New Media & Society

Work's Intimacy
Christine Lohmeier

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:
$SAGE

Additional services and information for *New Media & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://nms.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Oct 18, 2012

What is This?

One reservation I have with this book is the decision by the editors to frame the project around the organizing rubric of 'online territories'. It is a term that is deployed to capture the idea that what is needed are more 'complex understanding[s] of territorial reconfiguration' (p. 4). The editors stress that 'the concept of online territory . . . does not refer to an exclusive realm of "online practices"' (p. 5). Rather, they insist it is intended to highlight 'the extensions and reconfigurations of pre-existing means of territorialization, be they cultural, economic, or geopolitical, as well as the potential for new types of social territories to take shape, enabled by online connectivity and sociability' (p. 5). The reasoning is sound, but the term selected to convey this reasoning – that of 'online territories' – is problematic. To my mind, this title phrase does little to capture (or clarify) our complex engagements with overlapping territories and social practices that is the core concern of the book, and, in this way, perhaps, does something of a disservice to the very nuanced analyses that, for the most part, comprise the volume.

This issue aside, *Online Territories* is overall a strong collection that brings together detailed (micro-scale) analyses of 'particular territories and identities' (p. 11) which open up possibilities for (macro-scale) reexaminations and more complex views of 'how global processes that in a certain light could be seen as deterritorialization may also entail, even depend upon, mutual processes of territorial struggle' (p. 3), and all the cultural, economic, power, and geopolitical implications this involves.

Reviewed by: Christine Lohmeier, *University of Munich, Germany*

With *Work's Intimacy* Melissa Gregg offers a close-up of white-collar workers in the creative, communication and information industries. The data presented in this monograph − collected between 2007 and 2009 − provide a fascinating insight into how the use of new media technologies has shaped employees' quotidian experience of work.

Work's Intimacy consists of three main parts. Part I is entitled 'The Connectivity Imperative: Business Responses to New Media'. Chapter 1 on 'Selling the Flexible Workplace' sets the scene for the data presentation and analysis to follow. Gregg gathered her data in Brisbane, a place that had been branded a hub for the creative and knowledge industries. The author traces how, over time, telecommunications companies advertised mobility and the collapse of temporal and spatial dimensions as technical possibilities that all workers should take advantage of: 'The normalization of online, mobile work cultures took place across a number of fronts: as part of an expanded recruitment sections and lift-outs in broadsheets; a similar expansion in the coverage of leisured and work-related IT targeted to both ordinary and executive workers; technology advertising in travel and leisure magazines; and 'how-to' guides explaining the steps involved in setting up a functional office' (p. 33). It was the buying into these concepts which led to work becoming a more and more intimate part of employees' everyday lives. In the following chapter on 'Working from Home', Gregg begins to unmask some of the myths that surround the mobile office. In addition, and often in contrast to its assumed convenience − for example in the case of working mothers − working from home brings new

challenges, such as the partly self-imposed requirement to be reachable at all times. As Gregg points out, this is 'typical in the mid-range and ordinary kinds of information jobs regardless of status and financial compensation' (p. 46). Similar inconveniences show in the case of part-time workers and those on temporary contracts whose efforts to do their job well are seldom recognized by management and co-workers.

Part II of the monograph deals with 'Getting Intimate: Online Culture and the Rise of Social Networking'. In the following three chapters, the author focuses on the email habits of her research participants and the strategies they have come to develop in order to deal with the deluge of information and correspondence. For many, this means working outside of paid working hours and, interestingly, some research participants do not classify dealing with emails as work at all. On the other hand, responding to emails in a timely manner is also interpreted as an indicator of one's efficiency and one's commitment to the team. This nicely provides a bridge to the following chapter which considers the role of social networking sites. In particular, the rise of Facebook took place during the period this book documents. Gregg describes how workers found being on Facebook to be a break from the usual work routine − a guilty pleasure and a way to keep track of colleagues through their profile pages to see them in different contexts than the professional environment. Others found the mixing of friends, family and colleagues as contacts on a social networking site problematic. Then again, one research participants found a reliable community on Facebook when her partner was away working extended night shifts. This fascinating chapter demonstrates the complexities, the positive and the negative sides of Facebook's performative quality from the point of view of individuals whose daily routines are largely dominated by work schedules.

While Facebook might be a more or less straightforward site to use and navigate, some of Gregg's research participants were also concerned with the constant pressure to keep up with and learn how to use new programs and maximize on the facilities the internet affords. It was interpreted as a personal failure when difficulties with technical equipment were encountered. Similar to their attitude of responding to email, research participants would not view uploading stories on their company's website or work-related tweeting as part of their workload. Instead, this was classed as a little extra activity done in between the 'real' tasks.

Part III of *Work's Intimacy* carries the title 'Looking for Love in the Networked Household'. The first chapter considers 'Home Offices and Remote Parenting', outlining among other points how quotidian work practices have also taken a toll on spatial use in the home and interactions between family members. It is in the home that children witness their parents' commitment to work: 'As children grow up with work-focused parents, part of their education is to witness the labor regimes that will be necessary to secure their destiny as middle-class professionals' (p. 136). In the penultimate chapter, Gregg moves into more and more intimate territory. She addresses how family life, relationships and friendships are shaped by work's demands and how, in turn, participants' relationships with work becomes more and more intimate. While men find creating a time and place/space for work less challenging, women have to purposely free themselves from other tasks in order to allow for solitary time to work. Gregg summarizes that these working women are 'less interested in romance *fiction* since the real romance and adventure is to be found in work' (p. 141). Gregg dedicates the final chapter, 'On Call',

to employees working in IT support units. Their extremely demanding work schedules, plus the fact that all matters which require their attention are classified as very urgent, lead these workers to be available for work-related matters 24/7.

In many ways this book is a much-needed response to new-media evangelists who have highlighted solely the great opportunities that new media technology have brought us. Melissa Gregg shows clearly that the world of home offices, social networking sites and intensive smart phone use is not free from problems or inconveniences, and most notably it brings new kinds of pressure and expectations − both internally and externally imposed on the individual. Two themes that pervade this monograph are the lack of guidelines from management and the acceptance of individual responsibility by employees. These themes are of course highly interrelated: employees are silently expected to somehow manage additional tasks and to train themselves in using new programs and applications. In turn, Gregg's participants rarely reflect on the structural difficulties of their workload but see it as a personal failure if they are not able to keep on top of their tasks.

Work's Intimacy is a valuable addition to a growing field of literature on work in the creative industries. One minor flaw of this monograph is that it is at times challenging to keep track of research participants who were introduced in a previous chapter and then referred to again in subsequent sections. An anonymized overview of all participants would have been helpful here. For those working in academia, this book provides an intriguing case study which goes beyond its specific subject matter. For one thing, it hits close to home, as some of Gregg's participants were in fact academics who were very familiar with the issues outlined above. Furthermore, the working conditions, the instability and the precariousness many employees in the creative, knowledge and information industries face should lead us to question the promises universities and departments give their graduates on career paths and opportunities that might never come to pass.