

Conceptualising ‘Meta-Work’ in the Context of Continuous, Global Mobility: The Case of Digital Nomadism

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Abstract

Meta-work – the work that makes work possible – is an important aspect of professional lives. Yet, it is also one that remains understudied, in particular in the context of work activities characterised by continuous and global mobility. Building on a qualitative approach to online content analysis, this article sets out to explore the meta-work underlying digital nomadism, a leisure-driven lifestyle premised on a ‘work from anywhere’ logic. This article explores the four main dimensions of meta-work (resource mobilisation, articulation, transition and migration work) of digital nomads. In doing so, it shows the distinctiveness of the meta-work activities of digital nomads, thus conceptualising meta-work in the context of continuous, global mobility. Importantly, this article also challenges mainstream depictions of digital nomadism as a glamorous lifestyle accessible to anyone with the ‘right mind’ and the willingness to work less, be happier and live in some far-away paradisiac setting.

Keywords

digital nomadism, meta-work, new world of work, sociology of work

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Introduction

Any type of work involves performing a number of tasks and activities that remain hidden and are rarely acknowledged in formal depictions of work (Star and Strauss, 1999). Such activities can be conceptualised as meta-work, which has been defined earlier as ‘the work that enables work’ (Salzman and Palen, 2004: 2) or ‘the work of making work go well’ (Gerson, 2008: 196). Meta-work differentiates itself from other work activities in that it concerns the set-up of workers’ work activities as opposed to the activities that are part of their primary work sphere (Mark et al., 2005).

Various dimensions and manifestations of meta-work have been explored in the literature, including mobilisation work (Perry and Brodie, 2006), articulation work (Hampson and Junor, 2005; Postma et al., 2015; Strauss, 1988), configuration work (Jarrahi and Nelson, 2018) and more recently the tasks enabling flexible work (Whiting and Symon, 2020). While different in nature, these different forms of meta-work draw our attention onto the many invisible actions required to carry out professional activities. While the sociological literature has explored various facets of hidden or invisible work *sensu* Daniels (1987) and paid some attention to meta-work in an organisational context (Hampson and Junor, 2005), it has not done so in the context of continuous, global mobility. With flexible work arrangements gaining in popularity, it is therefore important to critically investigate how these new work modalities are established and supported.

In the pre-pandemic work landscape, a key figure at the forefront of the new world of work and global mobility was clearly the digital nomad (Aroles et al., 2019). There is no clear consensual definition of digital nomadism in the literature (see Aroles et al., 2020). Digital nomads are found in a wide array of occupations, including social media work (product placement, content sponsorship, brand endorsement, etc.), online mentoring and coaching, marketing, digital entrepreneurship, graphic design and IT/software development. The heterogeneity of their professional endeavours and employment status leads us to conceive of digital nomadism through the specificities of its mobility. Here, digital nomadism is defined as a leisure-driven lifestyle based on continuous and global mobility. Digital nomads can be conceptualised as a specific type of location-independent workers situated within the ‘Working From Anywhere’ (WFA) phenomenon (Choudhury et al., 2019). While ‘Working From Home’ (WFH) bestows temporal flexibility on workers, WFA opens the door to complete temporal and spatial flexibility. With digital nomads, the quest for temporal and location independence is complemented by global and continuous mobility. Importantly, digital nomadism is not only a flexible and mobile work arrangement, but also a lifestyle – a ‘distinctive, and therefore recognisable, mode of living’ (Sobel, 1981: 28). Digital nomads aspire to escape traditional work structures to achieve both professional and personal freedom. Empowered by their mobility (Hemsley et al., 2020), they select locations based on aesthetics and leisure considerations, rather than on the contingencies of their work activities.

This article aims to contribute to the sociological literature on meta-work and enhance our understanding of work life by exploring the different forms of meta-work that digital nomads need to perform. It thus revolves around the two following research questions: What are the specificities of meta-work in the context of continuous, global mobility? How does meta-work inform our understanding of digital nomadism and new work

practices? This article adopted a qualitative approach to content analysis, which involved a systematic process of data collection and thematic interpretation from various online sources. Of particular importance to this research were the two main forums connected to the digital nomad community as well as Facebook groups where digital nomads discuss and share their experiences of digital nomadism.

This article explores four main dimensions of meta-work underlying the professional activities of digital nomads, namely resource mobilisation work, articulation work, transition work and migration work. We show that, for digital nomads, meta-work is intrinsically connected to the question of mobility and the need to appear professional, thus preserving an ethos of smoothness, which lies at the core of their lifestyle. An appreciation of meta-work is crucial to our understanding of both digital nomadism and more generally new ways of working, thus enriching the sociological literature and highlighting the failed promises and feelings of disillusionment and disenchantment characterising the new world of work (see Sutherland et al., 2019). In particular, the glossy depictions of digital nomadism encountered on blogs and in the media contribute to its 'Disneyfication' as a movement and lifestyle (Bonneau and Aroles, 2021), thus distorting the reality of those involved in new ways of working. We thus argue that digital nomadism repeats and extends existing structural inequalities, as visible through the type and amount of meta-work digital nomads perform, similarly to other forms of work pertaining to the new world of work (Wood et al., 2019).

This article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on meta-work. An overview of the methodology underlying this article forms the basis of the third section. The fourth section lays out the four main dimensions of meta-work identified through the research. Finally, the discussion and the conclusion provide a critical reflection on the meta-work lying at the heart of digital nomadism.

Conceptualising meta-work as a form of invisible work

Work and invisibility

As suggested by Nardi and Engeström (1999: 2): 'work is, in a sense, always invisible to everyone but its own practitioners'. Generally speaking, invisible work is by definition work that is not perceived and/or not recognised. The fields of sociology of work, organisation studies as well as Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) have drawn our attention on work activities which are typically hidden, invisible or made invisible. Daniels' (1987) concept of invisible work has been very influential in theorising activities that are seen, from an economical or cultural standpoint, as 'without worth', including housework or volunteering activities. Her research has been expanded to other contexts, including paid domestic work (Cox, 1997), emotional labour (Ikeler, 2016; Macdonald, 1998) or dirty work (Duffy, 2007).

Hatton (2017) has shown that the term 'invisible work' has been used in the literature when referring to work that (i) is lacking legal protection and regulation (Pendo, 2016); (ii) is either economically or culturally devalued (Daniels, 1987); (iii) is socially marginalised (Nardi and Engeström, 1999); (iv) is typically overlooked and seen as unimportant (Kristal, 2002; Schmidt, 2016); and finally (v) is 'out of sight' (Macdonald, 1998; Star

and Strauss, 1999). The invisibility of different forms or aspects of work does not mean that this work is inconsequential and unimportant. The ‘mundane’ character of some tasks makes it difficult to formally recognise them. This is notably the case of practices regrouped under the umbrella of ‘meta-work’.

Defining meta-work

Meta-work refers to ‘the work that enables work’ (Salzman and Palen, 2004: 2) or ‘the work of making work go well’ (Gerson, 2008: 196). It encapsulates diverse activities that are (deliberately or not) ‘out of sight’. Meta-work activities can be mundane, seen as dull and uninteresting (Schmidt, 2016), be invisible or made invisible to others, or require skills that are not valued and involve difficulties that are not recognised as such. They are not part of formal job descriptions but nonetheless play a crucial role in the smooth functioning of professional activities (see Nardi and Engeström, 1999; Sachs, 1995).

Research in CSCW and in the sociology of work has contributed to develop our understanding of meta-work practices through the identification of three such types of activities, namely mobilisation work, configuration work and articulation work. Mobilisation work comprises activities performed to assemble the resources required to complete a task (see Perry and Brodie, 2006). Configuration work typically follows mobilisation work and covers activities that ‘make systems operate’ (Grinter, 1996; Jarrahi and Nelson, 2018); for instance, aligning tools with the task at hand. These two types of meta-work are required to make sure that all the various resources needed to complete a task or perform an activity are in place. Finally, articulation work refers to the activities required to manage the distributed nature of cooperative work (Schmidt and Bannon, 1992; Strauss, 1985). Articulation work comprises informal coordination practices allowing different kinds of activity and individuals to function together in an effective manner; such activities include aligning, integrating, negotiating and connecting (see Humphry, 2014; Schmidt, 2000).

Meta-work in the changing world of work

Refining our understanding of meta-work entails looking at new spaces where work is conducted. The increasingly distributed and mobile context in which many professional activities are carried out nowadays means that meta-work is not limited in space and time to a single workplace, but is carried out at home, on the road, in cafés or in coworking spaces (Ciolfi and De Carvalho, 2014). With advances made on the technological front, traditional, physical workspaces have become one of the many settings in which work occurs (Aroles et al., 2019). Increasingly, work activities take place, entirely or partly, in digitally mediated environments (technological platforms, online spaces, mobile device infrastructure, etc.). Flexible working thus relies on activities performed to support and sustain the use of digital technologies. More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, an exogenous shock, has further accentuated the importance of flexible working.

The term ‘digi-housekeeping’ has been proposed by Whiting and Symon (2020) to refer to these everyday activities, which remain mostly invisible, just like traditional housekeeping does. As they argue, ‘the labelling of such tasks as “mundane” discounts

their significance, rendering them invisible' (2020: 1082). Their description of digital housekeeping activities contributes to a finer conceptualisation of meta-work in the context of digitally mediated environments, which regroup activities that (i) can be distinguished from 'real' work and often help prepare it; (ii) create an infrastructure for 'real' work; (iii) ensure 'real' work can be engaged in anytime, anywhere; (iv) ensure 'real' work is optimally digitally supported; and (v) respond to, or anticipate, problems and are key to allowing performance of 'real' work to continue (Whiting and Symon, 2020). The invisibility of these activities can also be increased by the distance that separates workers from one another; such as is the case for distributed teams (Cramton et al., 2007). Thus, the visibility of meta-work gets even more reduced when work is conducted in distributed, mobile and mediated contexts, while its intensity increases.

Meta-work may also purposely be made invisible in order to convey an image of professionalism and reliability; for instance, customers may not be interested in how difficult it is to mobilise resources to perform a task or provide a service. When these activities are conducted abroad, often in different time zones, extra efforts must be dedicated to erase the distance with customers. The connection between meta-work and professionalism is perhaps even more marked for digital nomads, as they are not explicitly associated with an organisation. As such, they cannot rely on a formal infrastructure for questions of legitimacy, which implies that meta-work plays a critical role in the professional lives of digital nomads. While different forms of meta-work have been studied in organisations (Hampson and Junor, 2005), among teleworkers (Whiting and Symon, 2020) and in distributed teams (Hafermalz and Riemer, 2020), they have not been conceptualised in the case of highly mobile individuals such as digital nomads. Yet, the intensity of meta-work is serious for these workers not only because it must support new ways of working, but also a whole new mobile lifestyle, in which the notion of fixed home is often rethought.

Research method

Research focus

Digital nomadism is part and parcel of the changing world of work and its rise is intrinsically connected to the diversification of work modalities (Aroles et al., 2019; Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Spreitzer et al., 2017). Digital nomads form a specific type of location-independent workers who are voluntarily adopting ongoing and global mobility. The entanglement of leisure ('travel while working') and work ('work while travelling') turns remote work into a lifestyle. In their book entitled *Digital Nomad*, Makimoto and Manners (1997: 6) prophesied that:

with the ability to tap into every worldwide public information source from anywhere on the globe, and the ability to talk to anyone via a video link, humans are going to be given the opportunity, if they want it, of being global nomads.

Digital nomadism has been steadily gaining popularity over the years, recently experiencing a somehow exponential growth in the light of various technological innovations and developments (Aroles et al., 2020); in 2019, about 4.1 million independent workers

and 3.2 million traditional workers in the US described themselves as digital nomads (State of Independence in America, 2019). Digital nomadism is now regularly discussed in the media where it is typically depicted as an alternative, emancipatory, glamorous and highly attractive ‘way of living’, at odds with the daily humdrum of office work. Despite its growing popularity and presence in the media – where it is portrayed as a ‘revolution’ in the work landscape, providing freedom, flexibility and a better work–life balance – digital nomadism remains an emergent research topic in the sociological literature (see Müller, 2016).

Data collection

This research adopted a qualitative approach to content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) and drew from several types of online sources: forums, blogs, Facebook posts as well as newspaper articles, all of which were directly connected to the digital nomad community. Our approach was influenced by trace-based social media research (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017), which relies on the collection and analysis of user-generated digital traces available on social media platforms. We considered the content generated by social media users as traces of their online activities (rather than limiting our definition of traces to the metadata these activities generate). Content production (e.g. posting a question on a Facebook group) is the activity, and the content itself is a trace of this activity. In our case, we focused on the content generated by digital nomads on social media, and considered them not only as traces of online activities, but also as traces of their meta-work activities.

Online sources have been widely used as authenticated data collection platforms in the sociology of work (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020), and are suited to the study of digital nomadism for the following reasons. In a context where work is in transformation (Aroles et al., 2021), it seems important to investigate ‘in situ’ the new spaces where work activities take place. In the case of digital nomads, a significant proportion of work is performed in digital spaces. For them, social media is not only a communication tool or a vehicle for self-promotion, but also a workspace where they perform their work, exhibit their work process (see Hemsley et al., 2020), and where we learn about the atmosphere and emotional experience of work (Bonneau et al., 2021).

Digital nomads do not stay in one place long enough to integrate local communities of practice where they could find help to solve problems and by the nature of their work do not benefit from the structural comfort of facilitation provided by organisations. Hence, they tend to join online communities of practice that bring together nomads around the world, interacting in online forums and social media (Hemsley et al., 2020). For digital nomads, these communities could well be synonymous to the coffee break areas in traditional workplace settings where informal conversations among peers take place. These areas are generally a very good terrain for information exchange. The data are thus extracted in ‘natural environments’ and allow the discursive practices of the actors to be apprehended as such, and not according to the conceptions that the latter might have of them.

Overall, the research spanned over a period of two years, starting in early 2017. Importantly, with the exception of one Facebook group, our research revolved exclusively

around platforms open to the public. The process of data collection involved two main phases. Twitter and Facebook posts (on public accounts) have been used in the first stage of the research in order to identify further relevant online sources connected to the digital nomad community and to start gaining an understanding of the ongoing discussions occurring within this community. This first phase of the research was complemented by a survey of online newspaper articles in order to explore how digital nomadism was portrayed in the media and how that image compared to that articulated on both Twitter and Facebook. Newspaper articles became increasingly relevant in our attempt to unpack what lies behind the notion of digital nomadism. This preparatory phase of research allowed us to get a general overview of the current trends and topics of interest connected to digital nomadism.

In the second phase, the focus was on three main sources: the two main forums connected to the digital nomad community, approximately 40 personal blogs of digital nomads, and one specific Facebook group dedicated to digital nomads. In the interests of anonymity, these forums are not named. The exploration started with the personal blogs of digital nomads and then forum threads inviting members to introduce themselves. This amounted to analysing around 650 individual profiles, 350 of which were self-identified digital nomads. We then examined over 40 forum threads connected to the practicalities of being a digital nomad. This amounted to reading several hundred posts. This was complemented by the study of one Facebook group, which was chosen for its popularity (more than 30,000 members) and its level of activity (40 new posts per day on average). Over 190 Facebook posts related to those topics were examined in detail.

Data analysis

In order to articulate the themes and concepts emerging from the research, all three researchers systematically analysed and coded the data through an inductive approach. More precisely, a ‘three-stage process’ was followed, which involved generating first-order codes, second-order constructs and finally an overarching theme. By working through the research notes and the data collected, a series of first-order codes that captured the essence of the data was formulated. These first-order codes, which are the outcome of the analysis of blog posts and forum threads, were revised several times. These first-order codes include competition, transition, social media platforms, image, community, attracting clients, organising skills, professionalism, difficulties, inequalities, hidden work, commitment, frustration, loneliness, success and failure, and legitimacy. These codes enabled us to filter and organise the data before performing a more systematic analysis of the emerging themes linked to meta-work.

Second-order constructs were then crafted; this involved an iterative engagement with the first-order codes, the data collected as well as various debates and concepts within different streams of literature. These literatures included research on digital nomadism and broader changes in the world of work (for instance, Aroles et al., 2020; Bonneau and Enel, 2018; Müller, 2016; Spreitzer et al., 2017) as well as the literature connected to meta-work (Daniels, 1987; Hampson and Junor, 2005; Hatton, 2017; Star and Strauss, 1999; Whiting and Symon, 2020). This process allowed us to revisit, readjust and redevelop the first-order codes, as we sought to draw connections between our emerging

analytical paths. At this stage, a directed approach was used to focus specifically on elements relevant to the two research questions set in the introduction. This allowed us to categorise the different dimensions of meta-work that underlie digital nomadism. Altogether, this led to the development of our overarching theme, which sets to conceptualise the different facets of meta-work underlying digital nomadism and to explore the stakes of meta-work for digital nomads regarding matters of professionalism and legitimacy.

Finally, while this article does not engage with any sensitive topic per se, we nonetheless sought to protect the anonymity and privacy of those we researched. This entailed referring to various guides of best practice around the collection and analysis of publicly available 'private' data (see Hewson, 2016). Pseudonyms have been used throughout the article and anonymity was further ensured by systematically 'cloaking' the data; that is, a 'subtle alteration of text through changing word order and/or using synonyms to preserve meaning while avoiding traceability through search engines' (Glozer et al., 2019: 634). While we analysed original data to produce the research findings, all the quotes presented in this article are in 'cloaked' form.

Findings

What digital nomads discuss between themselves on forums and Facebook groups is at odds with what they would display on their social media profiles, blogs and websites (that are aimed at potential clients). When juxtaposing both, we can appreciate the existence and importance of meta-work for the activities of digital nomads. Through our exploration of the specificities of meta-work in the context of continuous, global mobility, we identified four dimensions of meta-work. The first two (resource mobilisation and articulation work) align with existing conceptualisations of meta-work, while the two others (transition and migration work) are specific to our case. Resource mobilisation as well as migration work are the two dominant forms of meta-work for digital nomads, with articulation and transition work playing more of a secondary role. We now turn our attention to these four dimensions.

Resource mobilisation work

The first type of 'meta-work' encountered is *resource mobilisation work*. Mobilisation work 'underlies many of the challenges and opportunities for mobile technology design, in supporting the secondary co-ordination efforts that users have to perform to meet their primary work objectives and goals' (Perry and Brodie, 2006: 103). Resource mobilisation work, for digital nomads, refers to the activities required to be able to put in place and maintain the socio-material infrastructures allowing them to work when they arrive in a new environment. It constitutes the most basic form of meta-work for that no work activities can be conducted until this dimension has been addressed. Part of this meta-work is predictable though and can be done 'in advance', even before reaching a new location. Hence, this type of meta-work would typically imply different temporalities, which is rarely acknowledged. While employees commonly rely on the 'sociomaterial scaffolding' (Orlikowski, 2006) afforded by infrastructures, technologies and spatial

arrangements to perform their work, for digital nomads, this assemblage must repetitively be brought together in their everyday work practices (and is hence more susceptible to problems).

On top of having to find an appropriate place for work, digital nomads need to build a temporary home base. Many complain about the difficulty of finding affordable, short-term housing that would allow them to start their activities as soon as they reach a new destination. This is even more complicated when travelling with dependants:

I'm about to move abroad with my little one and won't have a residency starting out. It's gonna be hard to get my kid into local daycare – which I don't think I want anyway. [. . .] I'd love to hear about your experiences! I'm a single parent so can't divide shifts with a hubbie/partner.

Yet this is absolutely pivotal, as their professional activities do not allow them to have breaks or spend a significant amount of time offline. For instance, social media influencers need to continuously create and post new content, online mentors cannot disappear for too long without potentially losing existing clients or missing new ones, freelancers need to be responsive to secure contracts, and so on. Importantly, this aspect of their lives remains hidden, as they need to appear professional at all times, effortlessly moving from one location to the other. In addition, if working on a table in a busy coffee shop might do the job for some, it is not well adapted to the needs of others whose work might require more dexterity, stability, precision or simply a quieter setting. The importance of, and stress related to, being available online is captured by a digital nomad:

I live in Costa Rica and our power went out last night . . . I was freaking out because I had a video interview this morning. I always keep at least \$20 on my SIM card so I can tether my laptop to it if the wifi goes out.

Resource mobilisation can be really problematic and effortful as digital nomads must have their own equipment, and also creatively compose when things do not align well (e.g. weak internet connections, noisy settings, etc.). Despite differences between digital nomads, this remains a significant challenge in the context of global mobility. Indeed, replicating the office anywhere requires additional work that very much depends on the characteristics of the local infrastructure, and is the sole responsibility of digital nomads.

Articulation work

The second type of 'meta-work' identified is *articulation work*. Articulation work amounts to 'the meshing of the often numerous tasks, clusters of tasks, and segments of the total arc [. . .] the meshing of efforts of various unit-workers [. . .] the meshing of actors with their various types of work and implicated tasks' (Strauss, 1985: 8). Previous studies have emphasised the crucial role of articulation work in establishing and maintaining the necessary arrangements for cooperative work, but also in performing the changes made necessary by the emergence of unexpected constraints (Schmidt and Bannon, 1992; Strauss, 1985). Articulation work is made of adjustments to others, management of common interfaces, availability and commitment. The following quote illustrates this aspect:

I ported my number to Google Voice and I also have a US Skype Number [. . .] When I know I'll be out and about or when I need someone to potentially wake me in the middle of the night, I give out my Skype Number which will forward to my local Number. Google Voice cannot forward to anything but a US number.

It is also concerned with preparing interactions with others. As hinted above, this does not only entail formal communication, but also making one's presence visible while being at a distance. The complexity of such meta-work is contingent upon the conditions in which digital nomads travel, the presence or otherwise of dependants, health requirements and so on:

Last year I had a really bad experience while trying to get a scan in Munich. I was not in the German system and my situation was not considered an emergency by the hospital (although it ended up being one). [. . .] From that moment I started talking with other women who mentioned similar problems while trying to get women's health, of family planning options while on the road.

Digital nomads must therefore make their activities visible to their collaborators and clients, and also remain attentive to what the latter are doing (Perry and Brodie, 2006). Digital nomads must find other ways to make their actions explicit, providing just enough information to their interlocutors, but without being too intrusive or generating too many interruptions, while making sure that their personal lives do not invade their professional space. In practice, this means that digital nomads typically have to 'over-work' to maintain their businesses afloat; a problem encountered in other forms of work and widespread in the new world of work (Sutherland et al., 2019). This is further accentuated by the global mobility lying at the heart of digital nomadism. In turn, this also contributes to creating a false image of ease that is detrimental to both current digital nomads (stigmatising their work as easy and effortless) and aspiring ones (as it conveys a somehow erroneous image of easiness) (see Bonneau and Aroles, 2021).

Transition work

The third type of 'meta-work' identified here is *transition work*. Transition work encapsulates all the different activities needed to deal with work fragmentation across different temporalities and spatialities. As noted by Duffy (2017: 211), 'spatial flexibility – working remotely – may correlate with a decline in temporal flexibility'. Claiming spatial autonomy means that they should take individual responsibility for coordinating 'desynchronised' activities (Hand, 2020). Spatial distance, jet lag and different time zones generate fundamental incompatibilities that digital nomads have to somehow minimise. This can, for instance, involve adapting their schedules to the needs of their clients/collaborators:

I spent 2 months travelling around Europe and Central Asia and my clients were Pacific Time: 7 to 14-hour difference depending on where I was. I ended up working in the early morning for one client and late night for the other while spending the mid-time exploring.

When digital nomads work independently, their contacts and clients change frequently. As a result, these temporal and spatial adaptations need to be built and rebuilt on a continuous, performative basis, thus preventing digital nomads from establishing routines that would systematise their work patterns. Their professional activity is often fragmented between several projects or mandates that overlap, thus generating competing demands and multiplying potential interruptions. Digital nomads need to not only constantly reconcile what happens ‘here and elsewhere’, but also to find strategies to create a form of continuity between successive rounds of work. Here again, the dimension of global mobility characterising digital nomads adds a layer of complexity that needs to be concealed. Flexibility (either temporal, spatial or both) comes at a cost and this is particularly apparent for digital nomads.

Migration work

Finally, the fourth type of meta-work, *migration work*, is the most frequently discussed. It refers to the time, efforts and resources that digital nomads need to devote to the formalities of living in a foreign country. This notably concerns visas: foreigners on a tourist visa are generally not allowed to work. Yet, many digital nomads do so, arguing that they do not hold local jobs, pay their taxes elsewhere, work online, and, most importantly, struggle to obtain a visa. Digital nomads must assess the risks associated with a potentially illegal status and, if necessary, remain discreet about their intention to work locally. Also, the renewal of an expired visa sometimes requires travelling to a neighbouring country.

When working with international clients, digital nomads need to find a platform to receive their payments, often in a different currency. This might also involve the setup of a borderless bank account or mailbox with scanning-mailing service, with the difficulties associated to the absence of a fixed home address. Fiscal questions are also a constant struggle (in which country should a digital nomad register their activities and pay tax?). A digital nomad captured these problems:

I have a Serbian citizenship. I spent the last four and a half years abroad. For two years now I have a registered self-employment in Denmark [. . .] My address was registered at a friend’s place. I want to get rid of my self-employment there due to the language difficulties and high taxes. And here comes the difficult part. I don’t want to register self-employment in my home country as I’m not planning to go back and I don’t feel supporting it with my taxes [. . .]. I thought about Ireland (where I lived half a year twice), but the biggest problem is the address. I don’t have plans of settling down yet, but if I don’t have an address I can’t have a self-employment [. . .].

If digital nomads plan to stay longer at a location, or if they do business with local employers or clients, they will inevitably have to obtain a work or resident visa. Since the type of visa required and its duration vary according to the application, and because there are no uniform rules or procedures from one country to another, this meta-work must be undertaken for each of the destinations that a digital nomad visits. Digital nomads must also take out appropriate insurance, in particular to cover the costs associated with possible health care, theft of equipment, or civil liability. Clearly, not all digital nomads are

equally affected by migration work – some passports are seen as having a stronger index than others (i.e. permitting travel more easily). Migration work can be made more difficult when having to deal with visa-related bureaucracy or with discrimination based on ethnicity or country of origin. This is apparent in the following quote:

I believe the biggest problem (a.k.a. pain-in-the-ass) for me as a Vietnamese citizen, is undeniably visa-related bureaucracy. Too many countries still discriminate against our visas, even if I'm fully capable of proving that I'm not just going to hide behind and become their latest blood-sucker.

In addition, the strength of one's passport is not the only criterion determining the extent of migration for digital nomads. One important aspect that goes into deciding where to go and under which conditions is, for many, safety. For instance, some online platforms rank cities and countries in terms of how gay-friendly they are, thus highlighting how the same space may be experienced very differently. Speaking to gender disparities, a digital nomad explained:

Safety (or perceived safety) is what will clearly differentiate the appeal to women versus men and women. That's my main requirement when choosing the destination of my next trip.

Discussion

Meta-work of digital nomads: Mobility, professionalism and smoothness

Our exploration of digital nomadism was motivated by an interest in exploring the 'other side' of perfected and glamorous portrayals on social media, highlighting instead the meta-work and difficulties faced by these individuals. The 'get rich quickly' narrative found in mainstream discourses and popularised through the publication of various 'how-to' guides gives digital nomadism an image of desirability and apparent ease (Bonneau and Aroles, 2021) that clearly reflects the 'techno-utopian rhetoric animating social media production more broadly' (Duffy, 2017: 99). This hype surrounding digital nomadism, we contend, contributes to hiding the practicalities and realities of this lifestyle, thus producing a false image of it and how it is experienced.

Unsurprisingly, this leads to feelings of frustration, disappointment and even betrayal, as some feel that they have been lured by the promises of digital nomadism. Just like any capitalistic system, it produces winners and losers and the fact that winners receive more attention in the media in general contributes to 'other' the experiences of those who are less successful, thus creating a wide array of erroneous images, ideas and assumptions about how easily such a lifestyle can be achieved.

Meta-work is encountered in most, if not all, professions, but in the context of digital nomadism, there is an obvious attempt to hide it to produce an image of professionalism, smoothness and ease. This is particularly noticeable when comparing forums for digital nomads with glossy personal blogs or meticulously curated social media profiles (Bonneau and Aroles, 2021). For digital nomads, meta-work does not only involve additional work, but also a large amount of preparatory work (mobilising different temporalities and spatialities) such that movements between places and countries can be facilitated.

Global mobility clearly sets them apart (as compared to independent forms of work) when it comes to meta-work, as it adds layers of complexity while exacerbating the already high level of heterogeneity encountered within the digital nomad community. In addition, digital nomads are not only building extended work interfaces, but also ‘extended life interfaces’; meta-work goes beyond supporting new ways of working, it entails making possible a whole new lifestyle. As such, digital nomadism can be seen as characterised by ‘a frenetic work pace punctuated by moments of uncertainty; the pressure to remain ever-accessible to audiences and advertisers alike; and a nagging sense of unease as one’s personal life becomes folded into a carefully curated digital persona’ (Duffy, 2017: 189).

Images of emancipation, easiness, glamour and independence found in the mainstream narratives surrounding digital nomadism downplay the amount of work that goes into digital nomadism. Exploring the dark side of digitalisation is now at the forefront of academic research based on the implications at societal, organisational and individual levels (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). Many of those elements can be identified upon closer scrutiny of the meta-work of digital nomads given the combination of the increased ‘hidden’ workload that digital nomads need to handle, and their sole responsibility for doing so, and the prominence of control mechanisms that digital nomads have to self-impose owing to the structural constraints of their work environment. By scratching beneath the surface of the so-called technologically enabling advantages linked to digital nomadism, one can find that many of the structural inequalities characterising the traditional world of work have been replicated but are buried under the imperative of professionalism.

Exploring the relation between meta-work and structural inequalities

Popular depictions of digital nomadism endow it with an image of desirability and apparent ease. It masks the meta-work underlying digital nomadism as well as the difficulties and stress related to the uncertainties of such professional endeavours. Behind the empowering promises of the ‘do-it-yourself ethos’, there is a sense that if one cannot achieve a sustainable digital nomad lifestyle, they can only blame themselves, with the ‘anyone can do it if they want it bad enough’ rhetoric deeply internalised by digital nomads.

The suggestion that both mobility and location independence are only contingent upon individual willingness and efforts is particularly problematic. While ‘recent narratives about technologically enabled industrialism invoke a more inclusive notion of self-enterprise’ (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017: 844), it clearly emerged from our research that barriers to entry remain particularly high. Access to savings earned through a career in the corporate world allows aspiring digital nomads to take risks and start afresh as digital nomads, while those who start with nothing find themselves in a very precarious situation. This is hardly surprising, yet that aspect is carefully concealed in glossy depictions of digital nomadism (Bonneau and Aroles, 2021). Moreover, it is not just financial inequalities that get repeated through digital nomadism; more covert infrastructural aspects of inequality clearly endure. As an example, nation states determine who has the right or not to move within a national territory. As highlighted in our Findings section, some passports are seen as stronger than others; for example, work (or even travel) visas

are more difficult and time consuming to obtain for non-westerners, which in turn generates inequalities within digital nomads, based on their country of origin and professional backgrounds. This polarisation means that some will have an easy and smooth access to mobility, while others will have little to no access to it (except illegally or in a restrictive form). This point was frequently raised in discussions pertaining to migration work.

In addition to financial and legislative constraints, the promises of digital nomadism fall short when it comes to addressing more fundamental inequalities plaguing the world of work and society in general. As showed, women are concerned with finding secure and woman-friendly places, which restricts their possibilities and likelihood of embracing a digital nomad lifestyle. On that point, Ahl and Marlow (2012: 544) argue that ‘women are positioned in deficit unless they acknowledge and subscribe to masculine discourse of entrepreneurship’. The same applies to minorities who might experience discrimination and more difficulties. Furthermore, such a lifestyle may be inaccessible to individuals with chronic diseases and thus requiring certain infrastructures and insurance. As such, the empowering narratives underlying digital nomadism seem to simply repeat existing infrastructural inequalities encountered in entrepreneurship in general, with the the inclusive and community-oriented stance of digital nomadism simply falling flat.

Conclusion

This article explored four types of meta-work that underlie both the professional endeavours and the maintenance of the lifestyle of digital nomads. We argue that digital nomads are under constant pressure to both support the perception of their work being considered as the future of work and the ‘Disneyfied’ image of their employment to legitimise their credibility. Understanding the nature of meta-work embedded in digital nomadism is insightful from the perspective of debates on the implications of technology for the future of work and constitutes a perfect terrain to investigate contemporary ‘shifts’ in the locus of responsibility for professional success. Within this broader framework of shifting responsibilities, our research demonstrates that even the most promising form of work deemed as ‘desirable’ from the changing technological landscape is characterised by embedded ‘precarity’ and volatility. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic is shedding light on both the importance of the concept of meta-work and the inequalities experienced by individuals.

The ideological and aesthetic underpinnings of emancipation and non-conformism found in the mainstream narrative surrounding digital nomadism is presented as a form of reaction to dominant ideals and imperatives, and even in some cases as a critique of contemporary capitalism. Yet, digital nomadism both mimics and echoes power dynamics encountered in any business activities and can be seen itself, to some extent, as a response to market demands and a direct extension of capitalism. If digital nomadism has a somehow undeniable appeal, the vocabulary on which it relies is also undeniably aligned with that of contemporary capitalism. The widespread popularity of the same values in economic discourses today suggests that this ‘new world of work’ might simply repeat existing infrastructural inequalities and reinforce an extreme form of capitalism. As such, with regards to digital nomadism, while the dark cubicle is progressively being replaced by a shiny beach in some paradisiac setting, we can’t help thinking that, in the end, there is nothing new under the sun.

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