

1. Articles



Video-communications, videoconferencing and the lockdown

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Up until now, the use of video-communication was fairly marginal, but with the lockdown period, most of us seem to have adopted it with disconcerting ease. It seems however to be used as a poor substitute for physical face-to-face meetings that would otherwise be allowed by travel. So the question is: are these interactions enabled by digital tools, while different, somehow inferior to those allowed by travel? How could video-presence make us question our mobility practices and rethink the political norms that govern them?

The current lockdown is giving rise to an apparent explosion in the use of video communication and video-telephony applications. While the use of these tools was previously relatively limited, the constraints imposed by the nationwide lockdown have seemingly led everyone - provided they have a connection - to use them in order to maintain some form of social life (having virtual drinks with friends) or reconstruct forms of collective activities (sporting or cultural) that could no longer be carried out in person. In the professional world, they were indeed already used for teleworking, but this was limited. Today, with most institutions and organizations trying to carry on with their activities, video conferencing has become a necessary feature of all professional meetings, as long as the work is immaterial (or can at least be dematerialized), even where simple phone calls might suffice. For many workers under lockdown, workdays have sometimes become an exhausting succession of videoconferences, so much so that people have started talking of "Zoom fatigue."¹ Finally, the closure of primary, middle and high schools as well as higher education institutions has led to the active development of forms of tele-pedagogy along with other forms of distance learning (which are more akin to remote classes aided by digital tools).

Therefore we should first note how the explosion of video communication is closely linked to a set of injunctions hammered home by the media at different levels: individual (we have to maintain our ties with family and friends for psychological and moral reasons),

organizational (we have to maintain the continuity of activities for confined teleworkers) and educational (this is the imperative of educational continuity). What is most striking about these injunctions is the way in which they are asserted as being undisputable. Yet possible alternatives, such as working less and more independently or giving up a month of school at the end of the year, all point to greater individual responsibility and a loosening of control. The trouble that we have in just considering them, even though the challenges of lockdown might spur us to do so, reveals the extent to which surveillance and control are foundational to our societies, which Gilles Deleuze already described in a prophetic article as “societies of control.”² And as we shall see below, these injunctions to continue as if nothing had happened risk causing the post-lockdown scenarios to be more conservative.

1. A boom, but few innovations

For many of us, this great increase in the use of videoconferencing has also introduced us for the first time to many applications. While Skype seemed to embody videoconferencing in the previous decade,³ Zoom now holds this position today. But this success also has its downside, as the case of Zoom shows. Videoconferencing applications are currently subject to particularly intense public scrutiny for their ethical and legal implications, particularly with regards to the protection of personal data and the security of their transmissions.⁴

It would be tempting to focus on the ordeal of the lockdown and the (often very real) difficulties that individuals face, in order to help them with videoconferencing and ensure a continuity of their personal and professional commitments. But it is more productive to reverse this approach, to be surprised instead that this transition is ultimately quite easy and to realize that it requires only minimal ingenuity and creativity. When the lockdown started, the tools and their uses were already there and available, even if the former were much less diffused and the latter less widely shared. While the lockdown certainly gave them a considerable boost, it didn't invent Zoom, nor moments of remote sociability, nor videoconferences, nor remote learning. Our societies tend to have a short memory, and it is therefore worth recalling, at a time when we keep talking about “virtual meetups,” that one of the first experimental uses of teleconferencing systems in Xerox's research laboratories in the 1980s was a kind of virtual coffee machine promoting informal remote exchanges between American and European laboratories. From a digital perspective, the entire digital and communicational infrastructure of the lockdown was already in place before it started, both in terms of the imaginaries and representations associated with these technologies, and the practices themselves, at least for a small proportion of individuals and organizations. The lockdown caused a change in scale, but one which was surprisingly easy and with relatively few innovations, insofar as we are seeing the majority of people discovering a whole infrastructure of technologies, representations and uses that were already there.

2. Social transformations and interactional adaptations

This isn't to say that the massive use of these tools during the lockdown period isn't bringing about social transformations. These are mostly amplified by the lockdown (but not created by it), and they can sometimes be subtle. Consider, for example, the way in which video interactions are organized, centered around a visual standard that requires

seeing the other person looking at the screen, like a “talking head.” ⁵ As mundane as this accomplishment may seem (the vast majority of us do this without thinking about it, except perhaps when it comes to combining several people on one screen), it constantly requires both reflexive vigilance with regard to the visual frame and one’s positioning in relation to the camera, and an effort to adjust one’s body and the video device. Being a tele-actor also means being - usually without even thinking about it, and from within the interaction - a director (almost in the television sense) of our interactions with others.

Another kind of evolution concerns the specific ways in which tele-activities are vulnerable to different forms of solicitations and interruptions that didn’t previously exist, particularly for professional and institutional activities. For teleworkers, professional activity becomes immersed in the domestic environment, such that teleworking also means trying to maintain a fragile border with one’s private life: choosing a neutral space, managing cohabitants who step into frame or interrupt a call, and therefore also seeing the evolution of the inherent domestic regulations of cohabitation. This permeability of tele-activities to the domestic world is of course amplified by the constraints of the lockdown (forced co-presence of all members of the household, the need to share screens if there aren’t enough for everyone, etc.). Whether in co-presence or remotely, those taking part in any social meeting must work to maintain and stabilize an interactional framework in the face of potential disturbances, but in the case of video communications from home, this framework becomes more fragile, or at least manifests specific forms of vulnerabilities whose implications are both practical and moral (as they incur interactional, domestic or organizational regulations).

On the other hand, the ability to multitask with multiple windows also introduces specific forms of disturbance, as within their screen, users are always tempted to use several applications at once, making it difficult for remote teachers, for instance, to hold the attention of their students. All these porosities, combined with the relaxed constraints of not being physically present, as well as the narrowed field of vision caused by the camera and multi-window features, provide confined teleworkers with new wiggle room to multitask or fake their involvement, even while other forms of control may be emerging.

3. Mobility and videoconferencing

The question of the relationship between videoconferencing and mobility is probably also very important. Videoconferencing and its intensive use during the lockdown should lead us to rethink some conceptions of mobility and co-presence. On the one hand, since its inception, video-conferencing has been thought of and used as a resource to enable forms of interaction between people who cannot meet physically or who would benefit from interacting remotely, either because the cost of organizing physical co-presence meetings is too high ⁶ or to avoid the difficulty of repeated long-term travel. ⁷

As a result, the very existence of videoconferencing, which is a tool for interaction, has important implications for conceptions of mobility and presence. First, it sharply reveals an instrumental conception of mobility and its social utility, and in this sense, it seems to revive older perspectives. The concept of mobility as an activity was created by “mobility studies” as a critique of the specific way in which transport researchers defined mobility, ⁸ that is as a movement through time and space that should generally be minimized. By considering mobility as an activity, mobility studies, on the other hand, focus on the ethical, legal or environmental implications of mobility, but also on mobility as a lived and multi-dimensional experience: for example, an individual may choose a longer journey in order to enjoy a better mobility experience. With videoconferencing, it is the instrumental

conception of mobility that is emphasized. Videoconferencing inherently implies a representation of mobility as a movement allowing people to interact, that is as transportation in the service of co-presence meetings. On the other hand, by presenting itself as a resource of immobility, videoconferencing seems at first to support and reinforce a radical duality between being sedentary and being mobile (again conceived of through the lens of movement or transportation).

Finally, because it offers ways to meet and collaborate remotely that seem more or less able to replace a co-presence that has become impossible or difficult to achieve, its use also promotes the idealization of co-presence meetings, in light of which all forms of remote interactions, especially those by videoconference, may appear to be imperfect substitutes, incapable of reproducing the qualities of physical, face-to-face encounters. The lockdown, by combining a drastic limitation of travel opportunities with intensive and almost systematic use of videoconferencing, therefore seems to solidify this opposition in public opinion.

By focusing on mobility as an activity, “mobility studies” have introduced a processual approach that profoundly challenges these oppositions. In particular, with regard to the modalities of interaction and encounters, rather than opposing “face-to-face” and “remote” meetings, we should consider configurations or trajectories that intertwine different forms of interactions and encounters. Teleworking shouldn’t be thought of as just an alternative to being physically present at the workplace, but as an additional resource that opens up multiple configurations in which people may come to combine face-to-face and remote meetings differently over time and depending on what their activities require.

It is only from these kinds of perspectives that we can try to think about what might happen after the lockdown. Indeed, during the lockdown, the authoritarian injunction to continue as before implies strong incentives not to change anything afterwards, and typically to go back to the workplace, especially since our economic and social structures haven’t changed. We shouldn’t expect any short-term revolution in our mobility habits and social interactions. But let’s not forget that before this particular period, the call to limit mobilities was already becoming a little more pressing, due to their economic and environmental costs. There was already talk of encouraging remote activities, even if it was still limited. The challenge of the lockdown has shown how doable it is to perform partly interactional tasks and activities remotely. It is legitimate to assume that, following the end of the lockdown, we will witness an increased use of videoconferencing, tele-meetings and remote work. Therefore, with probably sectoral variations, two outcomes can be imagined. If this increase in usage remains moderate, it will be absorbed by our current system smoothly and without debate. But where this shift in usage has the opportunity to become more widespread, it will likely ignite new and important debates on the right to presence or to tele-working (and by extension, on mobility rights). This discussion and public policy will require us to open up the “black box” of interaction, which is today the preserve of a few social scientists⁹, so that we can think much more directly about how we want to interact and should interact, and what for. Determining how, when, why and in the name of what right tele-presence can be chosen or imposed is one of the ethical, legal and political questions that we will face after the lockdown, and the answers we provide will have immediate implications for mobility.

Notes

1 <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/a-theory-of-zoom-fatigue>

- 2 Deleuze, G. (1990). "Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôles", L'autre Journal (1).
- 3 Harper, R., Watson, R. and Licoppe, C. (2019). Skyping the Family. Interpersonal video communication and domestic life. Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
- 4 See for instance <https://www.wired.com/story/zoom-backlash-zero-days/> ; <http://cdeacf.ca/actualite/2020/04/14/comprendre-failles-zoom>
- 5 Licoppe, C. and Morel, J. (2012). "Video-in-Interaction: 'Talking Heads' and the Multimodal Organization of Mobile and Skype Video Calls," Research in Language and Social Interaction, 45(4), p. 399-429.
- 6 In the justice system, for example, the possibility of appearing in court is closely linked to a process of budgetary rationalization that aims to limit the costs of convening and transporting different kinds of people who are supposed to be in court: Dumoulin, L., & Licoppe, C. (2018). Les audiences à distance. Genèse et institutionnalisation d'une innovation dans la justice. Paris, L.G.D.J.
- 7 The results of the [National Survey on Mobility and Lifestyles](#) suggest that the lengthening of daily mobilities could be one factor driving the development of telework.
- 8 Urry, J. (2005). Une sociologie des mobilités : Une nouvelle frontière pour la sociologie. Paris, Armand Colin.
- 9 The sociologist Erving Goffman described a kind of collective blind spot to what he called "the order of interaction." As much as we are explicitly interested in what happens during interactions and meetings, we tend to neglect the detailed understanding of how we achieve them while accomplishing ourselves as a certain type of person, manifesting specific forms of commitments and participations. Yet, comparing presence and tele-presence, whether in the context of team meetings, medical consultations or education, requires us to take a closer look at the details of our accomplishments in the interaction.

Teleworking

The remote performance of a salaried activity outside of the company's premises, at home or in a third place during normal working hours and requiring access to telecommunication tools.

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Lockdown

The lockdown measures implemented throughout 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, while varying from one country to the next, implied a major restriction on people's freedom of movement for a given period. Presented as a solution to the spread of the virus, the lockdown impacted local, interregional and international travel. By transforming the spatial and temporal dimensions of people's lifestyles, the lockdown accelerated a whole series of pre-existing trends, such as the rise of teleworking and teleshopping and the increase in walking and cycling, while also interrupting of long-distance mobility. The ambivalent experiences of the lockdown pave the way for a possible transformation of lifestyles in the future.

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Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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1 <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/project/2019/01/07/national-survey-mobility-and-lifestyles-12797>