The role of workspaces in infrastructuring remote work: use of coffee shops for bringing back the local

This is a proposal for the workshop NordiCHI 2020 workshop "Sharing & Cooperativism: Designing for Economies"

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This is a workshop proposal for thinking about sustainable workspaces and their relationship to online convening platforms.

CCS CONCEPTS • cooperative work, coffee shops, on-demand economy, freelancing, infrastructuring,

Additional Keywords and Phrases:

I am interested in the concept of "infrastructuring", which instead of focusing on characteristics, it focuses on "processual" qualities through which the phenomenon emerges (e.g. Star and Bowker 2002; Karasti and Baker 2004; Pipek and Wulf 2009). I as individual workers attempt to find different places around a city/place to work from. As work becomes more individuated, we are likely to see growth in affinity groups/spaces convened by websites such as MeetUps. As explained by, "extending the temporal, organizational, societal scopes and diversifying collaboration arenas from the common use, design and development to tailoring, appropriation, repair, maintenance and standardization, to including professionals from industry, formal organizational structures like standardization bodies and authorities as well as community members and citizens in informal, community-based initiatives" (ibid., p. 1–2).

From the literature on atomized, and individualized work, there is a rising numbers of freelance workers, and scholars have documented their need and desire to work physically side by side with others who understand their work (Spinuzzi,2012). According to Spinuzzi (2012), working alone "can take a toll on people, who sometimes find themselves cut off from networking and trust-building opportunities, with limited access to infrastructure and without firm barriers between their personal and work lives." (p.5) She cites Kjaerulff (2010), who described teleworkers struggles with separating their work lives and home lives, and sought other teleworkers with whom to socialize during weekly lunches. Similarly, Clark (2000) described how rural teleworkers struggled with professional isolation and sought local networks of freelancers (Spinuzzi, 2012, p. 173). For example, Gray & Suri (2019) remind us that even though there is a perception of on-demand work as isolated and individuated, workers find other means of aiding each other find work, share information about potential employers, and share overall social needs of the work.

Another rise to fill that need is co-working spaces: Current projections from the firm Emergent Research point to twenty-six thousand coworking spaces and something like 3.8 million individual members by 2020 (ref 18, Gregg). As Melissa Gregg (2018) states: "While coworking providers do not directly generate employment security or job leads, they provide the social and material infrastructure on which such valuable connections and opportunities can be realized". (p.20) Gregg also forecasted that as long as there is a growing number of professionals moving into this space of freelance, flexible, and on-demand work "the loss of temporal stability can be offset in coworking by the social connection that temporary colleagues and communities offer in a harsh employment market." (p.20)

Yet even before the rise of co-working spaces, urban professionals had been utilizing other businesses to fill some of this need. Laura Forlano focused on the provision of Wi- Fi for mobile workers to be able to make a "space" in urban life into a "place" of work. She calls it co-producing place via the "lived experiences" of mobile workers based on a qualitative study of Wi–Fi users. Therefore, Wi- Fi in public places "enable a certain kind of socio–technical practice around mobile work; namely, going to a café, park or public space with one's laptop or other device in order to work side–by–side with other people but not together with them" (Forlano, 2013). As Karasti & Blomberg explain "In studies of information infrastructures, mobilities research promises to provide new ways of grasping the complex lived practices of mobilization and (im)mobilization (Büscher et al. 2011) associated with infrastructuring."

My work took me to a coop coffee shop, where individuals interested in Python would use Meetup.com to gather informally once a week. Yet rather than it being a learning space, or official networking, I found that it was the working alongside peers that drew (or kept) people coming back. I want to look at this intersection of the online convening tool, the human labor to enact it, to the offline space that facilitates it. The organizer barely had time to code herself, as she had to explain basics in every instantiation. She would "encourage" ordering to help support the coffee shop, and she would bring a power strip (and beginner books) to each encounter. This type of having to re-fashion not only a work infrastructure, but to find individuals who share work interests to sit in a coffee shop to code next to each other is likely to continue, in parallel to the growth of official, for-profit co-working spaces. My question is, how can we facilitate this "infrastructuring" of work practices which now fall on to individual workers, when they used to be provided by their employers? How could we create a shared spaces and work that balances the individual work (ie *not* sharing of the on-demand economy) with the sharing that still has to take place, meaning the social, spatial and infrastructural? How are workers bringing together the online modes of convening (the Meetups) with physical spaces, and who is doing the logistical work? How can we think of partnership of the online with the offline that can aid in grounding workers back into the cities where their physical bodies are? Lastly, how can we trouble the word "community" when what ties them together is not the actual care for the shared space, but an individuals coping of precarity, ie can we bring the workers into co-ops and back into helping their local neighborhoods, rather than them renting out spaces in corporate, transnational co-working spaces that may be aiding the opposite?

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