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# Nomadic Work: Romance & reality

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*A Response to Barbara Czarniawska 'Nomadic Work as Life-Story Plot'*

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**Abstract** This article takes departure in Barbara Czarniawska's discussion of 'Nomadic Work as Life-Story Plot'. It contextualises her analysis of actors' interpretations of nomadic work with a bi-focal review of the ambiguous realities of these phenomena. Firstly, an examination of key aspects of the socio-economic and political context of nomadic work in global neoliberal economies reveals precarious conditions that cloud romantic interpretations of nomadism. Secondly, a review of studies of everyday practices of nomadic work shows how neoliberal, but also alternative futures are enacted through creative appropriation of collaborative technologies. One example is the work of digital 'disaster deck' volunteers and its potential for the mobilization of 'rapid, highly localized assistance' through closer collaboration between a distributed crowd, local communities, and official emergency responders (Starbird and Palen 2013). This and other examples suggest emergent new practices and politics of dwelling in mobility that are focused on sociality and collaboration, straddling virtual and physical commons. The twin critique developed in this response can augment narrative analysis to inform more integrated CSCW innovation that challenges the 'brave new world of work'.

**Keywords:** CSCW, design, neoliberalism, nomadic work, commons

## Introduction

CSCW thrives on stories of lived experience. So the fact that Barbara Czarniawska's analysis is rich with 'life-story plots' of nomadic work should enable useful insight. She asks 'who are the nomads?' and the stories she elicits are fascinating; intimate, thoughtful, revealing. They draw out motivations, hopes, dreams and frustrations that are typical of nomadic work. However, a focus on individual career choices, retrospectively rationalizes and romanticizes these choices as part of 'plots' that shape lives prospectively. This is problematic; not because it results in a rosy picture (it doesn't), but because it obscures important mechanisms and practices that form nomadic work. There are plenty of clues that the realities of nomadic work for 'digital immigrants' and 'digital natives' are more complex than is often

acknowledged. But there is not enough detail of how these are lived and enacted as individual, organizational, socio-economic and political, as well as practical realities.

In this response to 'Nomadic work as life-story plot', a short summary of Barbara Czarniawska's analysis is followed by a discussion that draws two important dimensions into view. Firstly, like traditional nomads, today's nomadic workers are part of larger technological, socio-economic and political contexts. Global neoliberal capitalism has made many modern nomads 'liquid' labour, trapped in mobility whether they are high earning professionals with bulimic work patterns or part of a new 'precariat' (Bauman, 2000; Standing, 2011). Both are often employed in freelance, temporary, insecure or 'precarious' positions. Contextualizing life-story plots in relation to this background can help in constructing a more rounded picture. Secondly, details of everyday practices of technologically augmented nomadic work are omitted from 'life-story plots'. Yet, a deeper understanding of how nomadic work is practised at this level is critical to inspiring critical design imaginaries and identify opportunities for creative resistance. There are not many studies that enable such insight and imagination – a fact that this special issue will help to address. In this response, a selective review of nomadic work practices drawn from studies from the sociology of mobilities and CSCW, HCI, and ubiquitous computing will help to illustrate how analysis of larger socio-economic and political contexts, life-story plots, and everyday practices could come together to shape collaborative technologies that allow people and societies to challenge the 'brave new world of work' in which nomadic work is done (Beck, 2000).

## **Who are the nomads?**

Czarniawska's analysis begins with personal definitions. Having brought together a set of highly mobile international academics and professionals in a focus group, the participants begin by drawing distinctions between traditional nomads and their own practices. An anthropologist in the group corrects some of the misconceptions that surface in this discussion. He highlights, for example, that traditional nomadic practices are rooted in complex social customs, inscribing skillfully defined routes into challenging landscapes, and he explains that the key rationale for traditional nomadic life-styles is to 'follow the capital' (which, for most indigenous populations, is constituted by cattle). But popular understanding of characteristics of nomadic life, such as 'they never settle', their lives are shaped by 'violence and resistance', 'their homes ... can be packed in a minute and they move on', and 'there is no notion of property' leads the participants to conclude that, if anything, they are 'modern nomads' – people who travel with and for work, and perhaps settle elsewhere temporarily (Brussels, Duesseldorf, London), but who crucially – unlike traditional nomads – have choice. However, when a business consultant member of the focus group declares that he recently refused to 'follow the capital', the anthropologist challenges the implied sense of superior freedom and choice ascribed to the modern nomad. He explains that 'nomads in the original sense of the word follow their own capital – camels or reindeer – [while] nomads in the fashionable sense of the word usually follow as labor the capital of others'.

Czarniawska then exhibits two 'working-life stories' to explore how different individuals straddle that disjuncture between freedom and dependence. Anselm, an émigré self-taught IT developer in his late 50s, categorized by Czarniawska as a 'digital immigrant' (a person old enough to have known a world without personal computers), recounts how he created many career opportunities through his travels. Anselm abandoned his Information Technology degree when he discovered that he could already build better systems than commercial developers. He turned down employment contracts, initially motivated by higher earnings available to consultants. But the freedom found in independence also suited his desire to 'compete under his own conditions' and escape the straitjackets of education, certification and employment. He travelled to learn and the people he met opened new doors for him. However, over the course of several decades, his career plumbed depths of hardship as well as soared, and since the start of the financial crisis in 2008, his fortune has taken a course for the worse, leaving him unemployed or employed via intermediaries, with low rates of pay. Bernard, Czarniawska's second respondent, describes similar contradictions. He is 30 years younger than Anselm and characterized as a 'digital native', a budding academic researcher, 'pushed' into career choices by the need to find employment, 'pulled' towards particular opportunities through his interests. Seemingly footloose without strong social ties, he moves between countries, educational opportunities and jobs. Reluctant to do 'what he was told to do', Bernard – like Anselm – is a free spirit, albeit one who continuously feels like 'being in deep water, ... not knowing if he would sink or swim'.

Czarniawska's analysis highlights the difficulties of nomadic career choices and the role social relationships might play, and she discusses some limitations of the metaphors of 'digital immigrant' and 'digital native'. However, her analysis most energetically foregrounds the entrepreneurial free spirit, mobility and flexibility both her respondents exhibit. They 'both believe in merit as the prime criterion for career advancement', and in the pursuit of their individual life-story plots 'both could have as [their] motto "I do not do what I am told to do"'. Both have the courage to live with financial insecurity. She mentions historical precedents of modern nomadism – journeymen, the dispossessed, and the stranger, and she draws from Anselm and Bernard's stories an understanding that today there is an ambiguity – a to-ing and fro-ing (D'Mello & Sahay, 2007) – of feeling, ranging from a sense of great freedom to a fear of drowning.

From this analysis, nomadic career choices emerge as personal choices made for 'good reasons', where the meaning of 'good' is not only pragmatic, but also normative. For Czarniawska 'good reasons' do not just describe pragmatically sound reasons that prompt people to 'move on' (if there are no jobs in one place, this is a 'good reason' to look elsewhere). She also implies that some reasons are morally superior because they embody 'good' personal values of entrepreneurial nous, responsibility, independence, freedom, and courage. Moreover, these values are, she suggests, autonomously chosen by her respondents, and attention to life-story plots draws this romantic individualism to the fore, allowing us to analyse it.

Turning to the next generation of European workers in the third part of her analysis, Czarniawska finds evidence of a continuing trend towards such individualism. She is fascinated by the fact that modern nomadic values of entrepreneurial spirit and courage still seem to shape the 'life-plots' young people devise for themselves. Portraits from a 2006 survey of 'Europeans on the move' confirm the contradictory experiences of modern nomadic work. Freedom, choice, flexibility, but also frustration and fear are recurrent experiences. From these stories, Czarniawska identifies obstacles for migrants and nomads, most importantly language, customs, and loneliness. But the young people she cites - like Anselm and Bernard - emerge from analysis as dynamic, spirited, full of entrepreneurial energy and good, autonomously chosen personal moral values that supply 'good reasons' for nomadic career choices. While their freedom might come at the price of security and the ability to make long-term plans, a large number seem to find this a price worth paying and seem to gladly take the risks. Czarniawska concludes with suggestions for further study, including comparisons across different industries, professions, and generations.

## **How are the nomads?**

Czarniawska's study provides insight into some important aspects of modern nomadic workers' experiences. But interpretation of modern nomadic experiences 'from the standpoint of the actors involved' with the aim to 'reveal a "reality outside" as seen by the speakers' (Czarniawska 1992, quoted in Silverman 2000) is analytically romantic (Silverman, 2000:132). Realities are not outside of, but made in, and made sense of, through lived practice and discourse. Stories need to be related to analysis that probes beyond the story to account for systemic and structural complexities as well as the practical realities of 'dwelling in mobility' (Urry, 2007:148). To contribute some lived reality to the romance of nomadic work captured by life story plots, I will now first trace some prominent contours of the technological and socio-political context and then explore some emergent technologically augmented everyday practices that are constitutive of nomadic work. A deeper understanding of the wider enframing of nomadic work and its practices can help in developing broader imaginaries for CSCW and challenge the 'brave new world of work' that is taking root along the routes travelled by modern nomads.

## **Precariously mobile**

Since the 2006 survey of 'Young Europeans on the Move' that Czarniawska cites, the financial crisis has generated harsher conditions. 'In November 2012, 5.799 million young persons were unemployed' (Eurostat, 2013). Youth unemployment rates in Europe today are 'the highest since the OECD began recording it' (Giles, 2012). This translates into difficult realities, for example for over 50% of the young people in Spain and Greece, who are without a job. While for some, these pressures provide 'good reasons' to seek work elsewhere, large numbers of young people also spend long periods of time in education, training, the informal economy and unemployment. An increase in temporary opportunities accompanies this trend, and

greater geographical mobility, or skills and flexibility acquired through training do not necessarily translate into upward social mobility. Indeed, there is evidence that taking on temporary jobs can increase the likelihood of becoming unemployed in the future (Antoni & Jahn, 2009). Analysts, including Nemat Shafik, the deputy Managing Director of the IMF, and Lazlo Andor, the European Union employment commissioner, point to a danger of 'lost generations', that is, generations of young people who encounter great difficulty in making economically independent lives for themselves anywhere (Al Dakkak, 2013; PressTV, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2013).

Against this background, mobile lifestyles appear less of a choice, and young people's difficulties index a more long-standing and pervasive trend towards 'immaterial labour', (focused on producing immaterial products – knowledge, ideas, services, relationships, affects) and 'precariousness':

*the contractual and material conditions of immaterial labor that tend to spread to the entire labor market are making the position of labor in general more precarious. There is one tendency, for example, in various forms of immaterial labor to blur the distinction between work time and nonwork time, extending the working day indefinitely to fill all of life, and another tendency for imaterial labor to function without stable long-term contracts and thus to adopt the precarious position of becoming flexible (to accomplish several tasks) and mobile (to move continually among locations). (Hardt & Negri 2004:65)*

Work has become deterritorialised, offshored if the material conditions and persons available in one place don't suit (Urry, 2013(forthcoming)), and mobilised to be done 'anywhere, anytime, by anybody' willing to accept the terms on offer. These transformations are fueled by neoliberal economic ideas, and deeply entangled with technological innovations, including support for distributed collaboration. They have created a 'brave new world' of work (Beck, 2000), characterised by intensified demands, on people's time, flexibility and mobility, and weakened traditional securities and solidarities. Over 20% of people globally are now employed in "non-standard" positions (everything but regular, full-time employment) or "contigent" jobs without the potential for permanence (Cappelli & Keller, 2012). The numbers of people in precarious employment have risen sharply, and in some areas, such as in and around Toronto 'barely half of those working are in permanent, full-time positions that provide benefits and a degree of employment security' (Lewchuk et al., 2013). Although this current increase in precarious work 'is only a small slice of capitalist history' where, in fact, precariousness is the norm and Fordism the exception (Rossiter, 2005), how widely discourses of employment construe opportunity and risk as individual responsibilities is remarkable. Structural and social mechanisms that shape individual life chances have become less visible, while pressures to accept individual responsibility for one's fortune have increased. This is clearly evident in Czarniawska's respondents' stories. Perhaps the most jarring example is Zoltán, the Hungarian economics graduate Czarniawska presents as one of a growing number of entrepreneurial young 'Europeans on the move', who

interprets his current employment position as a waiter in London as an achievement *'if you are prepared to work hard you can achieve a lot ... I couldn't just focus on finding a relevant job ... So I started applying to everything and anything. Three weeks after setting foot in the UK I found my first job through a small advert in a local newspaper. It was a cleaning job in Essex.'* (European Commission, 2006:127). Modern nomads like Zoltán perceive success and failure as predominantly related to just how flexible, mobile and socially skilled they are prepared to be as individuals:

*...if they stay unemployed, it is because they failed to learn the skills of gaining an interview, or because they did not try hard enough to find a job, ... if they are not sure about their career prospects and agonize about their future, it is because they are not good enough at winning friends and influencing people and failed to learn and master, as they should have done, the arts of self-expression and impressing others. This is, at any rate, what they are told these days to be the case, and what they have come to believe, so that they now behave as if this was, indeed, the truth of the matter.*  
(Bauman, 2000:34)

In Ulrich Beck's words 'how one lives becomes the biographical solution of systemic contradictions' (Beck, 1992:137). Particularly troubling here is the fact that in the process of individuals' continuous striving for individual freedom and responsibility their actual antithesis materialises: a growing gap between 'individuals *de jure* and their chances to become individuals *de facto*', able to 'gain control over their fate and make the choices they truly desire' (Bauman, 2000:39). In other words, the life story plots of individual autonomy so vividly documented by Czarniawska mask an actual erosion of real autonomy. For example, based on a study of Finish vocational education and training schemes, Kristiina Brunila argues that the project and skill-focused 'therapeutic' education many young people undergo as part of their prolonged transition into work contributes to the enactment of 'diminished selves':

*... this ethos works towards a new kind of self-disciplined worker-citizen who wants to know more about themselves than about society. This orientation is produced through operations of power that shape and retool young adults to fit market and state needs, ... therapeutic techniques ensure that one learns to find mistakes in oneself and then hold oneself to blame. This is one way to keep individuals busy by focusing on themselves and making their whole lives available for the interests of the market ...*  
(Brunila, 2012:12)

*Zeitdiagnostic* studies like these describe societal dynamics under headings of 'disorganized capitalism', 'network society', 'risk society' and 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992, 2000; Castells, 2009; Lash & Urry, 1994). They trace the contours of a neoliberal socio-economic and political context as it imprints itself on the world of work, on individual selves and social relationships, as well as technological imaginaries, as we will see shortly. Held up against this backdrop, the life-story plots Czarniawska elicits, with their emphasis on individual responsibility, flexibility and drive for continuous personal improvement, emerge as functional elements in a configuration of a docile mobile workforce. Real individual self-

determination and entrepreneurial freedom seem more of a mirage than attainable superior moral values:

*... in many countries, a least a quarter of the adult population is in the precariat. This is not just a matter of having insecure employment, of being in jobs with limited durations and with minimal labour protection ... It is being in a status that offers no sense of career, no sense of secure occupational identity, and few, if any, entitlements ... (Standing, 2011:585)*

Technologies, including technologies inspired by CSCW research, are used in ways that enable these conditions to endure. But they can be, and are, also used (and can be designed!) in ways that might help configure things differently. Transformations of mobile and collaborative work, supported creatively by technologies, by design or by appropriation, can support new forms of individuality and sociality with values that reach beyond concerns with individual careers and fortunes. These are possibilities that – in a more fortuitous dialectic synthesis – co-exist with the dystopian tendencies outlined above. In the very precarious nomadic mobilities that define the modern nomads' brave new world of work:

*precarity signifies both the multiplication of precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living and, simultaneously, new forms of political struggle and solidarity that reach beyond the traditional models of the political party or trade union. This double meaning is central to understanding the ideas and politics associated with precarity; the new moment of capitalism that engenders precariousness is seen as not only oppressive but also as offering the potential for new subjectivities, new socialities and new kinds of politics (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 3)*

The next section provides a glimpse into alternative kinds of subjectivities, socialities, and politics emerging from the creative appropriation of collaborative and mobile technologies for nomadic work practices.

## **Mobilizing CSCW**

Life-story plots gloss over an imbroglia of technology, social practices of nomadic work and intersecting social, physical, virtual, communicative and imaginative mobilities (Urry, 2007). There is a small but growing literature, to which this special issue contributes, that traces emergent socio-technical practices of nomadic work (e.g. Bellotti & Bly, 1996; Ciolfi, Gray, & D'Andrea, 2012; Perry, O'Hara, Sellen, Brown, & Harper, 2001). Some of these practices are functional, some disruptive to the neoliberal project, and inquiry into the lived reality of nomadic work practices can provide traction for CSCW design. By exploring, in outline, a small selection of such practices, this section seeks to develop emergent synergies between the fields of CSCW, HCI and ubiquitous computing and the sociology of mobilities (Büscher, Urry, Witchger, 2011; Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2000; Urry, 2007). The aim is to show that deeper insight into practices of nomadic work can inform design and appropriation of new technologies that is sensitive not only to corporate economic rationalities,

individual experiences and desires, or even the detail of collaborative practices but also wider imaginaries of a good life.

### **Practicing nomadic work**

This review of nomadic work practices shares Czarniawska's broad definition of nomadic work. It is not restricted to employees continuously 'on the road' but includes experiences of intermittent business travel, working abroad, from home, in cafes or co-working spaces, as well as on the move, and moving between short term or multiple jobs. There are, one might say, different regimes of mobility. Firstly, work is often elsewhere, requiring geographic mobilities. Creative industries concentrate in London, software companies in Mumbai, trade and financial services in Dubai, and transnational companies distribute their operations across the globe, encouraging a merrygoround of expatriate placements. Secondly, finding work can be a matter of 'moving on', that is, short-term contracts and freelance work require skills in finding or creating new opportunities. Thirdly, information, communication and sociality must be mobilized to enable collaboration between people working together apart. Fourthly, people may literally work on the move, on trains and planes, or whilst waiting (or stranded) in airport lounges, hotel lobbies, cars and cafes. The following list selects practices that seem particularly critical to nomadic work, identified from observations and qualitative studies within the growing field of studies of nomadcity to chart a complex field for innovation:

- *Network sociality* - Even before the rise of social media technologies, the pressures of work often being elsewhere, either physically distant from home or provided by many different employers, had given rise to 'network sociality' practices, consisting of 'fleeting and transient, yet iterative social relations; of ephemeral but intense encounters' (Wittel, 2001). Such networks build social and cultural capital from 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973), and may be useful in activities Bauman identifies as critical to success in neoliberal economies, such as 'winning friends and influencing people' as well as 'the arts of self-expression and impressing others'. It would be interesting to trace the history of mutually shaping interactions between these emergent social innovations in network sociality, CSCW research and innovation in supporting collaboration and awareness between networked colleagues, and the rise of social media.
- *Plastic* - a metaphor developed from a study of 'busyness' by Rattenbury, Nafus and Anderson (2008) to highlight how technologies have become amalgamated into practices of everyday life. Technologies can become plastic in the way they 'harmonize with and support daily life by filling opportunistic gaps, shrinking and expanding until interrupted, not demanding conscious coordination, supporting multitasking, and by deferring to external contingencies'. The practices that exploit this plasticity are also practices of cultural expression, giving meaning to busyness as an indicator of status, where excusing oneself 'from one activity to take care of another demonstrates social importance'. In these practices, infrastructures are often troublesome, with users often spending significant amounts of time



attempting to establish connectivity, and adapting compatibility with local resources (e.g. finding a printer that works), leading some analysts to call for designing better infrastructural visibility (Mark & Su, 2010).

- *Deliberate interactions* – Drawing on a study of professionals in Nairobi who collaborate with US and UK based colleagues, Wyche et al (2010) find that limited network availability, the cost of Internet usage, social norms around email responsiveness, and concerns over physical or virtual security give rise to practices of carefully planning and preparing of synchronous and asynchronous online collaborative interactions. People use multiple digital devices to straddle infrastructural constraints and manage different expectations of responsiveness. The nuanced insights into how technologies are mobilized for collaboration derived from research in this infrastructure-poor setting resonate with studies that find similarly careful preparation amongst mobile workers elsewhere. For example, Laurier, (2004) describes how sales reps prepare documentation of difficult cases to deal with on the motorway, and Perry et al. (2001) show commuters writing and saving text messages on the London underground to send when they recover connectivity. Studies like these can inform innovation that goes beyond a blanket assumption of ‘access anywhere, anytime’, for example by smoothing the transition between online and offline collaboration, by supporting awareness of collaborators’ timezone and infrastructural constraints, and by supporting discreet use of technologies in public settings.
- *This place or that?* – A number of studies explore the practicalities of choosing where to work, revealing how ‘place shapes work’ (Brown & O’Hara, 2003). It might, for example, be easy to annotate a document on a train, but difficult to discuss complex changes with others. The growing diversity of places either designed or appropriated for mobile work (such as trains and planes equipped with wifi and power, wifi cafés, or co-working spaces) has given rise to the development of skills associated with ‘care of place’ (Liegl, this issue), where social networking and locative media may be used to find just the right spot to work even when in an unfamiliar place. Importantly, decisions over where to accomplish different types of work go beyond the practicalities of performing work, such as consideration of noise-levels, suitability for meetings, or the availability of surfaces and privacy: ‘the *where* is almost always connected to social relationships’ (Ciolfi et al., 2012). For example, the wish to look after and properly connect new employees into the team may prompt the CEO of a small company to spend more time in the office or to book a hotel with good internet connection while on a business trip, while the buzz of anonymous sociability may inform the choice of a café, or the potential to network may draw a worker into a co-working space.
- *Making workplaces* – Place shapes work, but work also shapes place (Brown & O’Hara, 2003) – in a number of ways. At a political level, Brown and O’Hara ask how capitalism comes to imprint itself on so many spaces so effectively, finding that where nomadic work is concerned ‘[t]here is one obvious answer to this: the workers do it themselves. They convert, adjust, and configure the

spaces which are available to them so as to be able to do their work in them'. This results in an erosion of 'third spaces' – spaces previously reserved for time-out, leisure, interaction and transit. These spaces are being reconfigured, appropriated and colonised by people doing work. Moreover, practically, making spaces fit for work involves an 'art and craft' of place-making (Watts, 2008), which often necessitates careful planning ahead or 'planful opportunism', that is, 'collecting and carrying particular technologies, documents, and resources' which *might* be useful (Perry et al., 2001). To help people equip themselves to make the most of the 'gift of travel time' (Jain & Lyons, 2008) technologies may be designed for different modalities of mobility and collaboration (Bellotti & Bly, 1996; Erickson, 2001; Kristoffersen F. & Ljungberg S., 2000; C Rossitto, 2009).

- *Homing* – In the process of making workplaces away from home, places can also become subject to 'homing'. Petersen, Lynggaard, Krogh, & Winther (2010) and Lynggaard (2011), describe seven different examples ranging from practices that allow people to make themselves at home in a place, such as *territorializing* (claiming space for one's activities) or *bubbling* (excluding disruptive context with earphones and screens) to practices that maintain a connection with home in temporary workplaces, for example through *rhythming* (maintaining routines and temporal schedules rooted in the home). Elliot and Urry (2010) also discuss a variety of technologically augmented practices that allow mobile workers to participate in the emotional and practical labour of home-making, including 'affect storage and retrieval', 'portable personhood', and doing 'love online' with children and partners (see also Walsh 2009). The flipside of 'homing' practices are home working practices which can tether workers to work and sometimes multiple, globally distributed workplaces. Orlikowski, Yates, and Mazmanian (2005) describe how investment banking employees label their BlackBerrys 'Crackberrys' when they find their wives 'wake up at three or four in the morning and I'll be checking my BlackBerry or sending [emails]'.
- *Working together apart* – Many aspects of the new ways of doing collaborative work on the move described above define constraints and opportunities for technological innovation. But they also highlight a paucity of studies of how precisely divisions of labour, articulation work, awareness, and mutual interdependencies are negotiated and joint outcomes are produced. While many authors discuss the need for sharing and integrating multi-media content across assemblies of diverse digital devices and spaces, and the need for time-zone, infrastructural and contextual awareness (e.g Rossitto & Eklundh, 2007, Wyche et al., 2010), there is a lack of insight into how such support is or would be used. One area where such pioneering research into the mobilization of collaborative work is being done is crisis informatics. In the aftermath of a crisis - a storm, fire, earthquake or human made emergency, local people and professional responders mobilize to help. More recently, people witnessing these events in the media or online have begun to insert themselves into these processes of mobilising people,

resources and information for disaster response, and converge online to help. Starbird and Palen (2013), for example, analyse how experienced and novice members of *Humanity Road*, an emerging volunteer organization in this field, self-organize with the help of collaborative technologies to collect, evaluate and route information to those who can act on it. Working almost exclusively online, many of the participants in this effort engage in nomadic work practices (although the specificities of this raise empirical questions not currently explored by crisis informatics researchers). Starbird and Palen show that the volunteers assemble different tools to filter, map, and verify information and to organise their collaboration, including email, skype, google docs, and various social media analytics tools. They have developed highly sophisticated practices of economically declaring what they are working and configuring awareness amongst a highly distributed and diverse group, to effectively distill, develop and share and instructions, and to diagnose social processes of collaboration as they unfold, adding new tools into the mix when articulation work becomes too onerous. In their conclusion Starbird and Palen describe how these work practices are giving rise to a new place: the '*knowledge commons*'. They argue that the volunteers' skills in 'baking' rigorous collaborative practices 'into' their use of technologies enable powerful collaboration amongst distributed online 'remote operators', including permanent as well as 'episodic volunteers' with little experience, as well as informants and responders on the ground. These practices of the commons are hopeful harbingers of different possible futures of modern nomadic work practices, especially as and when official emergency response organizations learn to leverage this new mobile workforce and the potential for 'rapid, highly localized assistance' they offer (for a discussion of such more 'agile' emergency response, see also (Perng et al. 2013) .

- *Working alone together* – In addition to the online 'knowledge commons', nomadic work practices seem to give rise also to a different, physical form of commons. Liegl (this issue) describes how co-working spaces feature as hubs for network sociality, but also just sociality. Many nomadic workers are 'socially at once highly sensitive, highly cooperative and isolated' (Beck 2000:54), prompting them to seek out other people. Spinuzzi (2012) also explores the new phenomenon of co-working spaces, noting that such spaces enable different kinds of work-related sociality than the café – allowing people to mingle with people who are 'like themselves'. Even if there is not much interaction as people work quietly 'alone together' as they do in some of these spaces, there are benefits. More practically, Spinuzzi observes how some co-working spaces allow individual workers to enter into different 'federations' if opportunities for projects that are too large for individual contractors arise.

CSCW technologies, social media, advances in Human Computer Interaction techniques, and innovations in mobile and ubiquitous computing are deeply entangled in the evolution of these practices. Being able to connect, communicate,

send and receive documents, and configure awareness across different work spaces has mobilized work in different ways, and it creates opportunities for new subjectivities, socialities and – possibly – a new politics of the commons.

## Discussion

Czarniawska's exploration of nomadic life-story plots firstly sheds light on a relatively privileged group of people who have the entrepreneurial nous, social capital and professional skills to shape economically, emotionally and practically viable nomadic careers and workdays. Secondly, it explores some of the experiences of young people, even more precariously poised. Some actively identify as nomads and take pride in the control they have over their work, ambitions and lives. Standing calls the former group 'the proficians' – professionals and technicians with highly sought after skills they can contract out as consultants or independents, and he shows how they are poised (precariously) between a 'salarial' above (those in stable full-time salaried employment) and a precariat below. Nomadic lifestyles and work practices more often than not do not translate into upward social mobility but uncertainty and short term opportunities. At one level, the individualism and freedom nomadic work promises is an illusion, a false belief, given that for so many the antithesis of freedom and individual autonomy materialize in and through nomadic work. All elements of the labour market shoulder an often heavy 'burden of mobility' (Cass, Shove, & Urry, 2005), where travelling is emotionally and physically tiring, making oneself at home in a new place is difficult (as Czarniawska describes), and real choices are severely curtailed. But both groups have also developed innovative 'nomadic' practices of making and maintaining social networks that stretch, identities that adapt, of moving on, of making (work)places and temporary homes. Technologies can support and enable these practices, and in the process, give rise to novel – positive – forms of sociality, social subjectivities, and – possibly – politics.

Elsewhere, Czarniawska has excelled at rich re-descriptions of 'practices', arguing that it often 'takes two – an actor and an observer – to describe [a] job' (Czarniawska, 2012:8). For a new politics of the commons and CSCW technologies that constructively support it, more of this kind of research is required. Rich descriptive insights into the mundane practical achievement of distributed, mobile, nomadic collaborative work from multiple theoretical and empirical locations are invaluable, because they can inform the design of technologies that can support productive new ways of working. Here, she has opted for a more 'romantic' celebration of interpretation and narrative, developed from 'flat' studies. This is somewhat unfortunate, but inspiring nonetheless. In this response, I have contextualized and critiqued the upbeat narratives of entrepreneurial nomadism and provided some counterbalance. The concept of precarious work reveals a different duality than that of individually experienced contradictions between freedom and dependence. It has a double face

*on the one side the shifts and intensification of exploitation brought about by the acceleration of information, and by Empire's search for ways of realizing 'unmediated command over subjectivity itself' (Lazzarato, 1996: 134), but on the other the release of a social potential for transformation, largely attributable to its affective dimensions and the opportunities for human contact and interaction.*

Developing CSCW technologies that support nomadic work practices on the basis of rich descriptions of the practices involved in the latter, in particular, has the potential to give shape to broader imaginaries for CSCW, challenge the 'brave new world of work', and enable nomadic work that is part of good lives.

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