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Conferencing in times of climate crisis and Covid-19: feminist and queer reflections on the digital shift in academic work

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ABSTRACT

This article employs a holistic understanding of environmental, social, and economic sustainability to explore the interaction between neoliberalism, climate crisis, digitalization, and academic work with a focus on its everyday aspects. Drawing our experience of organizing an online conference during the Covid-19 pandemic and our dialogue with conference participants, we first problematize the presumed disembodiment of digital exchange and suggest a nuanced understanding of physicality's role in knowledge production. We then explore the impact of the changing times and spaces of academic work on bodies and minds and the boundaries between private and public realms. Finally, we challenge the notion of digital solutionism by highlighting the implications of inhabiting digital platforms as spaces for knowledge production. While there is no simple solution to the problems around the digital shift in academic work and conferencing, we argue, downsizing can be a counteraction to platform capitalism in times of the climate crisis.

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Allowing academics to exchange ideas across geographical distances and engage in multiple tasks without delays, digitalization can be seen as a solution to both the negative environmental impact of travelling and the increasing demands for academic productivity under neoliberalism. In this article, we scrutinize the implications of digitalization in academic work and knowledge production by discussing academic conferencing in the context of the global digital shift.

The global digital shift in academic conferencing was underway way before the Covid-19 pandemic thanks to the technologies that allowed the organization of meetings online (Couldry & Meijas, 2019; Grandinetti, 2022; Wenger, 2023). However, the pandemic amplified this shift as well as the controversies around its perception – from optimism in the spirit of technological solutionism to more critical voices raising concerns about digitalization in neoliberal academia (Woodcock, 2018). It also intensified the discussions about the relationship between the digital shift and the climate crisis (Dalsgaard, 2022; Nikendei et al., 2021). A less-often discussed aspect of this shift is the transformation of the everyday experience of academic work and knowledge production that call for a more complex understanding of how neoliberalism, climate crisis, and digitalization interact.

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The reflections we share in this article are based on the international online conference 'Futures of Feminist and Queer Solidarities. Connectivity, Materiality and Mobility in a Digitalized World' (FFQS) that we organized at the height of the pandemic in Fall 2020. When we – a group of feminist and queer scholars, at the time all located at the University of Gothenburg – started planning for the FFQS in 2018, we were interested in how digitalization impacted feminist and queer activism and practices of solidarity on a global scale. Our preference to organize the conference online was in response to the growing concern about the negative environmental impact of intense academic travelling and the role of academia in sustainable development. Well aware of the climate crisis caused by global warming and the high level of greenhouse gas emissions (UNEP, 2024), we felt urged to address the issue of climate justice and explore new forms of scientific exchange that would not damage the planet as much as the 'old' ones. Our reflections are informed by feminist and queer critique, among others, which acknowledges the role of heteronormativity and anthropocentrism in the climate crisis that arises at the intersection of environmental, economic, and social injustices (Hultman & Pulé, 2018). Therefore, in this article, we understand sustainability broadly as a commitment to 'environmentally, socially and economically sustainable actions and outcomes' (Maxey, 2009, p. 443).

The sudden global shift to the digital sphere for teaching, research, and conferencing provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic generated a wave of scholarship about the digitalization of academic knowledge production and exchange. The emerging literature concerning the digitalization of academic exchange mainly focuses on the practical and technical sides of virtual conferencing (Goebel et al., 2020; Pedaste & Kasemets, 2021) and highlights the risks of increased surveillance and unequal access to learning as a result of videoconferencing and the platformization of academic life (Grandinetti, 2022). In line with our broader ambition to develop a holistic understanding of environmental, social, and economic sustainability, this article takes a step further by attending to the social and epistemological implications of relocating academic work to digital environments. We problematize the entanglement between digitalization and neoliberalization of academia when the overarching introduction of digital technologies in academic work is driven by the market-centered logic of academic productivity, self-interest, and competitive individualism.

The article is structured in five sections. The first section lays a theoretical foundation for our reflections and provides an overview of the literature on virtual conferencing in times of the Covid-19 pandemic that highlight the pros and cons of this development considering the digital turn in neoliberal academia. In the second section, we recall the process of organizing the FFQS conference as we introduce our use of dialogue and reflection as methods in feminist and queer knowledge production. After that, three thematic sections addressing the most conspicuous dimensions of virtual conferencing from feminist and queer perspectives follow. First, we problematize the presumable disembodiment of digital exchange, arguing that the digitalization of academic work emphasizes its cognitive aspects at the expense of the role of physicality in producing knowledge. Then, we examine the blurred boundaries between private and public realms facilitated by digital technologies and explore the impact on bodies and minds of the changing times and spaces of academic work. Focusing on various modes of sustainability at work, we highlight the shifting temporalities of academic knowledge production through a discussion of multi-tasking as both a problem and opportunity. Finally, we discuss the challenge of 'platform capitalism' and surveillance (Srnicek, 2016) in neoliberal academia and its entanglement with digitalization. In these thematic sections, we draw on our experience of organizing the FFQS conference as well as our exchange with conference participants following the event as a case study to unpack the everyday aspects of the ongoing digital shift of academic practices and spaces.

Digital as the new normal in neoliberal academia

Our reflections in this article are grounded in the existing literature about academic conferencing in the context of the digital turn in neoliberal academia. Before we proceed with the overview of this literature, some theoretical points of departure should be laid out. *First,* we acknowledge the neoliberalization of academia as a global phenomenon stretching beyond the Global North-Global South divide (Ivancheva et al., 2019; Swartz et al., 2019). Neoliberal processes in higher education have their local specificities depending on the context (Cannizzo, 2018). However, globally, the neoliberalization of academic institutions implies the increasing privatization and commercialization of higher education, the insertion of the market logic and managerialist values into the academic public sector, and the introduction of neoliberal self-management including entrepreneurial individualism and competitiveness in academic workplaces and career development. As research shows (Boncori, 2020; Ivancheva et al., 2019; Pereira, 2021), the neoliberalization of academic labour exacerbates existing social inequalities, including those along the gender line. Thus, neoliberal academia is by default in conflict with sustainable development as a commitment to environmental, social, and economic justice and equality broadly understood. The Covid-19 pandemic made this conflict more obvious for many (eg. Pereira, 2021). While neoliberalization is not specific to higher education, it poses particular challenges to academia since the privatization and commercialization of higher education is not always compatible with universities' ambition to redress inequalities and widen access to education for various minorities (Swartz et al., 2019) or to cultivate critical thinking (Smith & Jeffery, 2013). This is especially palpable in critical research fields including feminist and queer studies.

Our *second* point of departure is that the neoliberalization of academia occurs simultaneously with the introduction of digital tools in academic pedagogy and research. In fact, the two processes – neoliberalization and digitalization – are closely bound together (Smith & Jeffery, 2013; Woodcock, 2018, p. 129). While digitalization increases the flexibility and autonomy of academic work, it also leads to a greater control and measurability of academic productivity and intensifies the time, speed, and volume of academic work (Heiden et al., 2021; Mountz et al., 2015; Woodcock, 2018). Requirements on increased productivity are enhanced by the developments in digital technology, making any place and time apt for teaching and research, reflected in the phrase 'academia without walls' (Gill, 2010, p. 237) when the instruments of academic work are physically decoupled from the geography of the university (Woodcock, 2018, p. 129). The ambivalent influence of digitalization on the efficiency, productivity, and social organizing of knowledge workers goes beyond academia (Vuori et al., 2019). However, if we admit that education in general and academic knowledge production in particular have greater social responsibility for promoting equality, justice, and sustainability, it becomes hard to overlook the negative trends caused by the digitalization of academic work and university pedagogies. Digital technologies used by us scholars are part of the ever-ongoing technological development necessary for capitalist growth (Muldoon, 2022; Srnicek, 2016), and through digitalization universities become dependent on large corporations that provide higher education institutions the necessary hard – and software (Ivancheva, 2020). At the same time, universities become a source of demographic data for businesses providing software, contributing to surveillance capitalism where users of digital technology, as we discuss further in the article, become raw material for the industry (Zuboff, 2019).

It is in this context scholars explore how the changing conditions for academic work interact with gender and sexual inequalities in online academic exchanges during the pandemic, including academic conferencing (Górska et al., 2021). For instance, Vetter and McDowell (2023, p. 2) demonstrate the unequal access to learning provided by video – conferencing due to 'private

commercial mechanisms'. In the same vein, Grandinetti (2022) acknowledges the 'platformization' of university life and highlights the risks involved in the greater influence of private corporations on higher education. Recognizing the usefulness of video-conferencing platforms in academic communication, they simultaneously point at the need for universities to examine the challenges of 'security, surveillance, censorship, equity, and access' as big tech is being consolidated in the university world (Grandinetti, 2022, p. 10). Williamson et al. (2020) illuminate how 'data colonialism' today involves the exploitation of human beings through data, as social discrimination and behavioural influence increases with continuous tracking of such kind (Couldry & Meijas, 2019). Prinsloo et al. (2021) highlights the problems with unequal access to the internet, an inequality which is gendered, raced and geo-political – a problematic situation to which Hayes and Cheng (2020) provide some suggestions as to how a positive move towards equality could be taken, for example by considering epistemic equality and non-discrimination as an official objective indicator of excellence in teaching. Research on academic conferences highlight their significance as an integral part of researchers' careers (Rowe, 2018), addressing both the importance of conferences for dissemination and exchange of scientific knowledge and for building and maintaining research networks (Hauss, 2021; Oester et al., 2017). Ariane Wenger (2023) finds that virtual conferences are more sustainable and often more inclusive than in-person conferences, but she also highlights as negative the lack of social interaction and networking during virtual conferences.

Finding that much literature on the topic has focused on how gender and sexual inequalities at home intensified as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Maria do Mar Pereira (2021) argues that analyses should start with questioning the supposed 'normality' of pre-pandemic academic work. Indeed, independently of the inequalities resulting from the digital shift during the pandemic, research on conferencing highlights how academics must negotiate neoliberalism's careless culture of productivity (Nicolazzo & Jourian, 2020). In this vein, Henderson and Moreau (2020) show how conference participants try to balance conflicting identities of an academic and a carer, while seeking to reconcile mobility requirements with caring responsibilities in contemporary academia. Burford et al. (2020) highlights the gendered nature of the care and service labour of maintaining conference communities in academia. This scholarship calls upon the integration of new norms of academic work informed by ethics of care (Boncori, 2020) and the recognition of how academic work relies and impacts on relations of interdependence (Couch et al., 2020), physical and emotional health (Clavijo, 2020), and reproductive labour (Bacevic, 2021). In our view, this approach also requires a rethinking of academic exchange with respect to climate justice, the effects of the measures taken during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the care labour that academics often have to combine with intense mobility and work hours extending beyond the regular. As some scholars have pointed out, the prioritization of large international conferences over intimate small-scale gatherings can be seen as a direct consequence of the neoliberalization and corporatization of academia, 'manifested in quantitative performance networks' (Steinberg, 2009, p. 552). Academic excellence understood in this way leads to the rise of carbon emissions through extensive travelling, the visibility of few scholars who have resources for extensive mobility, and the privileging of the 'international' scale over more local academic interventions (Berg, 2009). We agreed with and aspired to address these concerns when we started planning the FFQS conference.

Futures of feminist and queer solidarities: dialogue and reflection as method

This article is a result of our organizational and evaluative efforts that have been informed by dialogue and reflection as methods of knowledge production in feminist and queer research (e.g.

Browne et al., 2017; Çağatay et al., 2023; Mohanty & Carty, 2018; Mountz et al., 2015). When we started planning the conference in 2018, we explored how we could organize scientific exchange in a way that didn't itself reinforce the multi-levelled challenges we wanted to critically address. Moving the conference to the digital sphere looked like the first step to do so, yet we also knew that digitalization might not be the solution to the climate crisis but itself part of the problem and we needed to challenge the techno-fix legacy of the sustainability discourse. Consulting colleagues from the Department of Environmental Sciences at the University of Gothenburg to learn more about digitalization and the climate crisis, we arrived at the insight that one of our goals for the conference could be to scale down, to rethink the pace and size of our activities, and to use less resources. The question of de-growth appeared important to us (Mellor, 2019; Muraca, 2012) and we wanted to know more about how scaling down could facilitate approaching big questions and challenge ongoing tensions, exploitations, and inequalities from the perspective of feminist, indigenous, and queer of colour critiques, including universalizing feminist and queer agendas, ethnocentrism, green colonialism, and neoliberal dispossession, extraction, and dislocation. With this in mind, we downsized the number of conference participants to create a safe, intimate space in the digital sphere, and decided to cover the travel costs of only those participants who could come to Gothenburg by train. This way, we would still be able to cultivate face-to-face relations with other scholars outside conference hours without contributing to the carbon footprint of neoliberal academia. But who could afford travelling to Gothenburg by train, timewise and money-wise, if they didn't reside nearby? Our decision had Eurocentric implications and it risked excluding researchers from the Global South from cultivating in-person relations. There seemed to be no perfect solution.

In line with the decision to organize an explorative conference in a small format, we also scaled down our efforts and proceeded with small steps at a time with meetings where we discussed the state of affairs and distributed responsibilities for the upcoming months, avoiding burnout. As we later discussed, however, this didn't necessarily reduce the amount of academic work we had on an everyday basis; it was rather in line with the traction towards performing many tasks on a given workday, which could lead to multi-tasking (see below). Again, there was no perfect solution.

As the conference date approached, having an in-person meeting in Gothenburg was no longer a possibility. The Covid-19 pandemic had triggered a massive shift towards the digital sphere with most conferences and workshops being held on Zoom and many lectures and seminars being publicly broadcasted to reach broader audiences. While this looked like an unprecedented opportunity to expand the room for collective considerations of feminist and queer futures, it jeopardized our aim to scale down and create spaces of trust, intimacy, and solidarity. We moved the conference to Zoom as it had become a popular software most of us were by now familiar with but didn't yield to the temptation to broadcast the conference or invite external participants by registration. To accommodate participation from different parts of the world from Canada to Pakistan, we scheduled the conference slots in the afternoons, starting at 12.00 and ending at 19.00 (CET).

Following the conference, reflecting on how our attempt of scaling down academic exchange played out in the context of the pandemic, we sent out a Google Forms evaluation sheet to each participant and asked them about the various aspects of their conference experience including technical/technological, affective, corporeal, and intellectual/scholarly. Out of over fifty colleagues who participated in the conference on different days and in different capacities (e.g. paper presenter, session discussant, roundtable discussant, keynote speaker), twenty-three people filled in the form, all of them consenting to the use of their responses for this article in the spirit of carrying our dialogue beyond the conference itself. These forms not only offered the possibility to collectively reflect on the technical dimensions of organizing academic exchange differently but also

pointed at important themes to explore in relation to academic work and knowledge production and digitalized feminist and queer futures. While we do not treat the forms strictly as research data, we draw on participants' responses to support and sometimes complicate the issues we explore in the three thematic sections that follow.

Physicality of academic knowledge production in the digital space

Our thinking about the meaning of physicality in knowledge production comes from the discussions we had during the conference and afterwards. When we asked conference participants to provide feedback on the pros and cons of the online format of the conference, many were univocal in claiming that while online conferences were environmentally friendly, Covid-safe and financially sustainable, they lacked the 'physicality' of the offline event. By this, participants meant travelling and exploring new places beyond the conference itself, informal communication in-between sessions, during lunches, dinners, and coffee breaks but also the lack of sensuous experience such as the 'inability to feel other people and their energy', as one participant put it, and a specific sense of intimacy that offline events offer. We suggest that these longings for physical contact, intimacy and informal communication are an important point of departure for problematizing the nature of feminist and queer academic knowledge production and its future in the digital space. The ability to share a common experience not only on the level of cognition but also on the level of senses and sensibilities seems to be an important, yet under-scrutinized dimension of academic knowledge production as well as of feminist and queer solidarity (Çağatay et al., 2022; Hemmings, 2012; Stoller, 1997).

Conference participants' reflections on physicality and its lack thereof resonate with the critique of neoliberal academia and its overemphasis on productivity, achievements, tangible and quick results at the expense of deeper engagements, care, and solidarity practices among academics located unequally in terms of their geopolitical belongings (for example, in the Global North or in the Global South), institutional affiliations (high-ranking universities or less recognized colleges) and various career status (early-career researchers or professors) (Mountz et al., 2015; Pereira, 2021). They are also in line with research on digitalization in other knowledge-intense professional spheres where the reduction of face-to-face contacts and, consequently, the weakening of social ties and a sense of community are noted as a negative outcome (Vuori et al., 2019). Bodily experience of knowledge production including its gendered and racialized aspects and the severe stress and anxiety that academic bodies experience under the pressure of the neoliberal ideology of achievement and productivity are 'the subject of conference coffee breaks but not keynotes, of after seminar drinks but not departmental meetings, committee minutes or Senate or Council documentation' (Gill & Donaghue, 2016, p. 91). Extending academic work beyond the physical environment of the university, digital technologies exacerbate these developments. They suggest an availability requirement that facilitates academics' accessibility to students and colleagues beyond the formally designated working space and time (Gregg, 2011, p. 2). They also make this extra-work invisible and underpaid. Importantly, digital technologies enhance individualization, preventing spontaneous informal encounters, collegial chit-chats, and coffee break discussions – things that many professionals are eager to sacrifice for the sake of productivity (Gregg, 2011) but what is an important, yet subtle form of academic work and knowledge production beyond the productivity pattern (Gill & Donaghue, 2016; Gregg, 2011; Pereira, 2021). This unrecognized aspect of academic exchange was what many participants of the conference were longing for, as the following quotes from their replies in the evaluation form suggest:

> Quote 1: I find face-to-face interaction extremely valuable and irreplaceable; informal Q&As after sessions can be very productive; social gatherings and events help build connections and solidarity.

> Quote 2: Gains [of the online format]: no travels. Not away from home. Better access for those who find it hard traveling. Losses: the hugs, the gossip, the experience of the location (the people and the city).

These two quotes exemplify the almost univocal acknowledgment among participants that the lack of physicality, even sensation, described as 'the feeling of people and location', or 'the hugs, the gossip' is a substantial limit of online conferencing that can hinder connectivity and solidarity. This limitation is to some extent exacerbated through the digital software aimed at facilitating academic exchange such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, which have become further widespread since the Covid-19 pandemic. These software are well-equipped to maintain intellectual productivity of academic exchange at the expense of informal yet crucial forms of academic interaction such as spontaneous meetings.

At the same time, the overemphasis on cognition leads to what is now known as the digital exhaustion, or zoom-fatigue (Warnborg, 2021), that many FFQS participants reported in their responses. As research suggests (Heiden et al., 2021), the reasons behind cognitive intensity of digital engagements lies in their specific arrangement when we stare at our interlocutors at a proximity that is rare for real life interactions. Moreover, online meetings have limited possibilities to assess the broader context of a conversation – we must be attentive to our interlocutors' faces because other signs that convey the meaning beyond verbal interactions are not available (Warnborg, 2021). Therefore, more focus is put on verbal interactions. The words 'tired', 'tiring', and 'exhausted' appeared frequently in the response forms in relation to the difficulty of following speakers through long sessions. Relevant suggestions in this regard were to have longer time for discussion and shorter for presentation as discussions were easier to follow and they engaged the otherwise passive audience. Turning off the camera in moments of fatigue was a helpful tactic (which some of us, organizers, also applied). In fact, very few participants always had their camera on. Most of them kept it on only when it was convenient to do so, or for example to show their face at the beginning and end of the sessions and when they were posing a question/sharing a comment.

In this context, we find it interesting to recognize the questioning, among feminist and queer thinkers, of the Cartesian tradition of abstract cognition detached from the body and senses (Ahmed, 2006; Grosz, 1994; Haraway, 1988). Haraway's concept of *situated knowledge* as feminist objectivity claims that the nature of knowledge is embodied and that feminist epistemology as well as political solidarity rest in 'partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections' (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). The objective knowledge, Haraway (1988, p. 589) argues, is 'the view from a body … versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity'. Cognitive meanings are created through embodied positionalities, a particular locality, an inhabited and situated place (Hornecker 2011, 21). Extending these thoughts to the process of academic knowledge production, we may ask how the physicality of bodies – their location, the degree of their safety and comfort, the positioning in relation to the physical world and other material subjects – influence the process of knowledge perception, production, and transmission. 'In/ability to feel other people' or a sense of intimacy that the conference participants were longing for in their feedback can be interpreted as the incapability of the conference software to create such a space where people can interact with each other not only intellectually but also physically; share a multi-modal material experience that approximate the mutual understanding of a particular scholarly but also, as literature on feminist and queer solidarities claims (Wiedlack, 2019), potentially political message.

However, we also need to ask whether this experience of physicality that many conference participants were longing for is unproblematic in its supposed universality. While motility is an important aspect of academic and political struggles (Lugones, 2003), there is a further need to problematize whose bodily experiences are counted in academic knowledge production and who has the possibility and the right to occupy space, be it in an academic conference or a seminar, where academics share a common experience of physicality (Haritaworn, 2011). What we learnt from our discussions before and during the conference is that we as scholars need to think more carefully about whose travelling to prioritize while organizing hybrid events to avoid the reproduction of existing academic hierarchies in which more established and resourceful institutions and scholars are always more desired and more present in international academic gatherings.

Without falling into the illusion of 'technological solutionism' (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019, p. 903), we argue that real-life feminist and queer academic events, at least those organized in the Global North, oftentimes exclude precarious and marginalized scholars such as those located in the geopolitical and structural peripheries of academic knowledge production including scholars from financially fragile academic institutions, early-career researchers, people who cannot travel because their gender identity do not fit their passports or they have disabilities that prevent their motility. Can the digital be a solution in establishing more egalitarian but also less climate-disruptive academic exchanges? As Risam argues, digitalization occurs 'in the context of a politics of knowledge that has not been hospitable to those outside the dominant cultures of the Global North' (Risam, 2018, p. 5). This implies that the mechanical digitalization of academic knowledge will not contribute to developing more inclusive insights about justice if it continues relying on and reproducing the same problematic patterns. As we show in the concluding section, the nature of the digital tools of communication should be seriously scrutinized if the aim is to cultivate more sustainable, transformative, and meaningful interactions.

Digital temporalities: multi-tasking and the public-private divide

As the time-spaces of academic work are exposed to an ongoing intensification and extensification of work, scholars have highlighted the multiple ways in which the digital shift has impacted upon boundaries between the private and the public (Drozdova, 2020; Pereira, 2015). Their contributions describe how knowledge workers face increasing amounts of 'fragmented, simultaneous activity, plagued with frequent interruptions and numerous inputs from their electronic gadgets', aggressive deadlines, a fragmentation of tasks, and constant interpersonal interactions (Appelbaum & Marchionni, 2008, p. 1314; see also Lindbeck & Snower, 2000). These changes reflect a new, holistic logic shaping the organization, as universities, among others, set out to explore new technologies, partners and markets on a global scale (Powell, 2001). Simultaneously, the overlaps between being at home and being at work resulting from these changes, which were strongly emphasized during the pandemic, brought the ongoing reorganization of the boundaries between public and private realms to the fore. Yet, there are significant differences between those who can afford and enjoy working from home and those who do not have this possibility. In this section, we attend to these changing conditions as they are linked to intersecting modes of precarity and vulnerability and draw attention to the time-spaces within which people engage digitally. We focus both on modes of sustainability, that is, risks for exhaustion or burn-out, and on issues of safety, i.e. risks of exposure to either state surveillance or surveillance in the home, for example of being unwillingly 'outed' as feminist or LGBTI+. The changing boundaries between the public and

private realms, facilitated through digital technologies, generate diverse meanings of 'working from home' and academia without walls (Gill, 2010) for researchers.

In their reflections on the conference many participants pointed at the difficulty of devoting full focus at the conference and its negative effect on their participation. Some expressed that the lack of focused attention was a result of care work, e.g. home schooling of kids, and/or parallel work tasks, such as teaching and attending meetings. Others mentioned that they found themselves easily distracted, so that if the paper presented didn't quickly catch their attention, they started to check email and didn't engage in discussions. Many addressed the digital nature of the conference, which made the boundaries between different working tasks difficult to uphold. One participant wrote: 'My main problem was that since the conference was online, I did not cancel my teaching. So, I was teaching in the morning, and presenting in the afternoon, and it made the conference stressful for me (my fault)'. Another participant pointed at what they experienced as a pressure on full availability, when the conference took place 'at home' as they didn't take days off their regular work to attend the conference: 'I found it really, really hard to legitimately say no to other requests […] during […] the conference, since I was "working" anyway. I think this was the most frustrating thing'.

Highlighting the difficulties of demarcating different academic tasks when working from home, participants' reflections opened up questions around what 'being present' digitally means and implies. Not only, as discussed in the previous section, did the lack of physicality in the digital exchange impact upon the experience, but the digital also resulted in blurred boundaries between public and private spaces. For some of our conference participants, this had stressing and frustrating effects. As a central dimension of the neoliberalization of academia, multitasking produces feelings of never being finished and a psychological condition of being simultaneously distracted and rushed, feelings which basically express physical, emotional, and psychological reactions to a workload that is unmanageable (Gendreau, 2007; Hallowell, 2005). In addition, individuals who exercise multi-tasking can also suffer from what has been described as 'techno stress' or 'digital fatigue', resulting from the excessive use of technological devices. Nonetheless, while all participants recognized the existence of multi-tasking in academic work, some participants did not find multi-tasking specific to digital conferences, as for example highlighted in this comment: 'Conferencing is often multi-tasking in general, as work life and other things in life don't stop happening. [In the digital conference] I didn't do it more than I would have otherwise'.

By contrast, in our dialogues with conference participants, some recognized that certain types of multi-tasking did not necessarily produce frustration, lack of focus and stress, but that they could actually be convenient and productive, help to get things out of one's hands, and create moments of focused attention. Typically, depending on what types of activities that were exercised (cooking, listening, writing etc.), multi-tasking appeared not solely detrimental but also partly beneficial, if it remained within the scope of one's own decision-making. Notions of linear work, of remaining on-task without distraction, and of being task oriented, informs much of the feelings and perception about multi-tasking as destructive. Although it is close at hand to think that the dynamics encircling multi-tasking are guided either by emergent digital technologies, or by norms about fast response times, the varied responses among our conference participants indicate that the sense of being stressed and pressed by time appear because of an interplay between the technology and expected response time (Treusch, 2021). These dynamics relate to broader questions of how and why norms around availability are collectively accepted. The complex nature of these negotiations suggest that universities could benefit from establishing more socially sustainable norms

around response time and expectations of availability among staff and students, as digital technologies blur the boundaries between the space of work and the space of home.

These dynamics illustrate further dimensions of the changing spatio-temporalities following working from home: when we don't leave our home for professional activities, the divide between private and public shifts from being spatial to becoming temporal, as our workspace and home space merge into the same physical space. While some of our conference participants regretted the inability to travel and be physically distant from home or from their home university to allow a full focus on the conference programme, others appreciated the possibility to join a conference from home, due to caring duties, environmental concerns, visa issues and/or lack of funding. The responses demonstrate an ongoing renegotiation of boundaries between public and private, and between the home and the institution, illuminated by the pandemic shift to 'working from home', yet representing a more fundamental shift because of technological developments, allowing people to connect from anywhere (Fairhurst, 1998; Gregg, 2011).

During the conference, when cameras were off or when some participants used virtual backgrounds in their Zoom windows, they might have demarcated a boundary between a space of privacy in the home and the publicity of the workplace. According to Saunders and Williams (1988), freedom from surveillance marks one key dimension in the idea of privacy, which could be what some of our participants manifested through their online behaviour (Giddens, 1994). Nonetheless, assumptions of the home as a space of safety, autonomy, or freedom, located outside of monitoring or surveillance have been problematized by feminist and queer scholars, who have illuminated the home simultaneously as a space of labour (Gregson & Lowe, 1994), violence (Brickell, 2012), and as a heterosexualized space of alienation and rejection (Bell, 1991; Johnston & Valentine, 1995; Valentine, 1993). With the pandemic, significant inequalities were revealed between those who enjoyed working from home and those who did not. The overlapping spheres of surveillance in public and private realms give rise to complex feelings with which feminist and LGBTI + subjects take part in the life of the family in the home, located partly outside the spheres of (state) surveillance and partly still within its scope (Gopinath, 2005). As our conference participants highlighted, closeted feminist and LGBTI + subjects attending online feminist rallies and Pride events or giving presentations on feminist and LGBTI + related issues could experience situations of risk in the sphere of the home/family. Fear of online surveillance by governmental actors could appear among these subjects in authoritarian or conservative contexts, and many LGBTI + subjects are suspicious towards the surveillance conducted by digital tech giants, such as Facebook or Google. These dynamics suggest that the space of the home does not guarantee freedom from surveillance. Rather, such freedom reflects a privilege of social location within particular state/public regimes, which furthermore sheds light on the relationship between public and private as more entwined than usually described. Nonetheless, during the pandemic, as LGBTI + subjects adapted their identities to the fluid conditions of increasing surveillance and repression the division between 'closeted' and 'out' became decentred. For example, Tunay Altay shows (2022), in response to pandemic restrictions, the possibility to move between digital and non-digital spaces allowed LGBTI + subjects in Turkey to navigate their presence in public space and treat their outness strategically.

Entwined with these reconfigurations of the spaces of work and home in response to digitalization and the pandemic, are the ongoing transformations taking place as results of the climate crisis. In the future, the notion of workspace as a place free from private life matters and home as a space free from public tasks might be seen as belonging to another era, and a small, privileged segment of the population. When seeking to bridge critical conversations on feminist and queer solidarities with struggles around climate justice and sustainability in the context of a digitalized world,

multiple interacting dimensions emerge, which needs to be better addressed in critical scholarly conversations. For example, the increased energy consumption involved in working from home may in the long run risk increasing class inequalities and add extra layers of pressure to the already precarious position of marginalized and non-normative subjects entering digital spaces from home. Visualizing the redrawing of boundaries during the pandemic as a queer and feminist issue, these complexities urge us to revisit theoretical debates about private-public spheres and to re-theorize them as affective, relational, and embodied spaces, with more complex overlaps and tensions than previously recognized, inviting a re-envisioning of knowledge production as grounded in situated places, bodies, and relationships (Collins, 2010; Haraway, 1988).

Digital platforms: capitalism and the will to dis/connect

If the home became the new workplace for many during the Covid-19 pandemic, digital platforms gained salience as an important space for scholarly interactions during and after this period. After the pandemic, the hope for a digital solution of what has now become acknowledged as a climate crisis or a climate emergency (Ripple et al., 2020) has also grown. Scholars have shown that transitioning from in-person to virtual conferencing can substantially reduce the carbon footprint from conferences by 94% and energy use by 90% (Alberts, 2022; Tao et al., 2021). While technology seems to promise some solutions to the climate crisis, critical scholars such as Evgeny Morozov (2014), James Muldoon (2022), and Shoshana Zuboff (2019) tell us not to believe in this 'solutionism'. Relatedly, there are several problems with the growth of platform capitalism that can and need to be addressed. First, as some of the participants also underlined and which have been presented in the earlier sections in this text, platforms like Zoom monitor human behaviour and sell private data to companies and advertisers. This so-called surveillance capitalism (Muldoon, 2022; Srnicek, 2016) contributes to capital accumulation and thereby the consolidation of capitalist power. Platform capitalism is not only a new chapter in the history of capitalism but also, as Zuboff argues (2019), a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of data extraction. With surveillance capitalism, it becomes possible not only to learn about people's behaviour through data, but the technology will also form behaviour and change how we act and understand ourselves. This new form of digital concentration of power and production of subjectivity is not possible to separate from the strengthening of capitalism through the neoliberal processes developed since the 1970s and 1980s and which we have been highlighting in this text. The Neoliberal ideology of organizing not only protects capitalist platforms from restrictions from the states. The states should, through the same regime, create legal structures and function to support the free market, let it thrive. Beyond this care of the free market, the state should be minimized (Harvey, 2007; Zuboff, 2019). The neoliberal anti-state ideology has made it possible for the capitalist platform to work on a transnational arena. The neoliberal ideology has also resulted in politics of austerity and deconstruction of welfare societies (Harvey, 2007). Many persons and groups' vulnerability have increased and when digitalization develops, a new precariat of workers from racial, ethnic, sexual minorities; women and indigenous persons from the Global South become a source of exploitable workforce – a problem of special importance for feminist and queer scholars (Precarity Lab Collective, 2020). While this precarization increases, a focus on self-interest and competitive individualism is also growing and scholars have shown how neoliberalism with its disinterest for the social, prepares for authoritarianism (Brown, 2019; Hall, 1988; Mouffe, 2018). Neoliberalism, and its steering impact, is therefore in stark contradiction with commitments to social and environmental sustainability. Not least is it worth noting that the

struggle for social and ecological sustainability in an increasingly digitized world, risks getting into the hands of the platform owners.

A second problem with the growth of platform capitalism is that digitalization entails a widespread use of digital devices and an increased waste creation. Both the production of these devices and the daily digital use produce CO2 emissions. Finally, digitalization involves new injustices based on power, technology, and money, which defines who has the privilege to afford and be able to connect, as well as the privilege to feel free to disconnect when needed (Kozinets, 2015; Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019). The problems around digitalization generate new questions and challenges connected to technology and capitalism for feminist and queer scholars who operate in neoliberal academia and who thereby also partake in the development of platform capitalism. How do these platforms form different practices of knowledge production? How do they shape scholarly subjectivities? Is resistance to neoliberalism and various inequalities possible, while using these capitalist platforms and technological devices which continue to produce CO2 emissions, injustice and a class society?

Zudoff's suggestion that 'if the digital is to be our home, then it is we who must make it so' (2019, p. 21) provides an orientation for handling the digital by taking part in shaping it with behaviours that counter the logic of platform capitalism. Reflecting on our work around the conference, our choice to use platforms like Zoom as organizers was perhaps not politically responsible enough; we supported a problematic technology and contributed to the accumulation of capital and power. It was easy to criticize us for this, and some conference participants did so. We could have built our own platform, creating 'our own home' as Zudoff suggested. In the process of organizing the FFQS, we indeed attempted to create such an alternative platform, but the bureaucracy of the university started to play a role there. Due to employment regulations, we were not allowed to hire the software engineer who had been developing an alternative platform at another department in Gothenburg university. When Zoom came up as a platform that many people gained familiarity with in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this came as both a relief and an expression of neoliberal subjectivity demanding efficiency instead of resisting the dominant platforms and struggling with the bureaucracy. To create our own platform would have taken an amount of time that we did not have. Alternatives to dominant platforms stood for another norm of temporality and being in the world than the neoliberal academic order which strongly formed both our subjectivity and the structures we worked in.

Organizing a digital international conference to cut down on CO2 emission but holding it on a capitalist platform was perhaps a good enough start to embark on a transformative dialogue with other scholars concerned about the entanglement between digitalization, neoliberal academia, and the climate crisis. Whether we will be able to develop alternative platforms in the future or not, we at least responded to one thing that concerned us equally: the climate crisis and the role of economic growth. Instead of hoping for a technological solution we, privileged feminist and queer scholars based in Europe, opted for doing less than planned. The capitalist society and the free market depend on economic growth which is incomprehensible with sustainability (Herrmann, 2023). By downsizing the conference and having fewer participants, fewer sessions, and fewer ambitions (see Tao et al., 2021) we acted against the norm of growth, cut down on our use of energy, and resisted the desire for being fantastic neoliberal subjects. This was, we argue, at least a small counteraction to the capitalist system; a transformation – however limited – towards a more holistically sustainable academic practice (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019). We need to act by doing less.

Conclusion

In this article we reflected on the three issues that have become salient to us in the process of organizing an online conference and through our dialogues with conference participants. First, we engaged with physicality or its lack thereof in digital exchanges and investigated why the lack of physical co-presence was experienced by conference participants as a void that the online conference could not fulfil. Then, we explored the changing times and spaces of academic work and investigated how the blurring boundaries between private and public realms impact upon the sustainability of working life and the safety of the working space, as these shifts are facilitated by digital technologies. Finally, we discussed the digital platform used for the conference from a perspective of platform and surveillance capitalism and reflected on the possibility of reclaiming the digital beyond the capitalistic growth regime.

Taking our experiences of organizing an online international feminist and queer conference amid the Covid-19 pandemic as a point of departure, this article has explored the epistemological, spatial, and social implications of relocating academic work and knowledge production to digital environments. The collaborative process of organizing the conference, the conference itself and the reflective dialogue with conference participants were the three dimensions that shaped the ground for the discussion offered in this article. The question of *how*, *where* and *when* of academic work has been our focus in this paper because it matters for knowledge production as well as scholarly subjectivity and exchange. While the conditions of academic work have changed significantly with the digital shift, the ways how individual members of neoliberal academia experience this digital shift is dependent on personal circumstances such as family status or career stage as well as global inequalities. The Covid-19 pandemic as a phenomenon bound in time intensified the digital shift of academic spaces and practices, but the shift itself preceded the pandemic and will continue after. As we perhaps come closer to the post-pandemic times, we see a mixed picture of different approaches to academic conferencing. There are indeed examples of conferences organizing hybrid options, or hybrid satellite events, but there are even more examples of huge world conferences taking place entirely on-site, meanwhile the spaces/places of academic work on an everyday basis continues to be ever more fluid through the possibility to connect via digital tools. We don't know what future developments will look like and how universities will respond to the incoming digital advancements, but we do know that there are problems with the ways in which universities approach the issue of sustainability today.

As we argued in this article, the post-pandemic changes in academia need to be accompanied by a careful and multi-level discussion around the implications following from the use of digital technologies for academic exchanges in teaching and/or in research practices, and we need to look beyond a sole focus on the pandemic to fully capture the problems following from these developments. Neoliberalism has transformed societies, subjectivities, and identities according to the capitalist logic of market freedom instead of a goal devoted to social justice, democracy, and social responsibility. Universities and scholars have not been immune to this process that is in stark contradiction with sustainability commitments of all kinds. This neoliberal orientation has already given a strong impact on how digital technologies are restructuring academia, paving the way for what we today experience as academia without walls, platformization/corporatization of university life and surveillance capitalism. The pandemic is neither the beginning nor the end of this epoch, but is better understood as an enabler, a condition of possibility, allowing the shift to go smoother and quicker than what would otherwise have been possible. Future research would benefit from looking closer into the multiple ways in which academics appreciate and/or suffer

from the digital shift depending on their positionality. We need to ask whether the knowledge that we produce in academia contribute to social, economic, and climate justice, as the holistic definition of sustainability implies, or whether it continues to reproduce hierarchies, inequalities and climate threatening organizations and practices despite an assumed democratic potential of new digital technologies, which are expected to make the academic knowledge more accessible and available. We are still in the early stages of the process of digitalization that is, and will be, in the making for many years to come. Our academic work experiences are not set in stone, and we are as much agents of the digital shift as we are subjected to its consequences. As we engage in feminist and queer knowledge production, we can develop practices and formulate forward looking demands that foster solidaric rather than neoliberal subjectivities while avoiding digital solutionism.

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