/603). Other 'occupational hazards' (Wenger 2000; p. 236) of brokering include organisational invisibility, marginality and homelessness, which reiterates the ontological limbo proposed by Tietze and Musson (2005) in relation to home-work.

In this paper, we apply the concepts of boundary objects and brokering to tease out how objects and the behaviours towards them ground the virtual and unbounded possibilities of home-working in materiality. The negotiation of this materiality must be navigated with others who make demands and who co-exist in a power dynamic with the home-worker. We will show that objects are constitutive of home-working, in the sense that they become a site of struggle (e.g. arguments over whether a kitchen table should be used for work or for eating between a home-worker and family members), which allows behaviours and norms of different communities to come in contact with one another, be transferred from home to work or vice versa, or be rejected as a brokering attempt.

Methodology

This article investigates how home-workers use brokering behaviours and boundary objects to align virtual work with the concrete, material aspects of home life. It is informed by the hermeneutic approach (McAuley 2004), and draws on the integration of personal experience, theory, literature, and a variety of data sources based on both home-workers (in the form of newspaper columns, online forums, and interviews) and the spouse of a home-worker (in the form of an autoethnographic diary). This approach provides us with access to the home location and with a variety of speaking positions.

The hermeneutic approach allows us to move back and forth between data and interpretation (McAuley 2004). We examined the subjectivities of home-working participants (newspaper columnist, online forum discussants, interviewees) in light of our own subjectivities, which for all three authors includes personal experience of working from home, and in the case of the first author, being the partner of a home-worker. Naturally, the development of this research was informed by our academic pre-understanding of the field. Our knowledge of the home-work setting is intricately linked with the analysis that emerged in this research (Blaikie 2010; McAuley 2004). The bringing together of different sources of data allows us to alternate between parts of home-working and the whole, and makes explicit the role of subjective experience in the interpretive process.

We define home-workers as people who engage in paid work while at home, irrespective of job categories, employment contract and precise nature of arrangement. This inclusive definition is based on the idea that everyone who works from home negotiates participation in the domains of home and work, regardless of circumstances. While we acknowledge that differing circumstances mean different experiences, for this article it is not of interest to map how one category of workers manages their home-work interface; rather, different

possibilities for creating connections between home and work are prioritised (see Sullivan (2003) for more information about issues of home-work definition).

The sample is drawn from the employment context of Ireland, where approximately 4% of the labour force work from home (Eurostat 2016). Ireland was deemed an interesting location in which to pursue this research as flexible working in Ireland is granted at the discretion of the employer and is not governed by specific legislation. Therefore individuals are at liberty to make choices about how to shape the home-work relationship and navigate its material contexts and virtual possibilities.

Data collection

Data collection began with unsolicited types of data. We followed a weekly column on working from home in an Irish broadsheet (A Dad's Life, The Irish Times, 2007-2010), written by an Irish home-working father over four years, which generated 195 columns. For the purposes of this paper, we drew on six of the most relevant columns, based on explicit references to the research focus. We also examined a strand (on the topic 'balancing work and life') on an online discussion forum for Irish home-working mothers (www.irishbusinesswomen.com) for six years for references to participation in home-work and managing boundaries. The selected strand contains 509 posts. Out of 509 posts, we selected 69 posts for inclusion in the analysis for this article, as these posts contained explicit references to the research focus.

To clarify any unanswered questions left by the written data, seven semi-structured interviews with Irish home-workers were conducted, each interview lasting between one and two hours. The interviews were of a conversational nature loosely guided by the topics of

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home-work boundaries, blurring, and relationships with home others and work others. All interviewees were professional workers, five men and two women, four non-parents and three parents. Interviewees were chosen by snowball sampling to deliberately span an interesting variety of personal circumstances, as the research interest was situated negotiation of work-home boundaries rather than insight into one specific type of worker.

The data collection process also included a personal diary maintained by the first author over the course of one year, which recorded negotiations between the author and her home-working partner as they moved in together and became accustomed to the presence of home and work under one roof. The diary as a first hand insight offers depth, moves away from an impersonal, academic narrative, and helps to make sense of others' accounts (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Gergen and Gergen 2003; Humphreys 2005; Holt 2003).

The combination of diverse individual accounts, all of which are rooted in their own social and material practices, results in an interesting and pluralistic analysis of how home-workers experience and handle boundary objects in their attempts to negotiate blurred boundaries in the home-work context. The overall sample consists of both male and female home-workers. We also included both parents and non-parents, in order not to privilege any particular circumstances. In summary, we suggest that the research strategy outlined here is useful for understanding how the socio-materiality of home-work tethers in the virtual possibilities of it, particularly as we benefit from a variety of speaking positions in the home-work scenario.

Analytic process

In line with the hermeneutic tradition, there was oscillation between data and experience as part of the interpretative process. In addition, some key literatures, namely the reviewed papers on sociomateriality and boundary objects, sensitised us to the role of material objects in boundary negotiation. In line with Blumer's (1954) notion of the research process being informed by sensitising concepts, we initially identified two different categories of objects, which fulfil boundary spanning functions, but which are also different in their degree of mobility and agency that can be exercised through them. We colour-coded any data where such objects were referred to and from thereon we identified how home-workers used them to facilitate their home-working practices, i.e. how they engaged in brokering activities. The hermeneutic process included the reading of the literature, the scrutiny of data and also the inclusion of our personal experience of being a 'home-working body' using technology and furniture.

To provide an example of how this sensitising process developed: in our first round of interpretation we identified two categories of objects (technology and furniture); sensitised by readings taken from sources about 'sociomateriality', we used those to discuss some of the diary data that was part of our data set. Table 1 provides an overview of the two boundary objects (technology and furniture), which emerged out of the analysis and shows how the effects of the two objects are drawn out. Further examination enabled us to 'discover' the body as an additional object, through which boundary spanning takes place and which is at the same time the 'battlefield' where struggles over time and accessibility are fought. In terms of the hermeneutic and cyclical analysis, we found that many of our colour codings overlapped and this meant that the different objects were in an interdependent relationship

with each other. This means that while we structure our findings into distinct categories, much of the data speaks to different boundary objects at once.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The Interplay of Material Objects and Virtuality in Home-Work

This section is structured so that first technology objects and then furniture objects are discussed. As the 'body as object' was identified as performing essential brokering functions across all boundary objects and brokering parties, we discuss issues of fusion through the body in the discussion section. Home-workers and their surrounding communities (at work and at home) used different kinds of objects to connect domains and to draw distinctions between them. These objects shape the practices of home-workers and emerge as sites of struggle, which bring out dilemmas and warrant negotiations.

We distinguish between different kinds of boundary objects, which provide material contexts to the virtual possibilities of home-work and which tether in the possibilities of anywhere and anytime labour. These objects are of course 'handled' in the interaction between the home-worker and relevant others, meaning that boundary objects are dependent on and even mutually constitutive of relationships between people. We found there to be a difference between technology boundary objects and furniture boundary objects, while the material form of the human body enacts and encounters these different objects. Therefore, rather than categorising the body as a separate boundary object, we will show below that embodiment is a constitutive element of how furniture and technology objects are navigated.

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Technology boundary objects

Technology boundary objects, e.g. phones, laptops, and other devices, are constructed by home-workers as gateways to the world of work and as enabling objects, which allow for connection to the workplace despite physical absence. Technology boundary objects can be omnipresent as they are often portable and can be always available, especially in the case of mobile devices. This material form makes it possible for home-workers to reach out towards the world of work and vice versa. Technology boundary objects however also serve a private function in the sense that while they are physically located in a space and may be perceived as a present device by several individuals at home, the home-worker could still engage in private actions, such as email checking, etc. which others in the room are not privy to.

> I prefer to use my laptop in the living room. I do switch it off to give my kids my un-divided attention at times but I do like the fact that I am working, yet as far as they are concerned, I am there. (Anna, online forum)

Anna's body and laptop are present as objects in the room with her children but her attention and focus is elsewhere as she works. She is there but not there simultaneously. Thus while technology affords the possibility of unbounded multi-membership across spheres, possibilities which have become perhaps fetishized as fusion, attending to the lived experience we see co-location of bodies, divided attention and limited, if any, joint engagement with home-others.

We also witness that when the home-worker is connected to the world of work only via a technology boundary object and other material cues (such as physical presence of the body) are unavailable, it allows the home-worker to paint a picture that is suggestive of physical embodiments of work as we know it but may in actual fact not exist:

> I just thought of a funny story another mom told me!! She received a phone call at home from a customer, she had 4 children screaming in the background so she said "can you just wait one moment until I go into my office" then she ran into the utility

> and shut the door, the children tried to follow, so she sat on the washing machine with her foot against the door...... "and then proceeded to take the order!!! 😄 (Cindy, online forum)

Here, the technology boundary object of the phone, which lets the home-worker connect to a customer and enables her to take an order, also enables the creation of an imaginary physical office and a setting of professionalism, which is at odds with the actual material context. Similar examples tell of technology boundary objects, which allow home-workers to paint an imaginary material setting:

> Well, you apologise, tell them that there was a childminding emergency or something else, find a nice way of talking about it and ahm, most of the time the customers or partners don't see it as a problem. […] Alright, you never know what people think, but you do notice that many are positively surprised that there's a child in the background. You quickly explain that you're at home at the moment, that your wife is at work (Simon, interview participant)

> So there's a couple of practicality issues around that but ahm, you know, the postman will come and the dogs will bark. And that's happened once or twice. And it's fine if it's just colleagues because they'll just be laughing but if it's external people I'm usually very careful. Lock them in somewhere so there's ahm and I have my phone, kind of people who ring me directly in the Dublin number it's just transferred to my mobile so they don't necessarily know where I am (Dee, interview participant)

In both examples we witness that technology boundary objects allow for impressions of professionalism to be created or maintained. In Dee's example, the fact that phone calls are transferred from her office landline to her mobile number allows her to maintain the impression that she is physically located in an office setting, and the material act of locking in her dogs further contributes to the impression she is creating. In Simon's example, the phone allows him to create a pretence of his child only being in the background because of a childcare emergency, rather than letting customers witness his regular Friday working arrangement, which in its actual material setting always includes being at home while looking after his daughter. The material form of technology boundary objects only limits what is possible to some degree: these kinds of objects do not require the people of different domains to be co-located in order to negotiate at the interface of these objects. Instead, technology

boundary objects allow home-workers to engage in types of brokering to tell a story to the world of work that is of their own creation and does not have to be reflective of their actual material context.

Mobile phones and email lack material cues of 'seeing' or being with the home-worker yet that material deficit in virtual contact affords the possibility of creating imaginary spaces, locations, and professional identities. To achieve this the material reality of screaming children and barking dogs needs to be made invisible, immaterial in the interaction, or in Simon's case 'excused' as an emergency i.e. not normal practice. How these objects are handled, and brokered in practice shows us the permeability of boundaries across domains (work and home), how participants creatively use the limits of materiality (phone is only audio) to create and legitimate their practices and professional selves with work others, and how this permeability of boundaries is much stronger in one direction (work to home) rather than the other (home to work) as the material reality of children and dogs needs to be made invisible to work others, thus calling into question notions of 'fusion'.

The other side of the story of technology boundary objects is their navigation by the people who are situated in the physical context of their use, in this case how home others respond to the home-worker utilising a technology boundary object towards work others. As we can see below, adults in the home setting are co-creators of the impression of professionalism, while children struggle to understand engagement with a technology boundary object as material engagement in the world of work:

> I don't think his boss would appreciate me pottering around in the background [while he is on a video conference] – but again what does his boss expect to happen in our home? It's supposed to be all business-like and everything but after all it is still the place where we live. (Researcher's diary)

> They (children) realise that at times we need to be left alone, but recently they have taken to ascertaining if I am definitely engaged in a job-related phone call before

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storming into the room and demanding that they get to know whoever is on the other end of the line. Fortunately, whoever is on the other end of the line is usually willing to tolerate their infractions but it doesn't make for a professional atmosphere. (Newspaper column: 17 February 2009)

Because our dear beloved daughter has a strong need for attention. And she doesn't like it when dad is working on the laptop. Or talking with customers on the phone. At that very moment, she gets it into her head that she urgently needs to play. With dad. (Simon, interview participant)

Tensions arise around the materiality of the body actually inhabiting a home space (pottering around in background) while the boundary object of using a laptop allows visual and audio connections to the work context. This creates risks of the home-worker being positioned as 'not business-like', or not professional, if home-others are visible across domains. The home other becomes uncomfortable inhabiting the home space as 'I don't think his boss would appreciate me…', suggesting again that the home other being 'invisible' would facilitate a more legitimate positioning for the home-worker in the work domain.

The materiality of home space and home others needs to be less visible, which is more difficult with the synchronous and richer visual and auditory channels of videoconferencing. Thus the richer material affordances of this technology object in use constrain the virtual possibilities of being positioned as a legitimate professional and also create dilemmas for the material possibilities of home others' existence (they should get out of the space, not be seen, not be heard). Relating to previous observations about the direction of the permeability of boundaries, it is noteworthy that home others are positioned as 'demanding', having a 'strong need for attention', and that their demands impinge on the business of getting work done, while work others are not similarly positioned as demanding or intrusive; instead, they 'tolerate infractions'.

From our data we can clearly see technology being used as boundary objects creating connections and distinctions between domains of practice. Interestingly as the materiality of the possible connections increased from asynchronous to synchronous communication across

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increasingly rich communication channels (from written, to voice, to videoconferencing) the

identity possibilities for the home-worker became more constrained and the material presence

of home spaces and home others became more problematic. The fantasy of anytime anywhere

virtual working was easier to create and sustain when the boundary object facilitated a sparser

material connection between domains.

If as Star (2010) suggested materiality 'derives from action' then what material practices are

constituted through technology objects being used in social relations here? The technology

object was primarily handled to create and legitimate the home-worker's identity as a

professional. To legitimate one's identity as a professional home-worker, technology is

handled to make invisible the materiality of home spaces and home others as much as

possible. The brokering across domains here strongly suggests the legitimation and

prioritisation of work demands underpinned by expectations of the transfer of norms of

professionalism, quiet, non-presence of non-workers etc. Perhaps these entanglements at the

boundary of work and home could be explained by the nature of the objects we have

discussed thus far i.e. technology being associated with work demands such as emails, report

writing etc. However, what about objects that are much more associated with the home

domain e.g. kitchen tables, beds, couches – how are they handled at the home-work

boundary? We move on in the next section to consider these boundary objects.

Furniture boundary objects

Furniture boundary objects, such as desks, sofas, kitchen tables and beds are less mobile than

technology boundary objects. They constitute the material and physical surroundings in

which home-work is navigated. In the home-work setting, furniture boundary objects serve

multiple functions and multiple 'masters' (the home-worker or home others, e.g. spouses,

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children, flatmates). These objects are contested in their meaning because they can be used

for multiple purposes, which can be flexibly negotiated, e.g. a kitchen table can provide the

material context for a comforting family meal, but can also be the space from which a home-

worker processes business transactions. Because these objects are less mobile than

technology objects, they express conflict more visibly and illuminate the notion of contested

space more prominently.

> This week he said he wanted to be able to cuddle up with me, so would I mind if he
> took work to bed. Not great for my sleep, but good to have him there. So he's started
> using a little folding coffee table, which he puts next to the bed with his laptop on it...
> (Researcher's diary)
>
> As I write this my son is lying asleep across my legs. I was at Open Coffee this morn-
> ing […] Had meetings with some people regarding some very exciting future devel-
> opments. And I am sitting here typing up the proposals and outlays with these busi-
> nesses that I cannot wait to start. All from my couch in my sitting room. I have an of-
> fice upstairs that my Husband is forever encouraging me to use. But I have always
> said my first job is Mum. (Cindy, online discussion forum)

Both examples display features of brokering, where work behaviours are transferred into the

home domain. As the first example shows, bringing work into the bedroom raises important

questions: For spouses, is it better to allow work into the bedroom than not spending time

with a home-working partner at all? There is also a clear theme of home-workers engaging in

ongoing negotiation with home others about acceptable practices. For example, in the extracts

above Cindy's husband is 'forever encouraging' her to use the home office and the researcher

is being asked 'would she mind' the laptop being used in the bedroom.

In the second extract we see the physical contact between mother and child, a material

connection between bodies; the flexible use of a couch as both an intimate home object, and

simultaneously a work object accommodating the laptop and typing up business proposals.

The objects of couch, bodies and technology are intertwined physically thus creating

connections between domains. Temporarily at least, the couch, a furniture object, allows for

fusion across domains and purposes. This is underpinned by Cindy's positioning of self as

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'my first job is Mum' and the rationale for not removing herself physically to the upstairs office. However, this temporary fusion is only possible if the home other makes little demands i.e. is asleep and not interrupting work, showing that the different states of a body as a boundary object (asleep versus requiring attention) determine the extent of fusion possible.

These examples of testing, trying out and negotiating boundaries demonstrate that the material contexts of home-work are not fixed, but are gradually navigated. Wenger (1998) talks about negotiation as a key element in our practices and describes it as 'an accomplishment that requires sustained attention and readjustment' (p. 53). Sometimes, these negotiations span different kinds of boundary objects at the same time, e.g. the below example shows how the phone as a technology boundary object enables work others to connect to the home-worker, while the negotiation at home plays out on the furniture boundary object of the bed.

> Sometimes I'd even be in bed in the morning, talking to customers, while I'm still in bed with my girlfriend. I'd often be called before technically work hours, ah so I would have customers, sometimes just calling me at half past 8 when I'm technically not supposed to start work till 9. And I would still be in bed and I would take their call and I would talk to them. (David, interview participant)

Furniture boundary objects such as the bed also necessitate negotiation around how one's body is to be used. A physical body in the bed conjures up connotations of intimacy and rest, and co-presence of the home-worker and his girlfriend in the bed is immediate, emotive, and very concrete. The fact that this material space is normally inhabited by both members of the couple in an intimate manner cannot be ignored, and the brokering behaviour enacted by David here is quite a transition. He must ignore the physical cues of the materiality of the bed and use the immediacy of the phone call instead to elicit norms of professionalism and customer service.

There are other examples where different kinds of objects and relationships become 'mixed

and mangled' into a whole that signifies neither the world of home nor the world of work, but

somewhere in between:

> What started out as a definite choice to leave the workplace has morphed over the
> years into a conglomeration of job and home life, where one doesn't end where the
> other starts. Rather, the two interweave constantly so neither I nor the people I am
> dealing with are ever quite sure if I'm working or not. These people include family,
> friends and colleagues. (Newspaper column: 17 February 2009)

> And then, well, at some stage the little one wakes up so I take care of her, make
> breakfast. And then she'll either sit on my lap while I work or she'll play while I'm
> working. Or I don't do anything and just play with her, or yeah, that's how we pass
> the day. So it's a constant mix between proper work, childminding, and somewhere in
> between. (Simon, interview participant)

> I am here but not!!! And always feel guilty, either not doing enough as a parent or
> doing enough with the business. (Maya, online discussion forum)

The words "conglomeration" and "interweave" in the first example demonstrate that the

material aspects of home-work are so ambiguous that those involved (including the home-

worker himself) cannot tell whether the home-worker is working or not. The physical body of

the home-worker and his capacity to think are mobile and could potentially always be

available for both domains. Similarly, the furniture and technology objects within which he

navigates his working and home life are available to both domains, and therefore do not

afford clues as to the appropriate domain either.

In the second example, while the words "mix" and "somewhere in between" signify a sense

of fusion, all of which plays out in the home space and its furniture objects, the ability to

connect different domains to each other depends on the physical demands of a child's body:

her needs for sleep, breakfast, and play determine the extent to which work is possible for this

home-worker. The last example contains the phrase "I am here but not", which highlights that

home-workers are living at the boundaries "where exactly that sense of here and there are

confounded" (Star 2010; p. 602/603). Living at the boundaries is a result of a number of

colliding factors: inhabiting unclear furniture objects, using technology objects which allow for presence in different domains, and ambiguous relationships with others marked by the display of work behaviours and home behaviours, often simultaneously.

The materiality of home-work tethers in its unbounded possibilities, but its concrete forms provide material expressions of conflict, negotiation, and ambiguity, rather than certainty. The metaphors of fusion and permeability (Haeger and Lingham 2014) have been used to describe the flexible interplay of time, space and objects across work and home domains.

However, in our data where participants used objects to broker connections between domains (while still recognising the distinction between work and non-work) the privileging of work demands and practices was much more likely than privileging home others and their demands. Thus the permeation of work into home was much more possible than home into work. To take one scenario – the mother working on a laptop while in the same room with the kids at home is more plausible than the kids spending a few hours with her at work playing. Where boundaries between domains become less clear, and result in 'a conglomeration of job and home life', the experience appears not to be one of seamless fusion but confusion living at the boundaries.

Discussion: Bodies as battlefields and fusion

Through our data we examined how materiality tethers the possibilities of anytime, anywhere working and specifically the role of material objects in brokering boundaries in home-working contexts. Two sensitising categories of technology and furniture emerged which were similar in fulfilling boundary spanning functions but differed in the degree of mobility and agency that can be exercised through them.

Both technology and furniture boundary objects are navigated via the human bodies of the home-workers and others involved. The body serves as 'the battlefield' where object relations are negotiated. The body emerges as the ultimate boundary object and becomes the site where tensions become lived experience. Star (2010) described boundary objects as "at once temporal, based in action, subject to reflection and local tailoring, and distributed throughout all of these dimensions" (p. 603). For example, recall the example of the home-worker being in bed with his girlfriend while taking customer phone calls – a scenario that requires furniture and technology objects – but one that affects physical bodies and psychological expressions most by raising questions of whether norms of professionalism or intimacy be performed. The identities performed here and the positioning of the home-worker becomes subject to negotiation ('the battlefield') and local tailoring.

The body can also give rise to moments of genuine fusion, such as the scenario where a mother wrote proposals on her laptop, while sitting on the couch with the child asleep in her lap. However, such fusion, while experienced as peaceful, is also momentarily precarious and depends on the body 'complying' and being asleep, rather than demanding attention, such as being hungry or wanting to play. The body thus serves as an instrument of bridging different norms, behaviours and experiences. The body is highly mobile, allowing the home-worker and others to switch quickly between domains and allowing them to be instantly available (e.g. you can think about work or home in an instant). However, the body is strongly bounded and cannot be easily shared between domains in the way that a furniture object can, so values and practices cannot be fused but must be switched between.

Star and Griesemer (1989; p.393) contended that boundary objects are "plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites". If we take the idea of the body as a boundary object further, is it plastic enough to allow switching between work and home

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demands, yet does it maintain a robust common identity across sites? Tietze and Musson (2010) and Marsh and Musson (2008) showed that teleworkers struggle to succeed if they do not align strongly with either their professional or home identities. This would show more support for the notion of the body as a constant battlefield in home-work than the body as a place for fusion. However, fusion is at the same time an attempt to cope with a coherent identity being dissolved and represents an embracing of 'being neither here nor there'. This is in line with Star's (2010) notion of the boundary object as a shared space, and from our data we show that a shared space can frequently mean a contested space.

In highlighting the challenges of maintaining a common identity across spaces, the idea of the body as boundary object also raises questions about whether the body should be seen only as an object that responds to the demands made on it by the different actors involved, or whether the body itself is a subject and possesses agency in negotiations. The different data examples we showed paint a varied picture: at times, the body is 'the battlefield' where object relations are negotiated, and as such the body is manipulated, done to, and reactive (as in the example of the home-worker in bed with his girlfriend – both respond to the demands of the situation by acting in a professional manner and remaining quiet). However, there are other times when the body becomes more active, demanding, and in control of the work-home negotiation, such as when children are screaming or demanding attention.

Looking at the interplay of technology, furniture and bodies, we found interesting uses of objects stemming from the limits of material connection in technology, such that objects could be used to create the impression of professionalism and a foregrounding of the work domain. For example, the more impoverished the material connection to work others (e.g. just voice rather than Skype image) the more home-workers could leverage virtual possibilities to create a professional positioning. Successfully brokering this positioning though was often contingent on home others being silent, sleeping, or invisible (while

screaming, storming children, barking dogs, and a pottering spouse all needed to be screened out). When such situations arise work others either need to be kept unaware of the materiality of home and home others or are positioned as tolerant 'of infractions' should the other sphere materialise.

In this assemblage of practice where technology is the boundary object we can see a primacy of work norms and values – thus it is not simply the importation of work tasks to the home but also the privileging of work identities, practices, and norms. Even furniture objects, which are far less mobile and much more associated with the home domain, can be temporarily brokered to serve work demands e.g. taking calls from the bed. Home others on the other hand, while having some negotiating clout, mostly need to be silent, invisible, and undemanding for the 'fusion' to function. The primacy of work values is particularly visible in the ways the bodies of home-workers and home others need to be disciplined to legitimate identities as a proper worker.

Thus in terms of a contribution we argue for the value of exploring the interplay of the virtual and material via boundary objects to examine the limits (and potential costs) of 'fusion' or 'permeability' in constituting home-work practices. By attending to the detail of how objects, identities and practices are handled we have been able to highlight the contestation and negotiation involved in home-working rather than the seamless blending of spheres which is assumed in many discourses around home-working and virtual work.

The tethering of possibilities, we argue, is created both through the material constraints of boundary objects but also importantly through the values and sense making of participants in relation to practices. The handling of 'matter' (objects or material artifacts) goes beyond its informational or task use for participants to highlight what matters i.e. values in social relations. In this vein, Schatzki (2002 cited in Rinkinen et al. 2015; p.877) suggests that

practices not only "delineate the means and process of doing" but also "simultaneously reproduce proper and desirable ends, aims and orientations".

However, in home-working the relationship between different domains of practice is being negotiated by home-workers and work and home others, and desirable ends and values may be irreconcilable. So for example parents try to 'be there' for children by working on a laptop while co-located in the same room but this only works if the child is sleeping or watching a movie and not making any demands on the parent's attention. They struggle to reconcile a normative evaluation of good parenting (being with your children) with being a good worker (devoting full attention to work task). While at a superficial level both domains are fused, in the sense of being co-located or intertwined, there is clearly not a resolution of competing normative evaluations (i.e. being a good parent and a good worker simultaneously).

These irreconcilable values can be glimpsed by attending in participants' accounts not just to what they do and with whom but to the normative evaluations around their attempts to sustain multi-membership across domains (e.g. 'guilt' at not being good enough in either sphere, work others 'tolerating infractions', or the sense of 'I am here but not!"). Therefore we argue for the importance not just of examining 'how' boundary objects tether possibilities and are used to negotiate boundaries. Instead, we argue for the importance of asking 'to what end'. We argue for the value of analysing how people's accounts of their handling of objects in assemblages of practices give us insight into what values are driving negotiations, who is a more powerful broker in a situated negotiation and what identity possibilities are opened up or indeed closed down for home-workers and home others.

Conclusion

Our study has drawn attention to the complex interplay of the material and virtual in constituting ways of being in home-working. As such it contributes to an ongoing research agenda (e.g. Wajcman and Rose 2011; Symon and Pritchard 2015; Orlikowski 2007) to unpack the sociomaterial aspects of everyday life. In particular we have shown the importance of attending to the intersection of objects, brokering and the negotiation of, often conflicting, values in understanding what is coming to be at the boundary of home and work life.

Our study adds a contribution to this growing body of research by moving beyond popular images of fusion and deriving a theoretical conceptualisation of fusion from our varied empirical data sources. Virtual forms of working, including working from home, have been shown to carry the potential to fuse practices deriving from different cultural spheres; yet, at the same time we show that such fusion is inchoate and precarious and that values inform the use and brokering of contested boundaries around time and space.

Our evidence demonstrates that fusion happens in paradoxical ways: through the boundary object of the body, fusion is both an enabling instrument for virtual working and a persistent source of resistance against encroachment of work into the private sphere. The body is a key 'object' through which home-workers make sense, negotiate boundaries and through which the materiality of virtuality becomes a lived and complex emotional experience. The body can be disciplined by those negotiating home-work boundaries (such as the silencing of the domestic and messy aspects of home life and home others), but it can also be an important agent in allowing for fusion to happen in the first place (physical co-presence of the home-worker in two domains).

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In conclusion, the contribution of our paper has been to highlight the limits of what is technologically possibly in the world of home-work, by emphasising the role of the body and material objects in the negotiation of boundaries between work and home. We have shown the body to be a fusion-enabling boundary object, while simultaneously being disciplined to accommodate work demands. The value of this approach has been to demonstrate the complexity of popular notions of work and home becoming seamlessly fused through technology and anytime, anywhere working.

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