

# THE MOBILITIES OF DIGITAL WORK: THE CASE OF DIGITAL NOMADISM

*Research in Progress*

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## Abstract

*This research-in-progress examines the mobilities of digital work. We study digital nomadism as an exemplary case of extremely mobile forms of digital working. The recent "mobile turn" in the social sciences provides us with theoretical grounds to understand societies that are increasingly defined by dynamic, global environments (e.g., freelance work, globalization and migration) and less by the conventional foundations of society (e.g., lifelong employment, local economies and nation states). In this work, we are particularly interested in how and in which ways information technology (IT) makes new forms of (digital) working "mobile", unbound by conventional restrictions. To theorize the mobilities of digital work, we draw on ethnographic participant-observations and more than 100 first-hand and secondary interviews with digital nomads. The preliminary theoretical analysis reveals four interdependent mobilities of digital work: administrative mobility (working independently of organizations and businesses of others), spatial mobility (choosing where to work), temporal mobility (deciding when to work) and content mobility (freedom to determine the nature and contents of one's work). Digital nomads are the ideal-typical manifestation of the multiple mobilities of digital work.*

*Keywords: Digital work, digital nomadism, digital infrastructure, location-independent work, mobile work, new forms of organizing, digital working, digital organizing, future of work, openness, field study, ethnography.*

## 1 Introduction

The rise of ubiquitous digital infrastructures and miniaturized mobile devices has enabled new forms of flexible and remote working (Nelson, Jarrahi, & Thomson, 2017; Sørensen, 2011). Increasingly, knowledge workers perform their tasks remotely, disconnected and away from traditional organizations. They also often work in flexible schedules that blend work and leisure time. Research to date has explored dynamics of several forms of such flexible and remote working including remote working (Mulki, Bardhi, Lassk, & Nanavaty-Dahl, 2009), teleworking (Orlikowski & Barley, 2001), hot-desking (Millward, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007), flex-working (van Oorschot, 2004), and coworking (Spinuzzi, 2012) among others. "Digital nomadism" – the focus of our analysis – has been argued to be the most flexible and mobile of these new forms of work (Schlagwein, 2017).

While differing in their details, what these flexible forms of work have in common is that they challenge institutionalized work practices. The run often contrary to conceptions of what work "looks like", which in industrial societies has centred around ideas such as "being employed", "going to work" and "working nine to five" for the past decades. The overall flexible nature of these new

work forms is captured through the concept of “mobility”. While originating in sociology (“mobilities turn”), the concept has been suggested to be particularly relevant for studies of these new forms of working (Nelson et al., 2017).

In particular, it is often digitally-transformed work, digitalized work or, as we call it here, “digital work” that allows for different types of mobility. For example, digital information technology (IT) may enable workers to work across different places (Davis, 2002), to engage in asynchronous communication and achieve flexible timing (Nelson et al., 2017), and by using tools such as electronic marketplaces (e.g., Upwork), lends itself to more flexible organizational arrangement (e.g., freelancing) among others (Schlagwein, 2017). Due to the multitude of mobile aspects, we use the plural, “mobilities,” to emphasize our multi-modal understanding of “mobility”.

The IS field, and related fields such as Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), have had limited engagement with the mobilities of digital work. Sørensen and Landau (2015) bibliometric analysis of published research in leading IS journals indicates that mobility as a concept is grossly underrepresented in IS research relative to its importance. And while, for example, Winter et al. (2014) recognize that digital work is often what they call “extra-organizational work”, the vast majority of IS research remains preoccupied with the relation of IS/IT and “organizationally-bound” work (Sørensen & Landau, 2015). The “mobilities turn” that has impacted many social sciences has, surprisingly considering the role of digital IT, not impacted IS research in the same way (Sørensen, 2016).

As a result of the above, we have limited knowledge of why, how and in which way digital work is becoming “mobile”. As such, the research questions motivating this work is: *What are the mobilities constituted in digital work? And: How do the mobilities shaping the work life of digital nomads interplay with digital infrastructures?*

One of our central objectives is advancing our understanding of the mobility of digital work as a multi-dimensional concept. We do so by exploring the origins, nature and consequences of the “mobilities” of flexible, digital work, and by studying in-depth its most emblematic form, digital nomadism.

Digital nomadism involves digital workers, typically entrepreneurs and freelancers, “nomadically” travelling the world while digitally working at the same time (Schlagwein, 2017). The nomadic lifestyle is more “ideal-typical” mobile, digital work compared to previously studied forms of remote/flexible work. Digital nomads are in constant movement, work and life merge, and they are typically independent of organizations. Hence, we analyse the mobilities of digital work based on digital nomadism as an “extreme” case of flexible and mobile working.

## 2 Literature Review

“Mobilities” as a contemporary approach within the social sciences has their roots primary in sociology (including dedicated journals such as “*Mobilities*”). The approach has been of increasing influence in geography, migration studies, performance studies, transport studies, media studies and history (Merriman et al., 2013). Mobilities studies are concerned with the movement of people, things, concepts/information and the social implications of these movements.

The “mobility turn” emerged in the 1990s and 2000s as a response to global changes such as increased levels of mobility as well as more diverse forms of movement (Creswell & Clark, 2007). In sociology, in particular, John Urry's book, *“Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century”*

was a seminal milestone for research on mobilities (Urry, 2000). The book positioned itself as, and became, a "manifesto for a sociology that examines the diverse mobilities of people, objects, images, information and wastes; and of the complex interdependencies between, and social consequences of, these diverse mobilities" (Urry, 2000, p. 1). Urry and other mobilities scholars were inspired by James Clifford and Marc Augé who called for a shift of focus from the analysis of particular static places toward examinations of constant transition between these places and routes connecting them. Similarly, Manuel Castells' conceptualization of networked societies centres on a shift from "space of places" towards "space of flows" (Castells 1999).

The principal mission of mobilities research is to untangle mobility as a more sophisticated concept by pointing to "the importance of the systematic movements of people for work and family life, for leisure and pleasure, and for politics and protest" (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 208). As such, it critiques prior work that saw mobility as a uni-dimensional and unimportant concept – or black-boxed mobility entirely. From this perspective, the social world is defined and transformed by constant movement and dynamic transitions and flows (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Wajcman & Rose, 2011), which are reflected in mass geographical mobilities and cosmopolitanization (Urry, 2007).

Mobilities research takes a multi-dimensional approach, understanding "mobility" beyond a simple spatial notion (Büscher, Sheller, & Tyfield, 2016; Merriman et al., 2013). In particular, mobilities research recognizes the critical role played by the symbolic component of mobility flows and contextual aspects of mobility (Merriman et al., 2013). While digital nomadism has not been specifically studied through a mobilities lens, we find it particularly powerful to do because digital nomadism is characterized by "mobility" more than one way (as noted above).

What is "digital nomadism", exactly? Digital nomadism is a practice in which digital workers give up on "settled" living and embark on nomadic world travel, and perform work from different locations around the world, taking advantage of digital infrastructures and coworking spaces (Schlagwein 2017). This phenomenon stands in the history of teleworking and conventional nomadic work (Schlagwein 2018) but can be considered an "ideal-typical" (in a Weberian sense) type of mobile working (Sørensen, 2011). This workstyle reflects personal preferences for continuous international mobility (Whitehead & Halsall, 2017).

The current IS literature on mobile and digital work has focused on spatial mobility, and how this mobility shapes workers' interaction with IT (specifically mobile devices) (Sørensen, 2011). However, in this literature, the concept of mobility is not sufficiently problematized as such and understood as spatial movement from and to sites of work. Mobility is often closely associated with the notion of places and "place-making" practices that workers may perform (Brown & O'Hara, 2003). While space is, of course, a central dimension of "mobility", an exclusive focus on this type of mobility is empirically not sufficient to understand all "mobile", "flexible" and "rapidly shifting" dimensions of digital work and theoretically not informed by the above developments on mobilities in other fields. Consequently, aspects of mobility other than the spatial dimension have received less attention in research on mobile work in IS and related areas such as HCI research (de Carvalho, Ciolfi, & Gray, 2011). This means there is an opportunity to theoretically develop the notion of "mobility" beyond simple spatial/geographic mobility (Ciolfi & de Carvalho, 2014; Merriman et al., 2013).

Digital nomadism can be considered as an exemplary, extreme and arguably the "most mobile" form of work. A focus on digital nomadism thus enables us to explore the full range of "mobilities" of digital work. The concept of nomadism occupies a special place within the mobilities research and is considered a conceptually interesting metaphor that embraces multiple mobilities. Nomadic

approaches to organizing are seen as “emblematic of opportunity, choice, innovation and creativity” (Costas, 2013, p. 1473). The term, nomad, and the characteristics of traditional nomads, have helped researchers to describe emerging dynamics of hyper mobile people and their dynamic relationship with space (e.g., D’Andrea, 2006; Meerwarth, 2008). Digital nomads are particularly interesting to explore as 1) they are mobile in additional ways (e.g., conventional nomads cannot easily shift to other tasks, while digital nomads are flexible), and 2) digital nomads allow us to explore how various mobilities are shaped by IT (i.e., compared to conventional in-office digital workers or non-digital nomads).

Hence, to answer our research question(s), we engaged in a study of digital nomadism.

### **3 Research Method**

Due to the complex nature and novelty of the digital nomadism phenomenon, the study has an exploratory, qualitative and interpretive orientation (Walsham 2006). The empirical basis of this research includes extensive ethnographic work, which included participant-observation for 12 months and more than 100 first-hand and secondary interviews with digital nomads. Location of data collection included Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan, Vietnam, Portugal, Germany, USA as well as online interviews and data collection.

For the data analysis, we initially follow an inductive, data- and phenomenon-focused approach (Charmaz 2014). This included coding the data (not a full grounded theory analysis), re-reading interview transcripts and re-listening to audio recordings as well as cross-comparing and discussing memo and observational notes by both authors in an iterative, interpretive process (Myers & Klein 1999).

In line current qualitative and grounded approaches, we build on existing conceptualizations of mobility (i.e., Urry, 2000) in the analysis. That is, through the in the first instance grounded and emergent data analysis, the “mobilities” framing emerged as an insightful theoretical tool for making sense of the data (Myers & Klein 1999) and placing the emerging findings into a wider theoretical discourse. Tracing the life trajectories and narratives of the participants and how their situation changed, was particularly insightful.

### **4 Preliminary Findings and Analysis**

In a very brief sense, the “digital nomad lifestyle” can be described as a privileged, digitally-enabled form of nomadic working (as opposed to most traditional nomads, refugees or migrants). Digital nomads are strongly driven by a desire to escape the confinements 9-5 work, seeking out tropical, oriental, low-cost, lifestyle-oriented or “Instagram-friendly” locations, where they can meet “interesting” and “like-minded” people, and often have particular life purposes other than career or family (e.g., mastery in surfing or meditation/yoga, catharsis after an existential crisis, optimising life towards time and experience, self-actualisation/self-determinism). They are “connecting the dots” in a digital and globalised world, where technologies such as Internet access, online platforms, video conferencing, social media and messaging, project and time management tools as well as “physical” changes such as cheap air travel and the emergence of coworking spaces worldwide enable them to live and work independent of nation-states and employers/organisations.

Four distinct but interrelated dimensions of mobility are evident in the work-life of digital nomads; these dimensions together set apart digital nomads from both conventional nomadic workers and non-

nomadic digital workers:

**Administrative mobility:** One of the key dimensions of mobility is the organizational independence that digital nomads create and enjoy. Most digital nomads in our dataset were not permanently affiliated with a focal organization, and acted as independent workers, freelancers or entrepreneurs (categories which often overlap in the form of "business of one"). This bureaucratic independence or "administrative mobility" allows them to work across client organizations and freelance teams. There is no organization, "boss" or manager that could determine the project they work on, the times in which they do this, or the space where the work is performed. That is, as *de facto* "business of one" micro-enterprises, digital nomads are endowed with organizational mobility to move between and in and out work at their judgement and decision. Digital work inherently involves less transaction costs compared to other forms of work and hence does not necessitate a coordinating firm/organization. Most search and coordination mechanisms used are also digital and therefore flexible and scalable, such as digital marketplaces for project and freelance work.

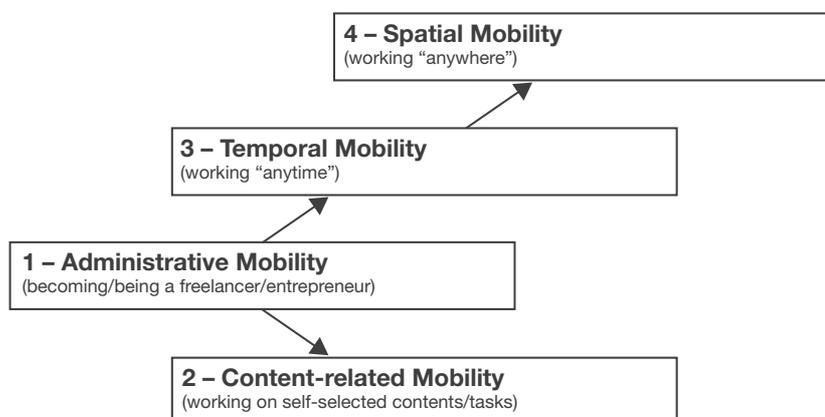
**Content-related mobility:** "Content-related mobility" is based on administrative mobility but refers to the ability to move between different strands of work and choose projects to work on (or to turn down) depending on the interest of the digital nomads in the content of what is being worked on. Digital nomads as digital workers possess the (digital) tools and skills to engage with work content of different types, and as nomads possess the external environment and internal flexibility to do this. For example, digital nomads might choose project so to learn about a new digital space, reconfigure "portfolios" of different kind of tasks that they can perform to nurture their social capital; they can also work in projects for primarily friendship and social reasons. The platform economy contributes substantially to the content mobility as digital nomads are able to extend their reach in finding digital work almost on a global scale, with local coworking spaces facilitating the same on arm-length, local and ad hoc bases. As such, digital nomads are much more mobile in shifting the "contents" of their work-life – what they concretely work on – compared to other work forms.

**Temporal mobility:** Administrative mobility typically increases temporal flexibility. Digital nomads exhibit a high level of temporal mobility, meaning they have a dynamic work schedule that can vary based on their schedule, preferences, location and intended activities. One of the critical lures of digital nomadism is a new balance between personal/leisure time and work hours. The two often bleed into one another, and the boundary between them is more malleable than typical temporal rhythms of traditional knowledge work, which is attached to certain work schedules. For digital nomads, temporal mobility goes beyond work scheduling and embraces other aspects of life. For example, work may be organised around "when the swell is up" for good surfing – rather the other way around (i.e., instead of time for surfing being organised around work time ultimately based on the factory model of work).

**Spatial mobility:** Having achieved administrative and temporal mobility, digital nomads then also enjoy high levels of freedom from the conventional notion of being bound to a particular location. They do not only move from a workspace to another workspace but typically from one country to another country (e.g., Thailand, Indonesia [Bali], Columbia, Mexico, Germany [Berlin] and Portugal are popular destinations). As such, digital nomadism is about digital workers conducting work across and between many locales. While types of locations, such as coworking spaces still matter to digital nomads, most of our research participants have managed to achieve a high level of location-independent work. They are using a set of technologies (e.g., laptop, mobile Internet, online tools, cloud storage) that are in their nature spatially *de facto* unrestricted.

Figure 1 below shows these four mobilities of digital work – all typically actualized in digital nomad

worklives – in their most typical temporal and logical order (i.e., some digital nomads may have achieved these mobilities in a different order, but the pattern shown in Figure 1 stands out as the most salient pattern):



**Figure 1: The Mobilities of Digital Work**

For most of our participants, mobility serves as a resource, not just a work requirement, opening up possibilities for shape and stimulate new work experiences and intellectual development. As such, digital nomads are the long-predicted, self-made, privileged “kinetic elite” (Costas, 2013) of contemporary digital workers enjoying multiple “mobilities”.

## 5 Conclusion

The study presented here focuses on digital nomadism to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mobility of digital work. Mobilities research, as a distinct paradigm within social sciences, helps problematize mobility as a multi-dimensional concept and to reveal and discuss the mobilities inherent in digital work. Using the empirical basis of digital nomadism and theoretical framework of mobilities, we reveal dimensions of work mobility and their relation beyond spatial mobility: namely administrative, content-related and temporal mobility.

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