All Work and No Play: How Digital Platforms Controlled Work, Disability, and Time During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts (Film and Moving Image Studies) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September 2023

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

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Entitled: All Work and No Play: How Digital Platforms Controlled Work, Disability, and Time During the COVID-19 Pandemic

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Film and Moving Image Studies)

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Abstract

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This project aims to explore the complexities and pitfalls of the rapid shift to remote workspaces as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, predominantly for disabled workers. This shift introduced a new way of working based on the use of mass collaboration platforms that aimed to keep us connected despite the limitations on gathering. With a focus on the stark change of the working environment between 2019-2022, I demonstrate how these platforms are the main channels for holding over older forms of workplace management. These outdated work practices end up deeply ingrained within the design of most mass collaboration tools. This fact both alters our relationship to time and space at work and allows for the exacerbation of discrimination to flow through the virtual workplace. The first chapter explores the former of the two, analyzing the histories of mass collaboration platforms and how they structure our navigation of time. I analyze both *Zoom* and *monday.com* to uncover how the crisis allowed many of their shortcomings to go unnoticed. In my second chapter I demonstrate how these virtual tools only further exacerbate ableism in the workplace, despite these spaces being virtual. I use *Meta* as a case study due to its novelty and incorporation of virtual reality in order to discuss accessibility and inclusion in the workplace. By analyzing these platforms I hope to uncover how these digital platforms can actually produce disability by creating inaccessible environments in the first place.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Joshua Neves, for the consistent support throughout my writing process. I appreciate more than I could express the time you dedicated toward helping me complete this project. Your knowledge on the subject, reading recommendations, positivity, and detailed notes are the reason for the successful completion of this thesis. You pushed me to write better and tackle a subject that I am extremely passionate about and because of this I have created something I am incredibly proud of.

Thank you to both Iuliia and Nicholas for organizing and hosting two semesters of an incredible writing workshop. Thank you also to Declan, Marielle, Zachery, Cole, Jess and Julio for being such wonderful editors and providing valuable feedback. I am incredibly privileged to be surrounded by such stellar academics and have the opportunity to share my work throughout the writing process.

Thank you to the professors who helped me develop a strong research focus, navigate the Master's process, and taught me a variety of interesting subjects. I always strive to broaden my knowledge which was the main reason for my interest in graduate studies. Thank you to Luca Caminati, May Chew, Marc Steinberg, Masha Salazkina, Rosanna Maule, and Joshua Neves for their exciting lectures and interesting readings. The compassion, intellect, and support from the faculty is unmatched and I am lucky to work alongside you.

Finally, thank you to my family and friends. Thank you to my mom and dad for their continual support amongst all my tears and smiles. Thank you for listening to me talk about the writing process, trying to verbally organize my thoughts, and for cheering me on as I completed each milestone. Thank you to my sister for giving me her support as she endures the highs and lows of her own undergraduate degree. Thank you to David, my partner, for taking the time to read parts of my work, asking how each meeting with my supervisor went, and helping me re-organize many changing timelines. Thank you to Michael and Riley for continually checking in on me throughout the process and for your enthusiasm to read it when it's done (even if it is a lot of pages)! You are all the backbone to my success and I would have never been here writing these acknowledgments without you.

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Introduction:
How to be Productive in (*Many)* Easy Steps

Christine walks into her corporate real-estate position on a day like any other when she is approached by her boss for a meeting. On the basis of her behavior over the past couple weeks, including eye rolling, sneering, and grunting, she is being let go.[1] According to her boss, these behaviors are inhibiting the productivity of those around her and upper-management deems that a significant loss for the company.[2] Now, let's revisit this situation with a bit more information. Christine is a long-term employee of her Toronto based corporate real-estate job with over 20 years of experience in business development and improvement.[3] A week prior, Christine made the difficult and personal decision to disclose her Tourette Syndrome (TS) to her boss. Christine walks into her office on a day like any other when she is approached by her boss for a meeting. She is being let go based on her physical and vocal tics which were considered distracting by management and other employees. She was extremely conscious of this fact although her tics never inhibited her performance at work. Infact, her tics are extremely important to her daily functioning and help her to self-regulate.[4] In her personal time she is accessing the support that she can.

Christine's story demonstrates a critical division between company management and employees fuelled by expectations of efficiency and able-bodiedness. Corporate goals are often productivity-driven and competitive without much regard for employees on a personal level.[5] This divide expanded during the urgent shift to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the influx of technology that came to structure the workday. The watchful eye of management is

[1] Marley, Ryan, dir. *Employable Me.* T.H.A Media Distribution, 11 Aug. 2017, 31:16-31:24.
[2] Marley, Ryan, dir. *Employable Me,* 6:50-7:00.
[3] Marley, Ryan, dir. *Employable Me,* 6:26-6:39.
[4] Marley, Ryan, dir. *Employable Me,* 8:50-9:01.
[5] "Addressing the Employer-Employee Divide in a Post-Pandemic Workplace." *Group Benefit Solutions*, Sept. 2022, https://www.newyorklife.com/assets/gbs/pdf/Post-Pandemic-Workplace-Divide.pdf.

now increasingly aided by digital platforms that hold over structures of discrimination. Despite the shift to remote and hybrid workspaces, disabled employees' working conditions are exacerbated by digital platforms that mimic the ableism of the physical workplace.

Several digital tools that came to populate remote working environments during the pandemic were regarded as saving graces, a convenient method to monitor activity without the risk of physical interaction. For example, the 20-minute in-person meeting between Christine and her boss could now be done over *Zoom*, the awkwardness of in-person layoffs streamlined to a short video call. In fact, in 2021 *Better.com* CEO Vishal Garg terminated 900 employees through a *Zoom* webinar, including their diversity, equity and inclusion recruiting team.[6] With all the advancements in workplace technology, I want to consider how and to what degree these software environments have transformed longstanding issues related to time-management, workplace accessibility, and disability.

The employer/employee divide within Christine' story represents an important reality of digitization. The powerful digital platforms taken up by corporate management allow for new forms of surveillance and control. Today, companies increasingly rely on software and computational tools to manage workers and inform performance evaluation. The refusal for accommodation and ignorance about disability, as Christine's example suggests, underscores how existing inequalities too often carry over into hybrid workplace practices and culture. For example, HireVue is an AI based assessment tool used by employers to identify ideal job candidates.[7] The platform provides game-style assessments that measure personality traits in

[6]Maruf, Ramishah. "Better.com CEO fires 900 employees over Zoom." *CNN Business,* 6 Dec. 2021. https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/05/business/better-ceo-fires-employees/index.html.
[7]Scherer, Matt. "HireVue "AI Explainability Statement" Mostly Fails to Explain What it Does." Centre for Democracy and Technology, 8 Sept. 2022. https://cdt.org/insights/hirevue-ai-explainability-statement-mostly-fails-to-explain-what-it-does/.

comparison to the job description and key requirements.[8] Employers gravitate to this tool as it offloads the stress of hiring employees. However, the convenience of using a digital platform doesn't mitigate its potential limitations, especially for disabled employees. It is impossible to separate platforms like HireVue from the existing inequalities that exist within the workplace. In fact, "HireVue centers non-disabled people as the 'norm' and [...] discriminate against disabilities related to speech or facial expression".[9] The pandemic's rush to remote work only further highlighted this and situations like Christine's are now being reenacted at a distance.

The two chapters that make up this thesis examine: *Zoom* (2011)*, monday.com* (2012) (*monday* from now on, stylized lowercase by the company)*,* and the up-and-coming *Meta* (2021) platform, specifically using *Meta* for work. *Zoom* is a very familiar video communications platform that "forms connections [through] meetings, team chat, whiteboard, phone and more".[10] These connections can be made globally and remotely which was especially crucial come the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Monday* is a work management software meant to streamline workflows for ideal efficiency. The platform's layout is composed of boards and widgets and "provides people, teams, and companies powerful products to help turn their work visions into a reality".[11] Finally, *Meta* provides access to virtual and mixed reality workrooms. These emergent uses of technology promise to "revolutionize the way we work" by creating an open world platform allowing for work tasks to transpire in virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR).[12]

These platforms ground this study in three ways. All three case studies represent different styles of mass collaboration platforms. This emphasizes how the economic imperatives that shape digital platforms perpetuate outdated workplace practices, rather than discrimination

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[8]Scherer, Matt. "HireVue "AI Explainability Statement" Mostly Fails to Explain What it Does."
[9]Whittaker, Meredith et al. "Disability, Bias, and AI." *AI Now Institute Report.* 2019, pp. 16.
[10]*Zoom.* Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2011, https://zoom.us/.
[11]*Monday.com.* Monday.com Inc., 2012, https://monday.com/.
[12]*Meta.* Meta Platforms, Inc., 2004, https://about.meta.com/.

resulting from the style of the platform itself. Second, access to all of these platforms is enabled or inhibited by management. This demonstrates how the consistent monitoring of time at work controls bodies and creates accessibility issues. Finally, these platforms accent the longstanding histories of simple communication tools and time-management practices in the workplace. Although the entirety of these histories are outside the scope of this study, the specific element that informs this project is examining what carries over from these periods into remote and hybrid forms of work. Overall, I analyze how older forms of workplace management practices are being held over by the integration of digital platforms within remote and hybrid work environments as a response to the crisis of the pandemic. These platforms increasingly structure workplace experience, reproducing ableist practices and exacerbating labor barriers for disabled workers.

From Break Rooms to Bedrooms

As the section title suggests, the workspace has undergone many evolutions. Tracking these developments is one way to understand how remote and hybrid workspaces were made possible. These environments are highly ambivalent and complex, encompassing both positive and negative aspects for workers. Many digital platforms, such as our examples of *Zoom, monday,* and *Meta* promise efficiency and collaboration.[13] With these promises also came a plethora of issues relating to accessibility and discrimination. This contradiction is highlighted in Melissa Gregg's book *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy* (2018). She emphasizes that, "discourses of efficiency inherited from previous eras are ill suited to a

[13] See *Zoom.* Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2011, https://zoom.us/ and *Monday.com.* Monday.com Inc., 2012, https://monday.com/ home web pages for promises of efficiency, connection, collaboration, and productivity.

world revolutionized by mobile and digital platforms".[14] If this is true, then why are mass collaboration platforms still heavily influenced by traditional work practices?

A brief roadmap of the evolution of the workplace is crucial to demonstrating how the longstanding histories of time-management continue to inform many digital platforms used in the workplace today. The following timeline will showcase how time-management has become a clear tool for the control of bodies for corporate convenience. The office spaces of the late 90s and early 2000's introduced some of the first digital time-management tools to monitor and evaluate workplace performance.[15] The shift to remote work in 2020 introduced a reliance on these platforms as the act of management also became digitized. To better track the countless changes the work environment has undergone, I will break it down into two distinct sections. The first encompasses histories of automation and productivity from factory work to early office spaces. The second focuses on the optimization and convenience of Web 2.0 and early forms of remote work.

The first period tracks from the 1950's to the early 1990's, focusing on early administrative work and manual factory labour. Melissa Gregg observes that "our need to control time might stem back to an outdated workspace where the clock or a stopwatch could define our orientation to a job or task".[16] Gregg examines two key experiments that are essential to this focus on control. In the early 1900's, Lilian and Frank Gilbreth recorded mundane factory work on film during a typical workday, such as screwing a cap onto a bottle.[17] Through these recordings, the Gilbreth's attempted to methodically break down the most efficient way to

[14]Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy.* Duke University Press, 2018. p.10.
[15]Marchese, David. "The Digital Workplace is Designed to bring you Down." *The New York Times,* 22 Jan. 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/01/23/magazine/cal-newport-interview.html?
[16]Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. p.8.
[17]Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. p.8.

perform these tasks by monitoring *therblig*, the smallest known movement in any given task.[18] The Gilbreth films consolidated new ideas about productivity and the evaluation of workplace performance, with a particular focus on eliminating all unnecessary motions within a task.[19] These developments informed subsequent experiments by Elton Mayo in the 1920's-30s.[20] Mayo's study, known as the Hawthorne Experiment, tried to understand the relationship between worker productivity and external factors, such as altering temperatures or shift times.[21] His research at a Western Electric factory explored how physiological outcomes affected employee productivity, but his research prioritized wealthy and white males. [22] These experiments foreground not only increasing investments in time-management by employers, but also the lasting effects of these techniques – and the norms they produced – across the 20th century and continuing into the workspaces of today.

Digital platforms used at work today are undoubtedly informed by the workspaces of the factory and early office, specifically in the way time was used as an instrument of control. The determination of 'proper uses of time' in these contexts were created by management to keep employees productive and efficient.[23] Michelle Murphy's *The Economization of Life* (2017) adds to these early histories of productivity. During the Cold War, productivity was the primary deciding factor of workplace success.[24] This can be seen through the United States quarterly collection of the condition of their economy starting in 1958.[25] These gross domestic product (GDP) estimates would determine the "[expectations] of bureaucrats, politicians, investors,

[18]Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. p.23.
[19]Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. p.36.
[20]Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. p.40.
[21]Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. p.40.
[22]Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. p.41-42.
[23]Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. p.28.
[24]Murphy, Michelle. "Introduction: Bottles and Curves." *The Economization of Life.* Duke University Press, 2017, p. 005.
[25]Murphy, Michelle. "Introduction: Bottles and Curves." p. 022.

entrepreneurs, workers, and just about anyone who follows the news".[26] By adhering to these expectations, employees would not only improve their own condition but also the overall productivity of the state.[27] These ways of evaluating workplace performance aren't without consequence and negative effects and still bleed into the workforce today.

As time-management became the central tool of control within the workplace, certain bodies were greatly limited by the mainstreaming of a productivity-driven workforce. As Gregg puts it, the above experiments prove that "productivity is a science premised on the exclusion of disruptive bodies and the silence of those with little recourse to power".[28] Outlined by Gregg and Murphy, these disruptive bodies fall outside the norms of wealthy, male, able-bodied and white.[29] There are countless histories of worker discrimination in the mid to late 1900's, but a detailed understanding of these histories are outside the scope of this project.[30] Instead, I want to continue through the 1950's-90's with a focus specifically on how the developments of automation catalyzed digital iterations of inequity.

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[26]Murphy, Michelle. "Introduction: Bottles and Curves." *The Economization of Life.* p. 023.
[27]Murphy, Michelle. "Introduction: Bottles and Curves." *The Economization of Life.* p. 023.
[28]Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*. p.47.
[29]Taken from Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy* and Murphy, Michelle. "Introduction: Bottles and Curves." *The Economization of Life.* p. 003.
[30]See Melissa Gregg's works for examples: "Chapter 1: A Brief History of Time Management." *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy,* p.22-49 and "The Athleticism of Accomplishment: Speed in the Workplace." *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities*, edited Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 102-114. Also, Weeks, Kathi. "The Future is Now: Utopian Demands and the Temporalities of Hope." *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries.* Duke University Press, 2011, pp.175-225 and Molotch, Harvey. ""Just Time" and the Relativity of Speed." *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities*, edited by Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 117-130. Accessed 10 Feb 2022.

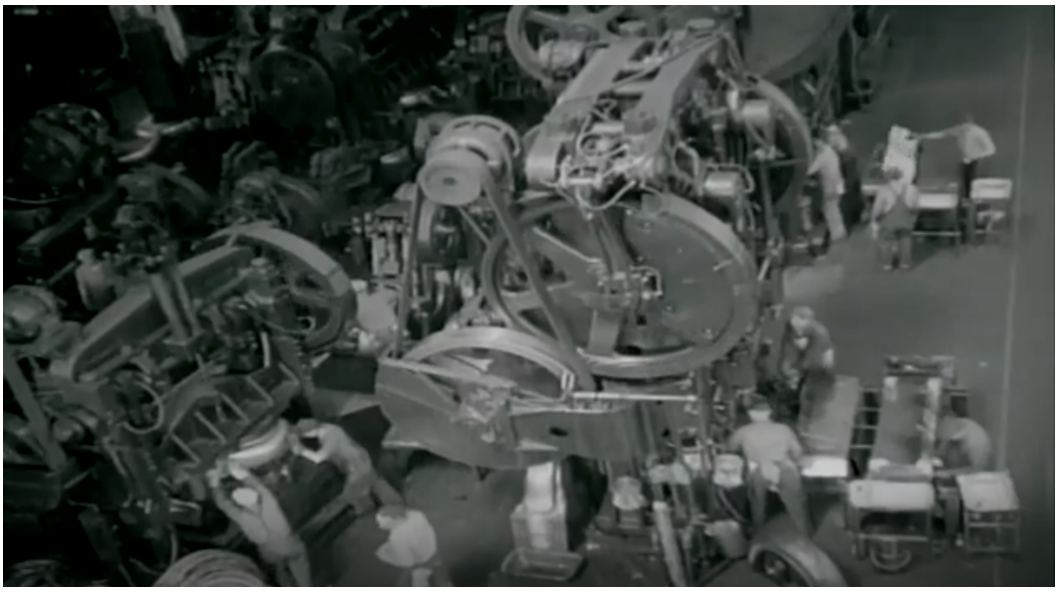

Figure 1: Screenshot from *The Future of Work and Death* showcasing early automation.

Histories of automation point to early efforts to optimize individuals prior to the digital era. Around the mid-1900's, productivity and efficiency worked hand-in-hand as the "ongoing substitutions of humans with machines [showed] up as productivity gains for companies".[31] Now, corporations could rely on the unfaltering actions of a machine that surpassed human capacities. Human employees became submissive not only to new figures of authority, but to computational systems as well. The fear of machines would continue to be publicized by popular media through the developments of Web 3.0 and artificial intelligence (AI) in the 2020's.[32] Widespread attention to these uncertainties wrought by automation has also led many to ignore earlier and ongoing problems related to the optimization of human bodies/workers. One of the aims of this thesis is to consider how the 20th century focus on optimizing bodies has continued into remote and hybrid environments of the pandemic.

[31]Molotch, Harvey. "'Just Time" and the Relativity of Speed." *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities*, edited by Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 127.
[32]De Cremer, David and Garry Kasparov. "AI Should Augment Human Intelligence, Not Replace It." *Harvard Business Review*, 18 Mar. 2021. https://hbr.org/2021/03/ai-should-augment-human-intelligence-not-replace-it.

The goal of optimization introduced by automation became further cemented into the time-management platforms of Web 2.0 during the1990s to 2010s. Web 2.0 is defined as a shift from hierarchical to collaborative internet content development.[33] The late 20th century popularized tech companies like *Microsoft* that further transformed the workspace through the creation of digital platforms that optimized certain positions of office work.[34] It can also be said that this period was the birthplace of the mass collaboration platform, the main focus of this thesis, with examples like *Wikipedia* in the early 2000s and the shift to collective content development.[35] These platforms represent a technologized version of the Gilbreth's therblig by replacing any parts of the workforce understood as low-skilled.[36] Despite the negative consequences of human optimization through technology, the early 2000's also showcased some of the early models of assistive technology (AT) in the workplace.[37] For many disabled employees, these forms of automation are beneficial for the completion of a workday. In line with the ambivalence of modern computational affordances, automation and technological developments have provided both positive and negative consequences for workers. This complexity is the backdrop for this project, specifically the thin line between how freeing and limiting the uses of digital tools can be.

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[33]Tkacz, Nathaniel. "Wikipedia and the Politics of Mass Collaboration." *Journal of Media and Communication*, vol. 2, no. 2, Sept. 2010, p. 40-42.

[34]In *Counterproductive*, Melissa Gregg depicts the secretary as one of the first positions to be optimized in the early instances of the office.

[35]Tkacz, Nathaniel. "Wikipedia and the Politics of Mass Collaboration." Journal of Media and Communication, vol. 2, no. 2, Sept. 2010, p. 45.

[36] David de Cremer and Garry Kasparov discuss the ideal tasks for automation to replace would be lower-level routine and repetitive positions such as managers, supervisors, and assembly line workers, to name a few. See De Cremer, David and Garry Kasparov. "AI Should Augment Human Intelligence, Not Replace It." *Harvard Business Review*, 18 Mar. 2021. https://hbr.org/2021/03/ai-should-augment-human-intelligence-not-replace-it.

[37] Krull, Jeannie. "40 Years of Assitive Technology: So Many Innovations, So Many More Future Opportunities!" *North Dakota Assitive Technology,* 17 Jul. 2020. https://ndassistive.org/blog/40-years-of-assistive-technology-so-many-innovations-so-many-more-future-opportunities/.

Consider that as recently as 2001, many forms of assistive technology were not recognized as necessary and were therefore not covered under Medicare for many in the United States.[38] For example, many speech generating devices were considered "convenience items and not primarily medical in nature".[39] Ironically, the process of accessing, owning, incorporating and learning the uses of AT is often anything but effortless or convenient.

Figure 2: *North Dakota Assistive's* First Assistive Technology Center circa 2002.

As the early 2010s approached, AT became more present within the workplace but limited by minimal trial periods and no opportunities for personalization.[40] The time allotted to information gathering and customization was controlled by employers and was not seen as productive but rather wasteful. Here, the onus falls on the individual to learn best practices for their assistive

[38]"Speech Generating Devices." *Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services*, 11 Jun. 2014. https://www.cms.gov/medicare-coverage-database/view/medicare-coverage-document.aspx?MCDId=26
[39] "Speech Generating Devices."
[40] Ravneberg, Bodil and Sylvia Söderström. *Disability, Society and Assistive Technology.* Routledge, 2017, p.67-70.

technology on personal time, so as to not encroach on any scheduled tasks during work. This restriction is yet another form of inequitable control and ableism that still exists in workplace environments of today.

I am interested in how earlier versions of the office are assumed by the mass collaboration platforms mentioned above. These workspaces housed several forms of simple communication, like instant messaging and email, which remain the cornerstone of many complex platforms of today.[41] Early communication platforms had to support growing teams until the mass collaboration platform took hold circa early 2000's.[42] Time-management has evolved to include both detailed performance evaluation and also promises of convenience, much like the early developments of AT.

Figure 3: An example of the early 2000's office taken from the show *The Office* (2005).

[41]Schrum, Lynne and Lisa Benson. "The Evolution of Workplace Tools for Group Communications and Collaboration."

[42]This is based on the collaborative boom surrounding platforms like *Wikipedia* and the development and popularization of Web 2.0 written in Tkacz, Nathaniel. "Wikipedia and the Politics of Mass Collaboration." *Journal of Media and Communication*, vol. 2, no. 2, Sept. 2010, p. 40-53.

Using mass collaboration platforms was one way management could optimize the time it took for employees to complete tasks. These platforms function as the productivity techniques of the present, melding the histories of simple communication with new computational affordances.. The efficiency that came with digital platforms would cause expectations of speed to become the norm. Once again, the management of employees relies on the possibility of temporal control. The temporal is not based on a common measurement such as a decade, but rather the diverse *experiences* of time including all its underlying political and economic contexts.[43] Therefore, the way employees experience time is based on environmental pressures from employers and digital technologies. Sarah Sharma's *In the Meantime*: *Temporality and Cultural Politics* (2014) was written shortly after the period in question. The book summarizes wonderfully how expectations to work quickly "prepare more and more sites for the institutions of modern power to intervene in bodies in increasingly invasive and inequitable ways".[44] Robbing the worker of subjective experiences of time, or subjective temporality, tends to reinforce the narrative that time is one singular shared experience.

Time is Money

This section brings us to the complex work environments of the 2010's until the present year of 2023. Although optimization was the driving force for earlier technologies and work environments, convenience began to structure the productivity regimes of remote work. Both the workspace and technological affordances of telework were sold to workers as convenient. The promise of convenience was a way to remarket older forms of time management techniques under the guise of increased collaboration and flexibility.[45] What has changed between

[43] Sharma, Sarah. "Speed Traps and the Temporal: Of Taxis, Truck Stops, and TaskRabbits." *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities*, edited by Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 132.
[44] Sharma, Sarah. *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics.* Duke University Press, 2014. p.18.
[45] These histories are reflective of Ruth Schwartz Cowan's modern definitions of convenience. Technology of the early home, similar to the early office, acted as a Trojan horse for the consequences of optimization and the

optimization of the early 2000's and remote work of the 2020's? The crisis of the pandemic in March 2020 drastically changed the location of work. In turn, we now rely on altered forms of time based on fear which greatly restructure how work is performed. However, the corporate goals of efficiency remain mostly unchanged. For high-level management, the shift to remote work was seen as a way to reduce real estate costs and advance productivity.[46] The promises of collaboration and flexibility covered up the ways corporations continued to glorify overwork and perpetrate discrimination. Convenience was enough to provide superficial comfort to a global population ridden with fear due to a looming crisis.

In the environment of remote work, the value of time at the individual-level and the company-level are at odds with each other in a more extreme form than previously seen. Corporations begin to prioritize specific models of time which continue to control bodies in remote and hybrid positions. These temporal forms of control are unique as they now extend into worker's personal time and space. There are four prominent remote work time models based on an attempt to categorize the works of several scholars, including: Melissa Gregg, Judy Wajcman, Robert Hassan, and Ronald Purser. I've labeled these as: *network, available, flexible,* and *affective time*. Some of these titles have been coined by the authors themselves, whereas some are categorizations I have made to better understand the way crisis has impacted our relationship to time. *Network time* is simply the time spent interacting with networked technology and platforms in the workplace. Coined by Hassan and Purser in their 2007 book *24/7*, it is "the time

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inequality of work. See Cowan, Ruth Scwartz. *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, New York, Basic Books, 1983.

[46]See for example: Choudhury, Prithwiraj (Raj). "Our Work-from-Anywhere Future." *Harvard Business Review,* Dec. 2020. https://hbr.org/2020/11/our-work-from-anywhere-future, Kazi, Chandni and Claire Hastwell. "Remote Work Productivity Study Finds Surprising Reality: 2-Year Analysis." *Great Place to Work,* 10 Feb. 2021. https://www.greatplacetowork.com/resources/blog/remote-work-productivity-study-finds-surprising-reality-2-year-study and Leblanc, Michel et al. "Espaces à bureaux au centre-ville de Montréal." *La Chambre de commerce du Montréal métropolitain,* April 2022.

needed to configure the machine, the time spent with certain application-related content, the flat and eternal time of pure communication".[47] Although their work was published fifteen years ago, networked time remains foundational to many current work practices.

A*vailable time* reflects the notion of staying busy, working long hours, and working on personal time. This expectation is one of the ways that management is able to control bodies outside of working environments and hours. Working consecutive hours with minimal breaks is common but is based on histories of automation and originates as an idea made for machines, not for people. I too find myself restricting my apps so as to not respond to work emails past five o'clock. *Microsoft* noted an alarming statistic in their 2022 Annual Work Trend Index, that meetings, chat, workday span, and after-hours work have all grown 28%, while weekend work has grown 14% since 2020.[48] The expectations of working on personal time are also not new. Large corporations have been providing incentives to promote just that especially within both telecommunications and media sectors of information industries.[49]

The third model of *flexible time* became a buzzword for several jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This model of time provided false hope to those fearfully moving to remote positions by promising control over one's working hours and work/life balance. The workplace is now described as "a nightmare of being able to reach synchronicity between individual schedules, as more flexible hours are becoming options but workplaces still function like the old 9-5".[50] This has been complicated more by hybrid work and the variety of locations to coordinate. From the standpoint of employers "the time of work and the time of life see no

[47] Hassan, Robert and Ronald E. Purser. *24/7.*
[48] Microsoft. "Great Expectations: Making Hybrid Work *Work*." *Annual Work Trend Index 2022*, 16 Mar. 2022.
[49]"Benefits at Google." *Google*. https://careers.google.com/benefits/.
[50] Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy.* Duke University Press, 2018, p.6.

alternative temporal order beyond the corporate control of bodies".[51] As I write this thesis, I too feel the pressures of busyness encroaching on my personal time while I am attempting to balance work, academics, and leisure.

Finally, *affective time* is most closely associated with wellness/mindfulness and personal time. Once again, corporate wellness functions much like the promises of digital platforms providing a temporary solution for systemic issues. A very large chunk of research has been dedicated to both wellness and mindfulness, especially by scholar Melissa Gregg. More than half of the working population have attempted to reclaim control over their time through prioritizing their health.[52] In corporate jargon, wellness is a diversion from systemic inequality that often "fails to consider the social infrastructure and the human dimensions that stretch some workers more than others, and equates all struggles as the same".[53] In a bid to enhance productivity, corporate mindfulness policies often take form in risk preventative forced yoga sessions and workplace empathy presentations.[54] The encouragement of basic human emotion is a fundamental reflection of corporate management of the personal.

Hybrid and remote work, and the histories that inform them, have clearly upheld a specific working subject. This unwavering worker lies at the center of the productivity standards which construct the current workforce. These standards are upheld by employers who fail to recognize, as said by Gregg, the "social infrastructure and the human dimensions that stretch some workers more than others".[55] I really enjoy this phrasing by Gregg as it emphasizes the multitude of complexities at play, an ambivalence that is important to keep in mind. These

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[51]Sharma, Sarah. *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*. Duke University Press, 2014.
[52] Microsoft. "Great Expectations: Making Hybrid Work *Work*."
https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/great-expectations-making-hybrid-work-work.
[53] Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy.* p.123.
[54] Hyman, Laura. "Happiness: The Story So Far." *Happiness, Understandings, Narratives and Discourses,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 9-30.
[55] Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy.* p.123.

histories provide context for the large divide between employer and employee. A divide where the consequences of automation and productivity are heavily felt by workers but ignored by employers.

To provide a very real example of this divide would be to circle back to Christine's opening story. Disabled employees have been continually written out of the histories of work. Sometimes they are not even given the option to enter the workforce at all and are therefore rejected from discussions of technology creation and positive work practices. Ironically, many disabled employees have worked remotely prior to the onset of the pandemic.[56] In this project, I aim to analyze the consequences of on demand digital labor platforms guided by three critical disability theory arguments. First, that environments act as extensions of discrimination. Second, the rejection of universalism and design-for-all approaches to technology. Finally, the rejection of a single, proper or continuous experience of time. These lenses are developed through prominent disability scholars such as Jonathan Sterne, Mara Mills, and Arseli Dokumaci. According to both Sterne and Mills, time is a more commonly used term to describe "industrial, financial, and regulatory control".[57] This insight parallels the previous discussions of time-management and histories of the workplace. Time as a form of control has already been cemented into the interfaces of mass collaboration platforms through the mainstreaming of the above four models of work time.

Methods

In this project I focused heavily on corporate publicity, platform advertisements, news coverage, disability scholarship and disability-focused organizational websites. I wanted to

[56]Ciruzzo, Chelsea. "Disabled people have worked remotely for years, and they've got advice for you and your bosses." *The Washington Post,* 17 Mar. 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/disabled-people-have-worked-remotely-for-years-and-theyve-got-advice-for-you-and-your-bosses-/2020/03/17/f99dfd54-67d1-11ea-b313-df458622c2cc_story.html. Accessed 10 Aug. 2022.
[57]Sterne, Jonathan and Mara Mills. *Second Rate*, Triple Canopy, 2020, p. 45.

assure that the lived experience of disabled employees who use mass collaboration platforms remained at the forefront of this work. Through these pieces, I could then provide a textual analysis of the rhetoric to simulate a discussion between corporate statistical data and personal testimonials. Several of these sources – including popular news outlets and articles written by disabled workers – were opinion pieces based on first-hand accounts of using mass collaboration platforms. I used these works as primary evidence for my thesis due to the limitation of this project's presentist viewpoint causing a limited supply of academic scholarship.

This research led to a method predominantly made up of discourse analysis of current corporate publicity, platform advertisement, and news coverages which allowed me to uncover throughlines within the environment of information industries during the height of the pandemic. A crucial discovery here was just how quickly popular platforms like *Zoom* shifted from a concern with public security to optimization despite overworking employees.[58] Although there was no fieldwork done for this thesis, its key dimension would be that the accounts would feel real and seamlessly fit into dialogue with corporate sources - almost as if interviews had been conducted. In order to accomplish this and break past the marketing tactics of large companies like *Meta* and *Zoom*, I relied on disabled users accounts of these platforms. These texts demonstrated a plethora of accessibility and access issues often glossed over by mainstream news or corporate publicity.

[58] *Zoom's* Annual Reports from the 2020-2022 fiscal years represent this shift from their customer address often found within the first few pages of the report. For example, see page 6 of their 2021 Annual Report.

Chapter Breakdown

My first chapter will explore how the integration of mass collaboration platforms responded to the crisis of the pandemic as an intended solution to keep individuals working. These digital tools rely on older forms of workplace management that alters our relationship to time and space at work, both discursively and in practice. The remote environments of white-collar information industries are where I focus my analysis as they tend to be the subject of popular media inquiries and are more likely to offer options of remote work over blue-collar sectors.[59] In this first chapter I analyze *Zoom* and *monday* alongside Arseli Dokumaci and Jonathan Sterne's insights that there are no single, proper or continuous experiences of time and that environments act as extensions of discrimination. To juxtapose these arguments I compare them to industry discourse, popular media coverage, and both *Zoom* and *monday's* own framing and publicity between 2019-2022. I aim to uncover the often invisible ways that working bodies were affected by the drastic changes in work location and the pace of the workday reflected during the period of the pandemic.

My second chapter will emphasize the negative consequences for disabled employees exacerbated by the ways these platforms have entered and directed our everyday lives. This specific group of individuals are in a unique position in relation to work as many have worked remote before the necessity caused by the pandemic. The main case study of this chapter is *Meta's* use cases for work. Since *Meta* combines open world navigation with virtual reality, the platform harbors a lot of potential for interaction and engagement. This chapter acts as a speculative call to action for how companies can begin to re-imagine their approach to the design of platforms. I am focused on situating platforms like *Meta* as a major player in the continual

[59]Kruse, Douglas et al. "Disability and remote work during the pandemic with implications for cancer survivors." *Journal of Cancer Survivorship,* no. 16, pp. 183–199, 2022. *SpringerLink,* https://doi.org/10.1007/s11764-021-01146-z.

transmission of workplace discrimination as several consequences for disabled employees have been publicized already.[60] Through hybrid environments, I examine how common workplace platforms further continue to reproduce ableism. This chapter reads alongside the disability scholarship of several academics focusing on the rejection of universalism for an individualist approach to the design of technology. Once again, I will discuss this scholarship in comparison to examples of popular news websites, blogs based on employee feedback, writings on workplace trends, and *Meta's* website and promotional materials.

I want to challenge the pre-existing frameworks of popular media by offering a more in depth academic perspective. By melding popular discussions with media, industry, and disability studies, it will be possible to determine how the desire to return to normal has overshadowed the need to change the aspects that made the workplace inaccessible to so many prior to the pandemic. Overall, my contribution to research aims to draw on digital media and disability studies in order to emphasize its relevance for understanding the current challenges of hybrid work. As a new wave of immersive technology begins to occupy our workplaces and more, divisions between able and disabled individuals threaten to increase once again unless users become central to the design of new platforms. The fear that emerged throughout the pandemic may have blindly thrust us into a new workspace that is not so different from its past iterations. Understanding what makes virtual and hybrid workspaces inequitable in the first place will allow for an analysis of how the affordances of technology can be altered to reduce limitations and harm.

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[60] See Huddleston, Tom Jr. "Racism could ruin the metaverse if tech doesn't improve diversity now, CTO warns: 'It absolutely is a problem." *CNBC*, 20 Jun. 2022, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/20/cto-racism-could-ruin-metaverse-if-tech-doesnt-improve-diversity-now.htmldsf, Basu, Tanya. "The metaverse has a groping problem already." *MIT Technology Review*, 16 Dec. 2021, https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/12/16/1042516/the-metaverse-has-a-groping-problem/, and Frenkel, Sheera and Kellen Browning. "The Metaverse's Dark Side: Here Come Harassment and Assaults." *The New York Times,* 30 Dec. 2021.

Chapter 1:
All in 'Good' Time: Workplace Platforms and the Temporal Organization of Labour

In the early months of 2020, as the warnings of a possible global pandemic began to spread through the news, so did talks of the video conferencing platform *Zoom Video Communications Inc.* As March approached, the software as a service (SaaS) giant continued to be adopted into the workflows of various industries. When the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic on March 11th 2020[61], multiple workforces found themselves with the newfound inability to work safely in-person. For employers, a video-first communications platform which promises connection across "disparate devices and locations"[62] became a necessary solution to keep people working. By the end of 2020, *Zoom* registered 81,900 business customers (companies made up of 10 or more individuals), that's a minimum of 819,000 paid accounts.[63] These numbers do not include the large number of free accounts also provided during the crisis.[64] The penetration of *Zoom* in daily life is demonstrated by the development of now common terms like *zooming*, which became a catch-all for remote work and various forms of connection throughout the day. In 2020 alone, major news organizations described the software as the latest Silicon valley gold mine, stock market star, and one of the biggest corporate success

[61]"Coronavirus (COVID-19) SARS-CoV-2." *Infection Prevention and Control Canada.* https://ipac-canada.org/coronavirus-resources#:~:text=Pandemic%20Coronavirus%20(COVID%2D19)&text=On%20March%2011%2C%202020%20the,19%20viral%20disease%20a%20pandemic.
[62]"Zoom Annual Report - Fiscal 2020." *Zoom*, 2020, 4. https://investors.zoom.us/static-files/a6b3b254-94ff-415f-bb3b-8c3146b061d4.
[63]"Zoom Annual Report - Fiscal 2020," p.7.
[64]"Zoom Annual Report - Fiscal 2020," p.7.

stories of the year based on its usability and reliability.[65] The height of the COVID-19 pandemic was not the only example of *Zoom's* success, as their achievements continued throughout 2021.[66]

The reliance on *Zoom* in North America remained consistent until 2022 introduced the gradual removal of several pandemic-related safety restrictions, which resulted in a cautious return to in-person work.[67] *Zoom's* financial achievement's became sporadic throughout that year. For example, *Zoom's* stock lost 85% of its value from its peak in 2020.[68] On the other hand, the company still posted an end of year gross profit of $3,045,310, up by approximately 1.2 million from 2021.[69] There is an instability reflected by the juxtaposition of these numbers. These measures of success diminished in a few years, similar to how quickly they grew. *Zoom's* ephemerality reflects a larger shift in the organization of work time through an increased use of mass collaboration platforms in remote and hybrid workspaces. The impermanence of the platform's success also reflects the ambivalence that is fundamental to many mass collaboration platforms. The prominence of these platforms during the pandemic was significant because of how the crisis initially transformed them into a necessity.

The platform's evolution throughout the pandemic created a virtual on-demand work culture measured by unattainable productivity under the guise of collaboration. As the pandemic

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[65] Many popular news outlets highlighted Zoom as successful in 2020. See "Zoom booms as teleconferencing company profits from coronavirus crisis." The Guardian, 3 June 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jun/03/zoom-booms-as-teleconferencing-company-profits-from-coronavirus-crisis. Bond, Shannon. "Zoom Turns Record Profit Thanks To Coronavirus Shutdowns." NPR, 31 Aug. 2020. https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/08/31/908089517/zoom-turns-record-profit-thanks-to-coronavirus-shutdowns. Novet, Jordan. "Why Zoom has become the darling of remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic." CNBC, 21 Mar. 2020. https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/21/why-zoom-has-become-darling-of-remote-workers-amid-covid-19-outbreak.html

[66] "Zoom Annual Report - Fiscal 2021." *Zoom*, 2021, p. 6. https://investors.zoom.us/static-files/a17fd391-13ae-429b-8cb3-bfd95b61b007

[67]"Return to workplaces." *The Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada.* https://pipsc.ca/news-issues/return-to-workplace.

[68] Novet, Jordan. "Zoom shares drop on light forecast as company faces 'heightened deal scrutiny'." *CNBC,* 21 Nov. 2022. https://www.cnbc.com/2022/11/21/zoom-zm-earnings-q3-2023.html

[69]"Zoom Annual Report - Fiscal 2022." *Zoom*, 2022, p. 50. https://investors.zoom.us/static-files/9a9d91bf-5c62-45fd-9573-fb03159c8a93.

continued, *Zoom* gradually shifted their focus from security and necessity to optimization. This means that the platform began to openly prioritize the efficiency and effectiveness of workers over giving them a safer method to complete their work. We can see this shift in the word choice between *Zoom's* 2020 and 2022 Annual Reports. The former highlights immediately their "[focus] on delivering happiness to [their] employees and customers".[70] Within the latter these goals become more subdued as they state their newfound focus on "[driving] growth".[71] During the later years of the pandemic, many corporations began to question whether productivity was decreasing. This uncertainty eventually led to a gradual return to in-person work.[72] In Canada, there have been countless formal complaints on behalf of workers advocating for the option to continue to work remotely.[73] The working topography of many Canadian cities also reflects this change. According to a study done by the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal, downtown office building vacancy is predicted to jump from 15.8% to 21% since the height of the pandemic in 2020, meaning one in every five buildings will be empty by 2023.[74] Despite these concerns, the undeniable success of mass collaboration platforms has facilitated the performance of work for many employees.

This chapter will explore generally what aspects of mass collaboration platforms emerged during the pandemic, and what remains now. For example, *Zoom*'s initial uses during the height

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[70] "Zoom Annual Report - Fiscal 2020." p. 4.
[71]"Zoom Annual Report - Fiscal 2022." p. 6.
[72]Kazi, Chandni and Claire Hastwell. "Remote Work Productivity Study Finds Surprising Reality: 2-Year Analysis." *Great Place to Work,* 10 Feb. 2021.
https://www.greatplacetowork.com/resources/blog/remote-work-productivity-study-finds-surprising-reality-2-year-study.
[73] "Return to workplaces."
[74]See both: Leblanc, Michel et al. "Espaces à bureaux au centre-ville de Montréal." *La Chambre de commerce du Montréal métropolitain,* April 2022.
https://www.ccmm.ca/en/publications/study-how-to-stimulate-synergies-and-attract-new-businesses-study/ and Tomesco, Frédéric. "Hybrid work could push Montreal downtown office vacancy rate to 21%: report." *Montreal Gazette,* 22 Apr. 2022.
https://montrealgazette.com/business/hybrid-work-could-push-montreal-downtown-office-vacancy-rate-to-21-report#:~:text=Vacancy%20rates%20downtown%20could%20eventually,Place%20Ville%20Marie's%20capacity.

of the pandemic were to help connect and reorganize sites of work. The platform now encompasses multiple elements that span both work and personal time, such as hosting appointments and events through its interface. Specifically, I am interested in how mass collaboration platforms hold over older forms of workplace management and how this alters our relationship to time and space at work. I argue the crisis of the pandemic between 2019-2022 demonstrated how these digital tools can almost instantly control our time and space. This period of transformation is the focus of this chapter. *Zoom* and similar platforms have brought about unattainable productivity, on demand work culture, and a facade of democratization. By emphasizing how these forms of control differ from the subjective uses of time and space in the workplace, we can pinpoint the aspects of work culture that create discrimination. From here, we can determine how both work practices and their technological iterations can be redesigned to better adapt to the real needs of employees.

As evident from earlier in the introduction, popular media and even certain scholarship flocked to cover the increasing use of platforms like *Zoom* during the months following COVID-19's peak in 2020. One example would be Lene Pettersen, who describes traditional and networked models of work as "different societal paradigms: one based on a top-down, market-based, competition-oriented logic and another based on more democratizing principles, mass collaboration, and networked logistics".[75] There is danger in analyzing complex scenarios in such a black and white manner and the relationships between mass collaboration platforms and workers are more complex than often given credit by popular media. This complexity stems from environmental factors and the subjectivity of a working day. Petterson's work remains

[75] Pettersen, Lene. "From mass production to mass collaboration: institutionalized hindrances to social platforms in workplace." Nordic Journal of Science and Technology Studies, vol. 2, no. 2, pp.29-40, 2014. BI Brage, http://hdl.handle.net/11250/293927.

representative of current claims about the potentials of remote working platforms.[76] My skepticism of popular claims such as Pettersen's is not unique, as other scholarship has also warned against accepting the "totalizing hype" of technology at face value.[77] I want to take a critical look at the promises of better collaboration and democratization as showcasing optimistic views of technology's power in the workplace. It is important to differentiate the promotional promises made by platform companies in comparison to the way many workplaces are already organized. Academic research is only recently beginning to analyze consequences for workers, especially in relation to discussions of the long-term cognitive and social effects of the implementation of these platforms.[78] I suspect the minimal scholarship is because we are still living with the pandemic and the rate at which technical innovations are developed and adopted make it difficult to determine how to properly use these tools. In just one work day, I use anywhere from four to five collaboration tools at once, leaving me with minimal time to fully learn the best practices of each platform.

Using popular/industry discourse and platform publicity, I aim to emphasize management's reliance on capitalist views of time and productivity through two familiar communications platforms: *Zoom* and *monday*. My analysis will focus on their promises of improved productivity, connection and collaboration in order to determine how these platforms present challenging regimes of optimization rather than inclusive collaboration. This chapter will be guided by critical disability theory which includes a more individualist or people-first approach. The disability scholarship arguments that align most with this chapter are 1) that

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[76]See both: Bond, Shannon. "Zoom Turns Record Profit Thanks To Coronavirus Shutdowns." Novet, Jordan. "Why Zoom has become the darling of remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic."

[77] Terranova, Tiziana. "Free Labour: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." Social Text, vol. 18, no. 2, pp.38, 2000. Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/31873.

[78]See both: Bailenson, Jeremy. N. "Nonverbal Overload: A Theoretical Argument for the Causes of Zoom Fatigue." *Technology, Mind, and Behavior*, vol. 2, no.1, 2021. *APA Open*, https://doi.org/10.1037/tmb0000030 and Voyles, Elora (Dr.). "The Zoom Ceiling is the New Glass Ceiling." *TINYpulse,* 7 Dec. 2021. https://www.tinypulse.com/blog/zoom-ceiling-new-glass-ceiling.

environments act as extensions of discrimination 2) and that there are no single, proper or continuous experiences of time. These lenses are experienced by and developed through prominent disability scholars such as Jonathan Sterne, Mara Mills, and Arseli Dokumaci. Since the workforce, even just in Canada, includes approximately 16.3 million individuals as of 2020,[79] I will focus my analysis of platform labor on information industries only. This group is composed of white-collar employees who take part in the production of information and communications technologies and their corresponding manufacturing, service, content and media sectors.[80] My research aims to modestly contribute to academia surrounding the consequences for workers by analyzing how mass collaboration platforms have evolved throughout the pandemic from a necessity to an ordinary part of the everyday.

The Technologization of Time

Before turning to my analysis of *Zoom* and *monday* we must understand how the crisis of the pandemic reorganized both time and space at work. Pertaining to time, the experience of crisis increased the unsettling feeling towards the role of platforms in the workplace, an uncertainty stemming from early histories of automation.[81] When organizing their time, many employees question both the best uses of these platforms and how to fully disconnect from them once the workday is complete. Pertaining to space, the reorganization of the location of the office has added to the uncertainty surrounding remote work. The traditional position classifications between management and employees, once reflected by the physical structures of the traditional office such as enclosed offices and bullpens, have been blurred. Now more than ever responsibility has been redirected to the worker.[82] Looking at the pandemic retrospectively

[79]"Labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted." *Statistics Canada*, 6 Jun. 2023, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410028703.
[80] "Information Industries." *OECD Going Digital Toolkit*. https://goingdigital.oecd.org/en/theme/8
[81] Blaknell, Sean and Wayne Walsh, dir. *The Future of Work and Death.*
[82] Marchese, David. "The Digital Workplace is Designed to bring you Down." *The New York Times,* 22 Jan. 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/01/23/magazine/cal-newport-interview.html?

allows for a reconsideration of the way mass collaboration platforms have controlled the idealistic performance of work through a competitive emphasis on speed and the promise of convenience.

The experience of crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic normalized the element of speed. As I was finishing my final Master's course on *Zoom* prior to writing this thesis, I suddenly became aware of how quickly I forgot that we were ever together in person. The rapid adaptation to a new *Zoom*-based class structure felt normal by the time my semester was ending. Speed and work are not new concepts and have been the backbone of several innovations in the automation of labor. However, the pandemic created the need to adapt to novel conditions quickly and the physical workspace adopted digital tools at a more rapid pace than previously seen. Speed is the cornerstone of the shift to remote work due to its relationship to fear and uncertainty. We have been taught since we were young to react quickly in the midst of an emergency. It is not a surprise many schools and workplaces rushed to find the best suited platform for our new reality. The collection of essays titled *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory* (2020) emphasizes the speed at which platforms both enter and structure everyday environments and will populate this section.

Keeping up with the high-speed energy of being online is no simple task. Melissa Gregg suggests speed has the ability to plant itself into the working body, especially when "engaged in iconic forms of labor precipitated by new communication technologies".[83] One's body must constantly keep up with the pace dictated by your brain and screen. Gregg's parasitic description of speed is so common in telework that several popular media pieces discuss the [X] signs you

[83] Gregg, Melissa. "The Athleticism of Accomplishment: Speed in the Workplace." *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities*, edited Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 102-114.

are on autopilot at work.[84] The act of performing work subconsciously aligns with the level of global fear that crisis and survival brought forth. Mundane actions became limited and unusual scenarios, such as working from home, became necessary with little or no time to adapt to these challenges. The digital tools that gained popularity during the pandemic use this uncertainty to their advantage to restructure both work space and time.

The promise of convenience during the shift to remote and hybrid work did not come without consequence. Employees found themselves completing a variety of tasks online, including many that bore no relation to work. For example, *Zoom* facilitated the completion of doctor's appointments, birthday parties, and work meetings all within the same day. All of these once unique physical spaces were melded into one central computer screen. Although the rapid integration of collaboration platforms into the workspace was arduous, one perspective could position these platforms as quite convenient in providing a one-stop shop for both leisure and work. Convenience, as discussed in *Pandemic Media*, is "produced by a space-time compression that gives rise to a feeling of ease linked historically to increasing pressures of time".[85] I would argue that the pandemic increased the pressure of time quicker than previously experienced, as individuals feared job loss as well as their own mortality. Thanks to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 we experienced an altered *time-space compression* through limited to no travel time and multiple tasks being held within the same interface.

The usage of the term time-space compression signals the way that time and space, especially at work, cooperate in the control of employees. Mass collaboration platform's don't do

[84]See for example: "6 signs you are working on autopilot." *Make me Better*, 15 May 2022, https://www.makemebetter.net/6-signs-you-are-working-on-autopilot/ and Lin Joy C. "3 Big Signs You're Stuck on Autopilot at Work (Plus: How to Snap Out of It)." *The Muse*, 19 Jun. 2020, https://www.themuse.com/advice/3-big-signs-youre-stuck-on-autopilot-at-work-plus-how-to-snap-out-of-it.
[85] Neves, Joshua and Marc Steinberg. "Pandemic Platforms: How Convenience Shapes the Inequality of Crisis." Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory, Meson Press, 2020, pp. 107. DOI: 10.14619/0085.

much to quell the control that time has over how work is performed. Instead they enhance the pressures of time through constant surveillance that normalizes a culture of overwork.[86] Workers are envisioned as protean subjects, able to shift tasks easily and work from anywhere all while keeping productivity at a high for the company. From the perspective of management, the workspaces adopted by the pandemic are convenient. Through the use of mass collaboration platforms, employers are able to continuously inject expectations of constant availability and busyness into the personal spaces of their employees. Despite our knowledge that burnout and mental health issues are very real consequences of overwork,[87] the race against the clock is enticing enough to keep us going.

The above elements demonstrate how the very nature of pandemic platforms produce their own feeling of uncertainty, which only adds to the advantage of corporations.[88] This is not a bold claim if we relate it to technology's long history of control through both structure and design. The restructuring of domestic and professional spheres through platforms have developed a culture of constrained and quick work. The speed at which employees are expected to complete their work is often unattainable and includes working (many) additional hours. We now function under the expectation to connect at any time and from anywhere. The prioritization of speed and promises of convenience have contributed to overwork, which has been exacerbated by an always connected working environment. As cocktail hours and workdays were restricted to the screen of a *Zoom* call amidst the crisis of COVID-19, digital exhaustion and Zoom fatigue

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[86]Surveillance tools can range per platform. For example, time-tracking widgets, status signals and automations that alert management of completed tasks. Both *Zoom.* Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2011, https://zoom.us and *Monday.com.* Monday.com Inc., 2012, https://monday.com/ utilize these tools.

[87] Albulescu, Patricia et al. "Give me a break!" A Systematic review and meta-analysis on the efficacy of micro-breaks for increasing well-being and performance." *National Library of Medicine*, vol. 17, no. 8, 31 Aug. 2022, pp. 4. PLoS One, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9432722/.

[88] *Zoom* made a gross profit of $507,262 USD at the height of the pandemic in 2020. This grew six times by 2022, bringing in around $3,045,310 USD. See "Zoom Annual Report - Fiscal 2022." *Zoom*, 2022, p. 50. https://investors.zoom.us/static-files/9a9d91bf-5c62-45fd-9573-fb03159c8a93.

became a new norm.[89] The discussion of how digital infrastructures exacerbate the exhaustion of workers is important for understanding how a crisis makes the one-sidedness of employment extremely visible.

The Mass Collaboration Platform

Zoom and *monday*, since their inception in the early 2010's, represent how the crisis of the pandemic shaped work practices. Uncertainty surrounding how the pandemic would affect daily life catalyzed the integration of these workplace tools at a rapid pace. The act of technologizing the workplace was not new, digital or platform capitalism provided the initial request for "on-demand labor apps, meaning people can complete labor outside corporate environments".[90] Platforms like *Zoom* were reframed as a techno-solution to the concern of how to continue working amidst global shutdowns. The functionality of these platforms reference the long histories of traditional work technologies steeped in control and a reliance on efficiency. *Zoom* and *monday* superficially reflect Pettersen's network model by promising frictionless collaboration and consistent productivity fueled by a minimal or complete lack of interruptions.[91] As we continue through the use cases of these platforms in digital workspaces, are Pettersen's descriptors of the network model actually upheld? This work has the advantage of a post-2020 perspective, allowing an exploration of the consequences of these platform's outside the environment of fear introduced by the crisis.

Zoom

Zoom became a household name for many during the early months of the pandemic. Personally, *Zoom* has allowed me to write this thesis as it is the main platform from which I both

[89]Bailenson, Jeremy. N. "Nonverbal Overload: A Theoretical Argument for the Causes of Zoom Fatigue."
[90] Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy.* pp.126.
[91] Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy.* pp.93

meet with my supervisor and coworkers. It is this ever-present nature of the platform which inspired its addition here. In 2022, a study done by Cristiana Tudor highlighted that "the pandemic has resulted in excess consumer interest for video conferencing SaaS programs that wouldn't have emerged otherwise".[92] *Zoom's* evolution during the pandemic follows a shift from an office-specific instrument to a critical tool for completing everyday tasks. As with other workplace platforms, *Zoom* stems from a history of software/infrastructure as a service (SaaS/IaaS) which began developing between the decades of 1950 to 1970.[93] During this twenty-year period, the evolution of mainframe computing provided shared access to one physical hardware from multiple computing environments.[94] A little bit later, these virtual machines developed into simple communication tools which began to frame the workday.[95] These advancements have come a long way in allowing SaaS videoconferencing platforms like *Zoom* to emerge as "the ultimate solution for businesses and government organizations to connect with remote workers".[96]

Simple communication tools and the work environments of the 2000's are still present within information industries. These elements are visible at the very foundation of *Zoom*'s operation, from the organization of participants on the screen to the ability to instantly message (IM) through an integrated chat window. The array of faces on the screen of a *Zoom* call is the visual representation of the layout of office cubicles. Meeting chat is reminiscent of instant messaging and chat rooms of Web 2.0. Both the screen and the chat window have individuals

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[92] Tudor, Christiana. "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Global Web and Video Conferencing Saas Market." pp.4.
[93]Neto, Maximilliano Destefani. "A brief history of cloud computing." *IBM,* 12 Sept. 2016. https://www.ibm.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-cloud-computing-2/
[94]Neto, Maximilliano Destefani. "A brief history of cloud computing."
[95] Schrum, Lynne and Lisa Benson. "The Evolution of Workplace Tools for Group Communications and Collaboration." *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, vol. 4, no. 4, Nov. 2022, pp. 483. *AHRD*, https://doi.org/10.1177/152342202237524.
[96]Tudor, Christiana. "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Global Web and Video Conferencing Saas Market." *Electronics*, vol. 11, no. 16, 2022, pp. 2. *MDPI*, https://doi.org/10.3390/electronics11162633.

culminating within one shared environment, recalling the histories of SaaS platforms. Even back in 2002, Lynne Schrum and Lisa Benson spoke of the development of IM tools for the workplace, they were considered able to "mimic the complexities of actual conversations and interactions, almost like real-life dialogues".[97] In more recent years, IM was praised for allowing remote workers to better communicate with their teams, regardless of distance.[98] *Zoom* seems to have been inspired by both the mimicking of real conversation and the potential to connect those across a distance through their meetings.

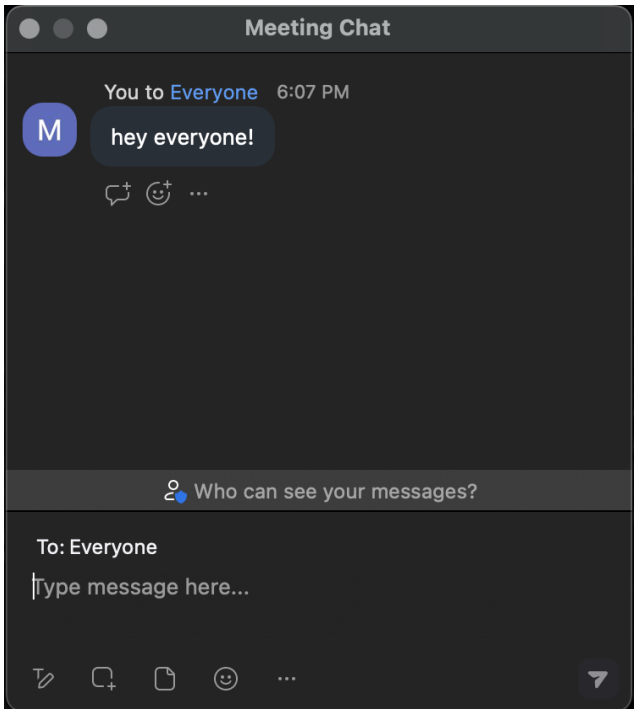

Figure 4:. *Zoom's* integrated chat window.

Moreover, the inherent failure of *Zoom*'s functionality actually causes a regression to these examples of simple communication. If we are unable to verbally communicate through the platforms due to connectivity issues, disability, or excessive noise, we must resort to using the

[97] Schrum, Lynne and Lisa Benson. "The Evolution of Workplace Tools for Group Communications and Collaboration." pp.483.
[98]Schrum, Lynne and Lisa Benson. "The Evolution of Workplace Tools for Group Communications and Collaboration." pp.483.

chat function in order to be heard. Depending on the number of members in a meeting, this chat can appear very one-sided. *Zoom's* own publicity states that, "chat is the backbone of collaboration in today's hybrid and flexible work environments [...] it's where teams begin and end their workdays".[99] With the focus on connection that these platforms have, it is no wonder they turned to chat technologies to inspire their structure.

In terms of the visual aesthetics of *Zoom*, Malte Hagener explores a fascinating relationship between audiovisual media, such as cinema, and the roots of videoconferencing platforms. In their work, split screens are described as presenting "two (or more) spaces that are visibly distinct, yet presented in direct proximity with each other".[100] Although it was meant to be an invisible effect, the resulting "ambiguity between proximity and distance, between absence and presence", was heavily felt among viewers.[101] The sheer ability of *Zoom* to frame multiple personal environments digitally on one screen is a clear call back to the original uses of split screen in cinema. If we 'zoom' forward from early cinema to look at *Zoom*'s increasing presence during the 2020 pandemic, the feelings of uncertainty from changing perceptions of distance are replicated.

Despite a rich history, *Zoom* has evolved since its inception in 2011. The platform has further combined and advanced both chat and video technologies, turning itself into an all-encompassing communications tool. According to their website, *Zoom* is perceived as the only program needed to create and connect.[102] Without removing the desire for face-to-face interaction but disregarding the physicality, *Zoom* became a catch-all for team meetings,

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[99] "Blog." *Zoom.* Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2011, https://zoom.us/.
[100] Hagener, Malte. "Divided, Together, Apart: How Split Screen Became Our Everyday Reality." *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory,* edited by Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini, Meson Press, 2020, pp. 35.
[101] Hagener, Malte. "Divided, Together, Apart: How Split Screen Became Our Everyday Reality." pp.36.
[102] *Zoom.* Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2011, https://zoom.us/. Has changed since writing began.

presentations, and even social events. Although their popularity may have become saturated, the necessity of videoconferencing in the workplace continues.

Zoom's evolution was tracked by many popular media sources, some of which have changed their tune since the platform's initial popularity in 2020. Originally, the platform was regarded as a holy grail in the press. *CNN Business* claimed "*Zoom's* ability to meet the needs of people working remotely and serve as a fun tool for socializing has heightened it to rockstar status".[103] However, by 2022 companies like *Vox*, *Forbes*, and *Yahoo!* began to be more critical of the platform's promises as consequences started to present themselves. Parallel to similar claims made previously like Pettersen's, the optimism of attaining an idealized workplace amidst telework has been much more complex than anticipated. The ever-present nature of *Zoom* is where control is able to seep into the everyday. How are we able to take back control when countless high-stake facets of life rely more than ever on mass collaboration tools?

We can see examples of the expansion of control through *Zoom*'s influence on mundane elements, like social etiquette. When entering a *Zoom* meeting you are expected to remain on mute until the session officially begins and when not speaking. Some users even go one step further and turn their cameras off as well. Not interrupting someone as they speak is a common courtesy to extend during a conversation. In a face-to-face interaction, interrupting would be a personal decision and could sometimes happen organically, like a laugh after a joke. Now, the power to refrain one from speaking is held by others. Keeping participants of a video call on mute is a task that can be done by the host of each meeting through the interface of *Zoom* itself, even prior to when the meeting has started.

[103]Kelly, Samantha Murphy. "Zoom's massive 'overnight success' actually took nine years." *CNN Business,* 27 Marc. 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/27/tech/zoom-app-coronavirus/index.html.

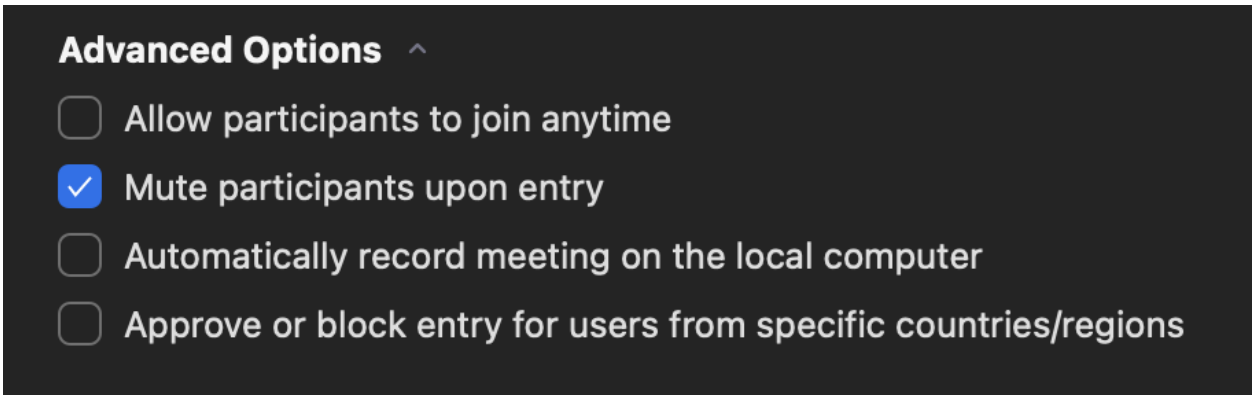

Figure 5: An example of options hosts are given when creating a meeting through *Zoom*.

For a platform which prioritizes connection as the backbone of their business model, the expectations that have come along with *zooming* have seemingly inhibited communication greatly.[104] In addition to the above example, the ambiguity of remote work has become the subject matter of many memes. There have been a plethora of internet jokes that showcase work from home attire as professional from the waist up and comfortable from the waist down.[105] These are literal examples of how the lines between public and private are crossed because of telework. One's home remains in a fluctuating state between professionalism and comfort. However, these ambiguous boundaries have caused some extreme forms of these jokes. In November of 2022 a Columbian judge, Vivian Polanía, was suspended for attending a virtual court hearing via *Zoom* out of her gown and while smoking a cigarette.[106] Even the act of smoking a cigarette on camera during a meeting would have been something reserved for

[104] *Zoom*. Zoom Video Communications, Inc.
[105] These are several examples. "22 Hilarious Work from Home Memes." *actiTIME*, Apr. 2020, https://www.actitime.com/fun/work-from-home-memes.
[106]Farberov, Snejana. "Colombian judge suspended for showing up half naked to Zoom court hearing." *New York Post*, 24 Nov. 2022, https://nypost.com/2022/11/24/colombian-judge-vivian-polania-suspended-for-showing-up-semi-nude-to-court-hearing/.

designated smoke breaks during in-person work. These examples how many employees remain confused by unclear working hours and the continual melding of public and private space.

monday.com

Monday is influenced by histories of cloud computing, organizational media, and open collaboration platforms. According to *Dropbox*, another significant cloud-based site, cloud computing "refers to tasks and services provided or hosted via the internet on a pay-as-you-go basis".[107] M*onday's* pricing page alone is a clear representation of this structure.

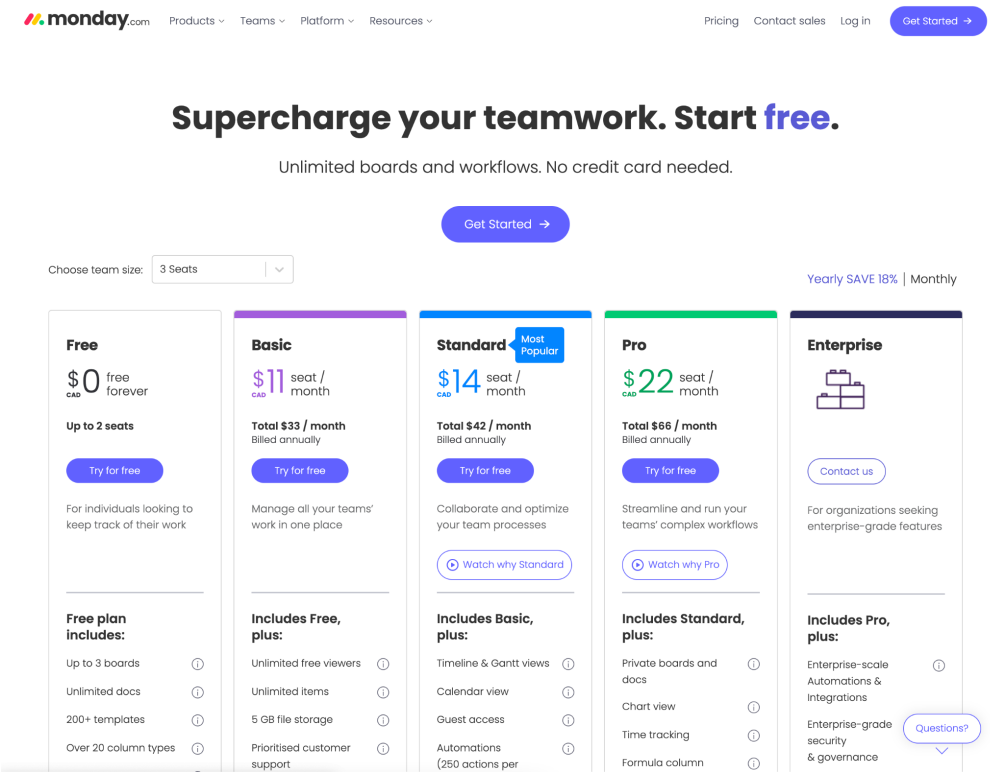

Figure 6: Pricing plans offered by *monday.com* through their website.

[107] "What is cloud computing?" *Dropbox*, https://experience.dropbox.com/resources/what-is-the-cloud.

The history of cloud computing pre-dates the early 2000s, with some of the most significant advancements taking place in the 1970s.[108] With the innovation of virtualization telecommunications companies were able to provide users with shared access to the same physical infrastructure, instead of building multiple physical environments.[109] These histories are also engrained in SaaS/IaaS developments. These advancements began to broaden within information industries and provided the groundwork for what would later become known as organizational media.

How have organizational software like *monday* evolved since their predecessors? Lisa Conrad's chapter "Organization is the message: Gray Media" in *Organize* follows the unremarkable media of work and administration.[110] These open/cloud based platforms are often used to organize information across teams as a resource database for consulting during one's workday. Today, these platforms methodically present each task for the day measured by timekeepers and statuses. We continue to see reflections of mundane office technologies within the failure of these platforms. As seen with *Zoom*, the shortcomings of *monday* will have one resorting back to basic forms of communication, like email or phone calls. Even *Wikipedia* informs the structure of mass collaboration platforms like *monday.* Despite being over two decades old, *Wikipedia* is still regarded as "the flagship of peer production and the most celebrated open content project".[111] The free volunteering of information has long since populated online platforms. Although many instances of mass collaboration have transferred to paid working environments, the performance of free labour has not ceased to exist.

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[108]Neto, Maximilliano Destefani. "A brief history of cloud computing."
[109]Neto, Maximilliano Destefani. "A brief history of cloud computing."
[110]Conrad, Lisa. "Organization Is the Message: Gray Media." *Organize,* edited by Götz Bachmann, Timon Beyes, Mercedes Bunz and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Meson press, 2019, p.64.
[111]Tkacz, Nathaniel. "Wikipedia and the Politics of Mass Collaboration." *Journal of Media and Communication*, vol. 2, no. 2, Sept. 2010, p. 41.

M*onday* did not respond to the pressures of the crisis with as much urgency or speed as *Zoom.* Many individuals I have met are unaware of the uses of *monday*. The platform encompasses a variety of tools, such as: customer relationship management, project management, software development, human resources, marketing and more.[112]

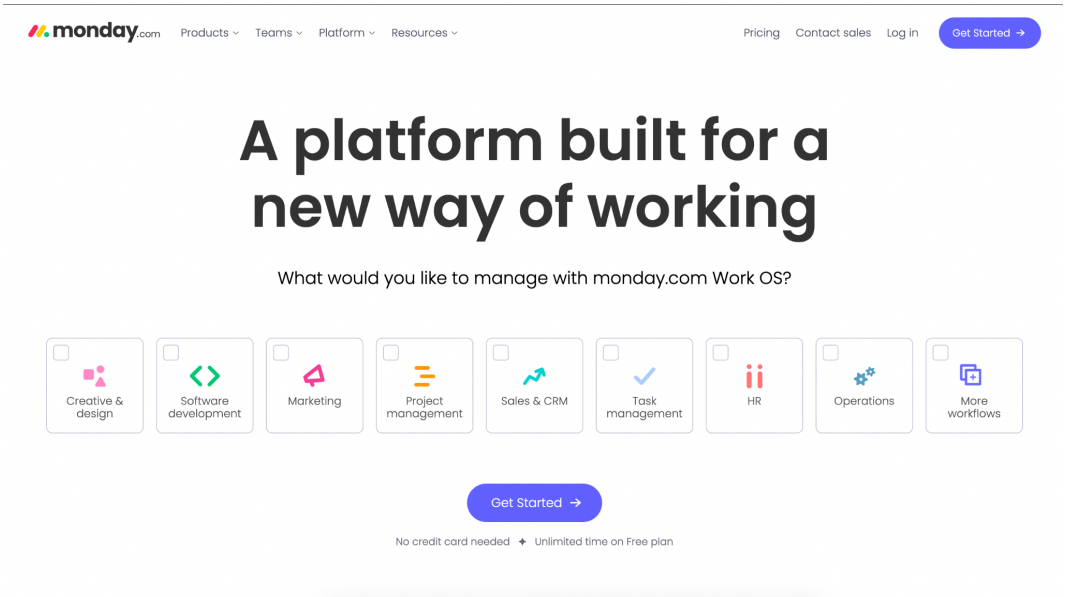

Figure 7: *Monday's* main webpage introducing their multiple tools.

However, the platform has evolved past just its services. Originally called *dapulse*, *monday.com* launched out of Tel Aviv in 2012. A rebrand in 2017 caused the company to change their name to *monday* to better align with the North American practice of beginning one's workweek on Monday.[113] This was a prominent factor leading to their eventual success during the 2020 pandemic.[114] If we refer back to Tudor's study, North America is the largest global market for

[112]Haan, Kathy and Kelly Main. "monday,com Review 2023: Features, Pros & Cons." *Forbes Advisor*, 17 Apr. 2023, https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/software/mondaycom-review/.
[113]Konrad, Alex. "monday shares jump at IPO minting new cloud software billionaire in Israel." *Forbes,* 10 Jun. 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexkonrad/2021/06/10/monday-shares-jump-at-ipo-minting-new-cloud-software-billionaire-in-israel/?sh=182c4ce14be8.
[114]Konrad, Alex. "monday shares jump at IPO minting new cloud software billionaire in Israel."

SaaS platforms and *monday's* rebrand assured they would not miss out on such a lucrative market.

The website brands itself as being built for "a new way of working",[115] alluding to the fact that the workspace has changed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The company makes sure to hit all the current buzzwords. Examples of such are: boosting a team's efficiency, reaching maximum productivity, reaching one's goals faster, and working without limits.[116] These echo many of the original goals of automation and the need to eliminate distractions in order to reach optimal productivity.[117] Unlike *Zoom*, which focuses a lot on the convenience of connectivity across different physical borders, *monday* lends its focus to speed and organization. As we have already determined by this point, convenience and speed are two sides of the same coin. *Monday's* website even has an entire "Speed and Execution" section, where they state:

> "We believe the faster you execute, the faster you learn, iterate, and improve. We are constantly running at our own pace and seeking feedback, both internally and from customers, so we can outdo our best. We believe this eagerness to try and improve gives us a competitive edge, especially as we continue to scale".[118]

Although they encourage you to work fast, as outlined by their initial sentence, they choose to run at their own pace. This is an excellent example of the employer/employee divide, where expectations are given and responsibility is placed on the worker to progress faster. Further in the excerpt, there is mention of constant improvement which gives *monday* a competitive edge. This idea echoes both market-based and competition oriented workspaces of the past, extending all

[115] *Monday.com.* Monday.com Inc, 2012, https://monday.com/.
[116] *Monday.com.* Monday.com Inc.
[117] Blacknell, Sean and Wayne Walsh, dir. *The Future of Work and Death.*
[118] "Speed and Execution." *Monday.com.* Monday.com Inc, 2012, https://monday.com/.

the way back to domestic labor handbooks of the pre-industrialization era, which "promoted repetitive duties and time-based competition as formative productivity techniques".[119] One of *monday's* most interesting promises is that of happiness. On their "About Us" page, they claim that "84% of people feel happier using monday.com", although there is no statement where this information is gathered from.[120] Despite the pitfalls, *monday's* reach during the pandemic was not insignificant. Their revenue actually grew by 106% from 2019 to the end of 2020, and their popularity grew within the press and workspaces alike.[121]

The platform's use cases in the digital workplace are not exempt from the complex push and pull between platform advertisements and reality. For *monday,* hierarchy and privilege of access are complicated through the platform's unclear division of labor. *Monday* follows the typical hierarchies of the traditional 9-5 and not the collaborative or horizontal one promised by popular discourses like Pettersen's. Networked and traditional forms of work are not opposites, they function very much in tandem with each other.

Returning to Lisa Conrad, "organized networks create new modes of networked sociality, but previous institutional forms are not replaced, and continue to play a substantive role".[122] The control these platforms retain takes place through the permission-based *freedom* of open collaboration. On *monday,* a manager's web view allows them to monitor employees at all times and control permissions given. These permissions grant an employee access to a workspace or not.

[119] Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy.* p. 23.
[120] "About Us." *Monday.com.* Monday.com Inc,
[121]Konrad, Alex. "monday shares jump at IPO minting new cloud software billionaire in Israel."
[122]Conrad, Lisa. "Organization Is the Message: Gray Media." p.77.

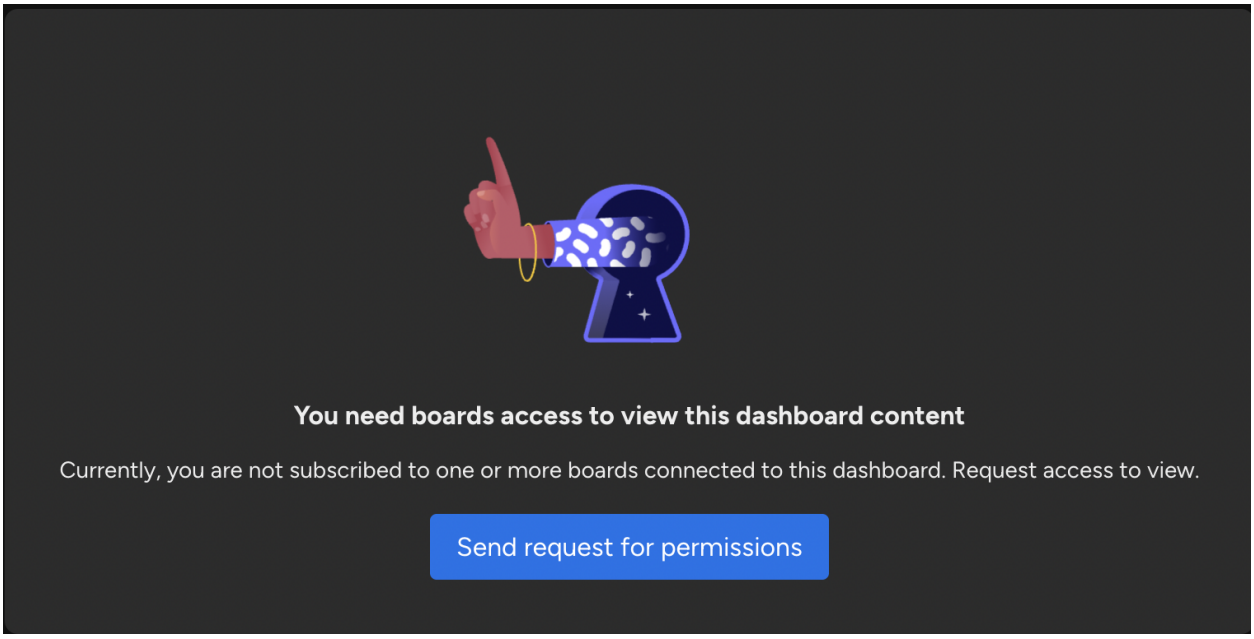

Figure 8: *Monday's* alert if you do not have permission to join a board.

Optimistic considerations of mass collaboration are often highly romanticized, which is not surprising considering the culture of busyness surrounding them is also romanticized. For example, Nathaniel Tkacz says that true collaboration is to be able to "[work] together outside the forces and motivations of capitalist exchange and the hierarchical, authoritarian relationships characteristic of wage labor in large organizations".[123] This would be impossible, as this optimistic view places collaboration in opposition to hierarchy and wage labor, which are not mutually exclusive but rather influence and shape each other. In addition, Roy Mann, co-founder of *monday* stated, "what's going to win is the ability to give people the power".[124] The power he speaks of was distributed, but it is idealistic to think that the majority of it went to working people over high-level direction.

To conclude, *Zoom's* assurance to defy physical borders during a time where physicality was restricted gave way to what seemed like a communications platform that could do it all.

[123] Quoting Yochai Benkler. Tkacz, Nathaniel. "Wikipedia and the Politics of Mass Collaboration." p.39.
[124]Konrad, Alex. "monday shares jump at IPO minting new cloud software billionaire in Israel."

However, *Zoom* functions much like a one-trick pony and the commitment to connection did little to uphold any popular assumptions of democracy. In fact, their platform has fallen to more of a totalitarian form of time control through the conflation of being online as being available. The constant pressure of availability, in addition to the overtaking of personal spaces, has worked alongside mass collaboration platforms to create models of work with no clear beginning or end. Employees are only recently learning how to step out of this loop.[125] The need for rest and relaxation is inherent to all bodies. In fact, a study done by the National Library of Medicine states that adhering to cycles of overwork were associated with decreased well-being and sleep quality as well as an increased negative mood".[126] Many jobs try to minimize the opportunity for these issues promising to support employee wellness in a bid to keep employees at work longer.[127] These wellness programs fail to claim responsibility for: the infrastructure that places individuals in riskful situations to begin with, that some workers are expected to do more than others, or that some workers require additional support.

Platforms such as *monday* have vowed to enhance productivity through increased speed and collaboration. The mass collaboration platform markets itself as a hub containing everything one would need to stay organized during their workday. However, even when a team is given the illusion of total control over the tool, *monday* still functions across the same vertical hierarchies of the traditional 9-5. Since invitations to boards by management is the primary way to access

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[125] Many movements have been re-emphasized or newly developed within the pandemic, including The Great Resignation, Quiet quitting, and work your wage to name a few. See "The Great Resignation, Quiet Quitting Right Now: Is It Safe To Quit A Job in A Recession?" *Forbes,* 23 Oct. 2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/qai/2022/10/23/the-great-resignation-quiet-quitting-right-now-is-it-safe-to-quit-a-job-in-a-recession/?sh=736f5b6e62b1. And Morrow, Emily. "Quiet quitting, acting your wage, and the TikTok of it all." *The Future of Commerce,* https://www.the-future-of-commerce.com/2022/10/20/quiet-quitting-employee-experience/.

[126] Albulescu, Patricia et al. "Give me a break!" A Systematic review and meta-analysis on the efficacy of micro-breaks for increasing well-being and performance." *National Library of Medicine*, vol. 17, no. 8, 31 Aug. 2022, p. 4. PLoS One, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9432722/.

[127] Gregg, Melissa. *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy.* p. 123.

information, plus the ability of the owner of a board to see all activity, there are still very clear accessibility issues across the platform. As Jonathan Sterne and Mara Mills emphasize, "time is not made by technology, but has become a compositional tool".[128] Time, especially during the pandemic, influences the way we live both with and away from work. Differentiating working time from leisure time is becoming more and more difficult and mass collaboration tools are exploiting this.

However, acknowledging the mass collaboration platforms that aided remote work as only negative would be a disservice to those it has benefitted both prior to and during the pandemic. It would also disregard the ambivalence that comes with these digital working environments and software, of which I am trying to emphasize. For example, a *Washington Post* article by Chelsea Cirruzzo titled "Disabled people have worked remotely for years, and they've got advice for you and your bosses", emphasizes that many may assume working from home is a novelty brought about only by the pandemic. The tone of the title itself evoked the frustration that disabled workers have toward their exclusion from several aspects of the shift to remote work. Being homebound, pandemic-related or not, will create a reliance on a plethora of digital platforms to complete the day. The shift to remote work specifically due to COVID-19 provided many with only a glimpse of what disabled employees have continuously fought for.

How to Build the *Perfect* Worker

After the analysis of both *Zoom* and *monday* it is clear that workplace platforms present more than just a productivity increase. Instead, older forms of workplace management and practices are forcefully continued by these networked models of work. The implementation of digital tools to facilitate the move to remote work was necessary. However, these remote environments often circulate around platform capitalism's idealized form of labour. These

[128]Sterne, Jonathan and Mara Mills. "800% slower." p.42.

expectations are transferred down to the employee through the design and uses of digital tools. It is evident that digital capitalism and its iterations within corporate environments favor one ideal working subject composed of an unwavering physical body and mind. This individual is vulnerable and to be controlled both during and after working hours. Corporations rely on "exposing the possibilities that a seemingly neutral world of support affords the normate body, while putting other bodies out of place".[129] Neutrality could not be further from the truth when it comes to discussing who capitalist values benefit.

Digital media in the workplace haven't necessarily developed new forms of inequality, but have undoubtedly expanded pre-existing disparities which extend far past the common employer versus employee divide.[130] The roots of this issue are grounded in the race for optimization in the workplace which produces the mindset that employees, like technology, can be algorithmically managed.[131] This is not a new idea, as advancements in automation and efficiency have existed since the Industrial Revolution. Moving toward the new work environments of the last decade, this form of optimal labor now represents the fastest route to the successful completion of a task using the platforms afforded to employees. Digital platforms almost always exist in a framework of control rather than as an actual aid to workers themselves.

Only more recently are popular media sources speaking out on the elements that allow discrimination to continue to circulate in the digital work environment. Some examples of these methods are hiring biases as was discussed back in the introduction. These forms of discrimination are extremely common in Canada.[132] According to *CBC, "*employers, especially large companies, are increasingly using artificial intelligence (AI) tools to quickly whittle down

[129]Dokumaci, Arseli. "Disability as Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism through Media-Creation." p.3.
[130]"Addressing the Employer-Employee Divide in a Post-Pandemic Workplace." *Group Benefit Solutions*, Sept. 2022, https://www.newyorklife.com/assets/gbs/pdf/Post-Pandemic-Workplace-Divide.pdf.
[131]Halpern, Orit et al. "The Smartness Mandate: Notes toward a Critique." *Grey Room,* no. 68, 2017, p. 14.
[132]"How to eliminate discrimination from your workplace." *Business Development Bank of Canada,* https://www.bdc.ca/en/articles-tools/employees/manage/how-eliminate-discrimination-from-your-workplace.

applicants into shortlists to help make hiring decisions".[133] With the limited knowledge of what information AI uses to scan for candidates, many are concerned that discrimination in these remote hiring processes will arise.[134] Most overlooked candidates are: immigrants, veterans, disabled people, caregivers, and neurodiverse people, among others".[135]

This is only a brief identification of some of the many challenges that are being exacerbated by SaaS platforms. Highlighting these points now is vital for setting up the discussion of accessibility issues and ableism within digital work. As a direct result of many of these inequitable structures the advancement of ableism in the workplace remains consistent. Virtual environments and platforms extend the privileging of spaces as well as the mental and physical capabilities of working individuals. There is a disproportionate amount of both academic and popular material missing where discussions of disabled communities and their relationship to remote work, both pre- and post- 2020, is the main focus.

In chapter two, I will focus on how the crisis of the pandemic has specifically exacerbated ableism despite the transformation of the physical work-space. The consequences for employees are often bracketed into one generalized category which disregards the specific issues that affect certain communities and/or individuals differently.[136] There is clearly a fundamental difference between how digital collaboration platforms, like *Zoom*, were regarded during the height of the pandemic in 2020 and the challenges they present in reality. Disabled communities have been at the forefront of the fight for reasonable accommodations in the workplace for decades and have consistently been rejected from obtaining the right to access

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[133]McQuillan, Laura. "Want a job? You'll have to convince our AI bot first." *CBC,* 19 Jan. 2023, https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/recruitment-ai-tools-risk-bias-hidden-workers-keywords-1.6718151.
[134] McQuillan, Laura. "Want a job? You'll have to convince our AI bot first."
[135] McQuillan, Laura. "Want a job? You'll have to convince our AI bot first."
[136]Adams, Alison, and David Kreps. "DISABILITY AND DISCOURSES OF WEB ACCESSIBILITY." p.1045-1046.

proper resources, or have been shut out of the workplace entirely.[137] Under Quebec's Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (CDPDJ), "remote work would be identified as a reasonable accommodation which employers would be required to offer their employees with disabilities".[138] However, it wasn't until recently that this was actually offered more consistently by employers, begging the question echoed by members of these communities: "why [has] it taken a public health crisis to make things accessible"?[139]

[137]Kruse, Douglas et al. "Disability and remote work during the pandemic with implications for cancer survivors." p.187.
[138] See both Ciruzzo, Chelsea. "Disabled people have worked remotely for years, and they've got advice for you and your bosses." and "Reasonable Accommodation." *Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse Québec*, https://www.cdpdj.qc.ca/en/your-rights/what-is/reasonable-accommodation.
[139] Ciruzzo, Chelsea. "Disabled people have worked remotely for years, and they've got advice for you and your bosses."

Chapter 2:
Selling the Future: The Optimism of Digital False Promises and their effects on Disability

"*Zoom*'s updates didn't so much solve inaccessibility as shine a spotlight on it", says Courtney Wade, PhD student in cultural strategy, community engagement, and digital design justice.[140] An overwhelming number of disabled individuals have fought for digital tools to provide actual access instead of just highlighting a need for accessibility.[141] When platforms attempt to solve their accessibility issues with patches they allude to their techno-solutionist form. Patches, as the terminology reflects, are only temporary cover-ups for deeply structural and complex issues. Beatrice Bachleda, a Deaf yoga instructor, echoes similar sentiments as Wade. Bachleda's use of *Zoom* in the workplace provides only "some semblance of access but that access has often been limited to auto captions".[142] Companies that model their accessibility features off generalized, normative, or able-bodied aspects are not conducive to any form of proper inclusion. There is a blatant disregard for the lived experiences of disabled employees especially during the global shift to remote work.

Before continuing through this chapter it is necessary to outline what the difference is between access and accessibility. Wade clarifies that,

> "access is a dynamic, intersectional approach that allows for authentic engagement of all participants. Accessibility is geared more toward making technology easy to use for hearing, abled, and neurotypical (non-neurodivergent) users, almost always at the expense of d/Deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent communities".[143]

The generalizations that are characteristic of corporate accessibility practices can be seen within

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[140] Shipman, Matt. "How Zoom Put Disabled Users in a Tough Spot (And What You Can Do About It)." *NC State University News,* 17 Aug. 2021. https://news.ncsu.edu/2021/08/zoom-and-access/.
[141]Shipman, Matt. "How Zoom Put Disabled Users in a Tough Spot (And What You Can Do About It)."
[142]Sanchez, Kait. "Deaf people face unique challenges as pandemic drags on." *The Verge,* 29 Jan. 2021. https://www.theverge.com/22254591/deaf-communication-tech-access-coronavirus-isolation
[143]Shipman, Matt. "How Zoom Put Disabled Users in a Tough Spot (And What You Can Do About It)."

the structure of many familiar mass collaboration platforms. For example, several of *Zoom's* accessibility changes are based on hearing, neurotypical and abled-bodied individuals under the guise of access.[144] The company states that hosts are able to assign someone to type captions or can enable live transcripts.[145] From a company perspective, meeting hosts further portray the promise of accessibility without ever granting true access to those who benefit from the accommodations in the first place. From a user perspective, one may end up disclosing their disability through the act of requesting live transcription during a meeting. In addition, users must trust that the host can properly enable these accessibility tools once requested. A transfer of responsibility can be seen from technology to user, where employees request live transcripts themselves yet hold no power to assure the correct completion of this task.

In late 2021, many white-collar industries chose a partial return to the office under certain safety protocols, thus introducing hybrid working.[146] Hybrid work is a weekly combination of remote and in-person work, optional for some and mandatory for others.[147] As the workspace was altered once again, many platforms re-worked their promises to include the addition of hybridity. Many promised to mitigate the unpredictability of flexible work models by enabling the hybrid workforce to stay connected.[148] The shift to a hybrid workforce proves that digital workspaces are here to stay and their consequences are not going away either. Now, despite some in-person work employees are still heavily relying on mass collaboration platforms to connect with their remote counterparts. As platforms continue to extend traditional forms of workplace management into

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[144]Shipman, Matt. "How Zoom Put Disabled Users in a Tough Spot (And What You Can Do About It)."
[145]"Accessibility." *Zoom Video Communications, Inc.*, 2011, https://zoom.us/. Accessed 4 Aug. 2022.
[146]Reginio, Sean M. "Canada: The Return To In-Person Work And The Issue Of Accomodation." *Mondaq*, 30 Nov. 2022. https://www.mondaq.com/canada/employee-rights-labour-relations/1255904/the-return-to-in-person-work-and-the-issue-of-accommodation.
[147]"Information Technology Gartner Glossary: Hybrid Work." *Gartner*. https://www.gartner.com/en/information-technology/glossary/hybrid-work
[148]"Industry." *Zoom Video Communications, Inc.*, 2011, https://zoom.us/. Accessed 4 Aug. 2022.

the digital, they are simultaneously exacerbating the discrimination that comes along with those practices. Hybrid work has even developed forms of discrimination between in-person and at-home employees specifically.

Many disability scholars argue against the way tech companies design and develop use cases for technology. Critical disability scholars like Jonathan Sterne, Mara Mills, Arseli Dokumaci, Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp have all contributed to these theoretical insights in the field of disability for this chapter. Concerning the design process, disability scholars reject the normative universalism and design-for-all approaches to technology.[149] There is a call instead for an approach based on individual experience reflecting how the uses of these platforms materialize in the real-world. This alludes to disability as method which centers disabled perspectives and experiences at the forefront of discussion and has also inspired this chapter.[150] Concerning hybrid work environments, disability scholars criticize the disregard for the way that environments have the possibility to produce and exacerbate disability.[151] If failure is inherent to many technological designs, then ableism can also be assumed to do the same as a facet of capitalism.[152] Through these lenses I hope to modestly contribute to disability scholarship by providing key insights on the repetitive nature of inequality and stress how digital environments only provide new grounds for the implementation of these discriminations. My privilege to

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[149] Many prominent scholars in media and disability studies have echoed this argument. See Adams, Alison, and David Kreps. "DISABILITY AND DISCOURSES OF WEB ACCESSIBILITY." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 12, no. 7, 22 Oct. 2009, pp. 1041-1058. *Taylor & Francis Online*, https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1080/13691180802552940. Sterne, Jonathan. "Degrees of Muteness." *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment.* Duke University Press, 2021, pp. 2-40. Ravneberg, Bodil and Sylvia Söderström. *Disability, Society and Assistive Technology.* Routledge, 2017.

[150]Dokumaci, Arseli. "Disability as Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism through Media-Creation." Disability Studies Quarterly, vol. 38, no. 3, 2018, pp. 1-14. DSQ, https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i3.6491.

[151] Many prominent scholars in media and disability studies have also echoed this argument. See again Sterne, Jonathan. "Degrees of Muteness." Also, Whittaker, Meredith et al. "Disability, Bias, and AI." *AI Now Institute Report.* 2019, pp. 1-32. Appadurai, Arjun and Neta Alexander. *Failure.* Polity Press, 2020. Dokumaci, Arseli. "People as Affordances: Building Disability Worlds through Care Intimacy." *Current Anthropology,* vol. 61, no. S21, 21 Feb, 2020, pp.S97-S108.. *Chicago University Press*, DOI: 10.1086/705783.

[152]Failure being inherent to the design of technology is the central theme of the book *Failure*. See Appadurai, Arjun and Neta Alexander. *Failure.* Polity Press, 2020. p.95.

access these works, as well as my greater research interests in accessibility in media production, and my personal work experience in the field of neurodiversity and disability have all inspired me to write alongside these field experts on the limitations for disabled workers.

Drawing on these elements, chapter two will turn its attention to *Meta* (2021) and demonstrate how hybrid workplace platforms carry over discriminatory aspects of in-person work. *Meta* was developed after the height of the pandemic when many workplaces started to discuss the return to in-person work.[153] Quickly, the platform became a tangible example of the aspirations and pitfalls of technology in everyday spaces. The platform promised a virtual environment where "virtual and mixed reality [will] revolutionize the way we work".[154] This position becomes saturated when the openness of the platform limits disabled employees.[155] Similar to other mass collaboration platforms, *Meta's* promises have been superficial and generalized.

As important as it is to understand the need for user-centered design choices when it comes to disability, it is equally as important to note that several organizations have already been working toward this. For example: *damn solidarity project, Inclusive Design Research Centre, and The Valuable 500* all have a goal to make the structure of workplaces and platforms more inclusive.[156] These organizations all target different levels of employment and industry. Some work directly with high-level management and others support non-management positions. I want to focus here not on the act of providing solutions, but rather on the substance of each organization. Analyzing how user-centered designs are being advocated for by these organizations can help to understand what common aspects of these platforms can be

[153] Microsoft. "Great Expectations: Making Hybrid Work *Work*."
[154] *Meta for Work.* Meta Platforms, Inc., 2004, https://forwork.meta.com/about-us/.
[155] Stoner, Grant." VR is Here to Stay. It's Time to Make it Accessible." *Wired,* 1 Mar. 2022, https://www.wired.com/story/virtual-reality-accessibility-disabilities/.
[156]Wade, Courtney. *Damn Solidarity Project.* https://www.damnsolidarityproject.com/. *Inclusive Design and Research Centre*, 1993. https://idrc.ocadu.ca/. Casey, Caroline. *The Valuable 500*, https://www.thevaluable500.com/.

inaccessible to many in the first place. It can also help to visualize a reality where the design process focuses on individualism and not corporations.

With a new wave of immersive and body-led technologies for work, the current divisions between able and disabled individuals in this context threaten to increase once again unless there is an honest focus on the user outside of harmful normative standards. Many studies and scholarship have relied on unclear or non-representative examples of disabled communities based on large and random sampling and no consistency in the understanding of disability.[157] Although one should refrain from devaluing the importance of examining all communities that are rejected by mainstream digital capitalism, these large groups are outside the scope of this project. My specific focus will be on mass collaboration platforms through the lens of disabled employees who have worked remotely within white-collar information industry positions during the height of the pandemic. These accounts will be explored through journalistic works that point to the shortcomings of these platforms for disabled users.

The New Workspace

One crucial misconception is that the consequences experienced by workers due to mass collaboration platforms are new. Mik Scarlet, an expert in the field of access and inclusion explains that "many of the solutions we've needed for this pandemic are the same solutions, like remote working, that disabled people have been requesting for years".[158] The rapid shift to remote work took place only once the general public was at risk, despite so many previous decades of disabled employees fighting for this exact reasonable accommodation. The urgency adopted by corporations during the public health crisis remains under scrutiny from disabled

[157]Dobransky, Kerry and Eszter Hargittai. "The disability divide in internet access and use." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2006, p.334, DOI: 10.1080/13691180600751298.
[158]Keegan, Matthew. "Why coronavirus may make the world more accessible." *BBC*, 13 May 2020. https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200513-why-the-coronavirus-can-make-the-world-more-accessible.

employees, not the shift to remote work itself. This frustration is echoed by many, such as Eve Hill, a disability rights lawyer who demonstrates that it was not until the pandemic that employers began offering what should have always been reasonable accommodations in the first place.[159] Accommodations are needed when the environment is not already accessible, which many workspaces are not. The actual performance of remote work is not being restricted as it was before the pandemic, but the platforms involved are greatly increasing the labour of work.

Despite being ambivalent in nature, the use of technology in hybrid spaces is especially complex for disabled employees. The use of assistive technologies juxtaposed with mass collaboration platforms demonstrates how an environment can exacerbate disability. Both are needed to successfully complete a workday, however they do not always function seamlessly together. Bodil Ravneberg and Sylvia Söderström, in their interdisciplinary book *Disability, Society and Assistive Technology,* define assistive technology as "any item, piece of equipment or product that is applied to secure, increase, maintain or improve functional capabilities".[160] Similar to most technology, AT's are often built on a universalist-for-all design influenced by abled bodies, rather than a for-me design based on different and fluid identities.[161] This places AT within a similar productivity-framing to the workspaces of the mid-20th century, where numbers and percentages create a successful tool rather than its functionality for those who require the accommodation.

The generalized assumptions that determine the design of AT also surround workspaces. Jonathan Sterne has developed an impairment theory in his book *Diminished Faculties: A*

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[159]Ciruzzo, Chelsea. "Disabled people have worked remotely for years, and they've got advice for you and your bosses." *The Washington Post,* 17 Mar. 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/disabled-people-have-worked-remotely-for-years-and-theyve-got-advice-for-you-and-your-bosses-/2020/03/17/f99dfd54-67d1-11ea-b313-df458622c2cc_story.html.
[160]Ravneberg and Söderström, "Introduction." p.7.
[161]Ravneberg and Söderström, "Introduction." p.2.

Political Phenomenology of Impairment (2021). Besides rejecting the assumption of a universally felt disability/impairment, Sterne's theory also criticizes naturalization.[162] The argument against naturalization stresses that disability is not always certain or predictable and very often intertwined within environmental, social, and cultural factors.[163] This is especially present for disabled workers who must use both assistive technology and mass collaboration platforms simultaneously. This push and pull between disability and external spheres is often overlooked by corporations who determine the implementation of technology inside the office. Naturalization exists in hybrid workspaces that refuse forms of assistive technology and disregard access when choosing collaboration platforms.

Hybrid work causes a two-fold problem for many disabled employees who rely on assistive technologies for everyday tasks. This is because the workspace switches between in-person and remote work. For some, remote work removes access to resources that remain in the physical office despite the loss of workers.[164] For others, the in-office elements of hybrid work disallows the use of resources that were only available in their home work environments. For example, Chelsea Bear has cerebral palsy and balancing or walking long distances is extremely difficult.[165] Her scooter remains at home if she is needed in the office, removing her ability to move around safely.[166] In some contexts, assistive technologies can be paid for by the company but these costs would be offloaded to the employee in the case of working from

[162]Sterne, Jonathan. "Degrees of Muteness."
[163]Sterne, Jonathan. "Degrees of Muteness." p.11.
[164] "The reality of working from home for people with disabilities." *accesiBe*, 16 Apr. 2020. Accessed 10 Aug. 2022. https://accessibe.com/blog/trends/the-reality-of-working-from-home-for-people-with-disabilities.
[165]Dawson, Kelly. "3 disabled workers share how 'returning to normal' makes work inaccessible." *FastCompany,*11 Nov. 2022, https://www.fastcompany.com/90750720/3-disabled-workers-share-how-returning-to-normal-makes-work-inaccessible
[166]Dawson, Kelly. "3 disabled workers share how 'returning to normal' makes work inaccessible."

home.[167] Once again, that is only if they are deemed reasonable accommodations in the first place. In 2019, the costs of living in Montreal suggested that employers would have to raise salaries by between $5,871-$16,285 for an employee to set up a home office, according to estimates by Canada's Mortgage and Housing Corporation.[168] These prices do not include the cost of the technology itself. In Canada, AT can range from $30 to $5,000 not including the set-up and time spent learning each device.[169] If assistive technologies are restricted based on the location that work is performed, then the problematic idea of naturalization is being continued through the assumption that a given workspace is 'accessible enough'.

The way that hybrid environments can exacerbate disability aligns with Dr. Arseli Dokumaci's critical disability theory of affordances. These micro activist affordances relate to "micro acts of world building, with which disabled people literally "make up," and at the same time "make up for," whatever affordance fails to readily materialize in their environments".[170] As Dokumaci outlines in their work, people can both be barriers to and act as affordances.[171] A story on page 106 outlines two people standing in a designated wheelchair-user spot of a bus as a man in a wheelchair lets the bus pass instead of embarking. This story shows that people can often physically act as barriers to disabled individuals. I would argue then that the rejection of accommodations by employers is just as much a non-affordance as the physical bodies of the two individuals blocking the wheelchair-user spot in Dokumaci's excerpt.

In addition to ableism and a reduction of access, daily use of collaboration platforms for hybrid work has also developed further discrimination for those who remain fully remote. The

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[167]Shearmur, Richard. "Remote Work: Employers are taking over our living spaces and passing on costs." *Talent Canada*, 22 Jun. 2020. https://www.talentcanada.ca/remote-work-employers-are-taking-over-our-living-spaces-and-passing-on-costs/
[168]Shearmur, Richard. "Remote Work: Employers are taking over our living spaces and passing on costs."
[169] "Products" *Canadian Assistive Technology*. https://canasstech.com/.
[170]Dokumaci, Arseli. "People as Affordances: Building Disability Worlds through Care Intimacy." p.98.
[171]Dokumaci, Arseli. "People as Affordances: Building Disability Worlds through Care Intimacy." p.100.

affective connections, opportunities for socialization, and job progression were once available to all employees. Now, those who telework full-time are being left behind by their hybrid or in-person counterparts. For example, the *glass ceiling* is a gendered workplace phenomenon that limits women from ascending to higher positions.[172] This phenomenon has adopted a new form during the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Zoom ceiling* was a term coined by psychologist Dr. Elora Voyles and describes the barrier that significantly enhances the possibility of remote workers' being "passed over for promotions compared to their in-person colleagues".[173] Voyles' 'Zoom ceiling' is significant when understanding how mass collaboration technologies are often shaped by previous inequitable forms of workplace management. In the same way that the glass ceiling has evolved into the Zoom ceiling, many platform design choices are undeniably tied to more traditional forms of workplace culture and social practices. Ableist structures, like the Zoom ceiling, that are built into the design of workplace tools become a materialized form of exclusion and discrimination.[174] This could be a plausible explanation for why many remote workers miss out on job retention or progression.

Douglas Kruse discusses the consequences from the loss of socialization during working from home for disabled individuals. The ideal assumption was, especially in early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, that working from home would help disabled workers retain their jobs and achieve fair promotions based on job performance and qualifications rather than by stereotypes and workplace culture.[175] Kruse's research uncovered that disabled workers in remote positions within white-collar industries were more likely to lose their jobs and less likely to receive

[172] Voyles, Elora. "The Zoom Ceiling is the New Glass Ceiling." *TINYpulse,* 7 Dec. 2021. https://www.tinypulse.com/blog/zoom-ceiling-new-glass-ceiling.
[173] Voyles, Elora. "The Zoom Ceiling is the New Glass Ceiling."
[174]Dokumaci, Arseli. "Disability as Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism through Media-Creation." p.6.
[175]Kruse, Douglas et al. "Disability and remote work during the pandemic with implications for cancer survivors." p.184.

promotions if employed.[176] Many of these realities point to the enhancement of the pre-existing glass ceiling which has now taken on a virtual form. Voyles states that the 'old' saying, "out of sight, out of mind" certainly applies to remote and hybrid workers.[177] The use of the word 'old' in and of itself refers to a past concept which is still being felt today. The inequity between remote workers and in-person workers in its most general sense is not a new issue.

There are many groups working towards the transformation of these hybrid workspaces into more accessible environments. For example, the *Inclusive Design Research Centre* (IDRC) in Toronto, Canada does exactly this. They actively research and develop better solutions for multiple sectors, including the workplace, to help disabled employees through technological design.[178] They strongly adhere to an individualist approach, going so far as to design multiple versions of the same technology to benefit one individual within multiple contexts.[179] They even have two projects dedicated to the workplace, including Future of Work and Disability (FWD) and Future of Work: Equitable Digital Systems (EDS) examining tools used for work.[180] I will return to them later in this chapter.

The Future of Work

Meta (2021) harbors infinite possibilities for the future of work. Its format is unique in that it allows for the same connections that *Zoom* and others promise, but through digital avatars and virtual reality one can actually feel like they are right next to their coworkers.[181] As *Meta* continues developing, so do the concerns of the repetition of older forms of inequitable workplace practices. *Meta* is a literal example of "built environments that act as a materialized

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[176]Kruse, Douglas et al. "Disability and remote work during the pandemic with implications for cancer survivors." p.184.
[177]Voyles, Elora. "The Zoom Ceiling is the New Glass Ceiling." Italics added for emphasis.
[178]*Inclusive Design and Research Centre*, 1993. https://idrc.ocadu.ca/.
[179]*Inclusive Design and Research Centre.*
[180]*Inclusive Design and Research Centre.*
[181]*Meta.* Meta Platforms, Inc., 2004, https://about.meta.com/.

form of exclusion and discrimination.[182] I want to take this opportunity to examine what virtual reality introduces for the organization of hybrid spaces. I hope to highlight how the futuristic promises of unrestricted movement promoted by *Meta* defers attention from the ableist structures that control the physical work environments that the platform is based upon.

Meta was announced on October 28th, 2021 as a facelift of the well-known *Facebook* company.[183] The crucial difference compared to its predecessors is that *Meta* is "moving beyond 2D screens toward immersive experiences like augmented and virtual reality to help build the next evolution in social technology".[184] The departure from a static 2D platform transforms the way we experience virtual space. The devices that are being created, such as VR headsets, are popularized as futuristic objects by promotional materials and popular media.[185] *Meta* describes its own Meta Quest Pro VR headset as being able to provide you with multi-tasking superpowers by asking rhetorically: "would you like to be able to lift a skyscraper up with one hand to examine its structural integrity"?[186] These claims clearly take on an artistic and contingent position in relation to the true abilities of the company.

[182]Dokumaci, Arseli. "Disability as Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism through Media-Creation." p.6.
[183]*Meta.* Meta Platforms, Inc.
[184]"Who we are.." *Meta,* 2004, https://about.meta.com/company-info/.
[185]Meta for Work. Meta Platforms, Inc., 2004, https://forwork.meta.com/about-us/.
[186]"Meta Quest Pro." *Meta,* 2004, https://www.meta.com/ca/quest/quest-pro/.

Figure 9: An example of *Meta's* promotional material found on their "about us" page.

Meta now aligns itself with the metaverse as reflected by the name. The metaverse, although quite ambiguous, is defined by Eric Ravenscraft as a shift in how we now interact with technology.[187] Much like the temporal discussions of the first chapter, the metaverse is classified as an experience rather than a tangible source. Its addition in this project reflects an exaggerated form of the ambivalence characteristic of many mass collaboration platforms created by the uncertainty experienced due to the pandemic. Accessing the metaverse through *Meta* is quite complex, with methods ranging from virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), or smart glasses.[188] My focus remains on virtual reality as it is the poster child for *Meta* and depicted in many of their promotional materials.[189] I am interested in how *Meta*'s virtual reality demonstrates the promise of freedom within a virtual space while simultaneously limiting many through their physical hardware.

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[187]Ravenscraft, Eric. "What is the Metaverse, Exactly?" *Wired*, 25 Apr. 2022. https://www.wired.com/story/what-is-the-metaverse/.
[188]"Who we are.." *Meta.*
[189] *Meta* emphasized its workrooms as a "VR-first experience" despite speaking on the potentials of joining through a 2D screen.

One of the most obvious limitations is the price of their physical hardware, such as VR goggles. As of 2023, the Meta Quest 2 virtual reality headset is being sold for $609.99, which is now a base model in comparison to the newer Meta Quest Pro which starts at $2,299.99.[190] These technologies are developed with the intention to facilitate an embodied internet, meaning a virtual version of yourself enabled by VR or AR.[191] Besides the price itself, there are numerous obstacles introduced by the expectation to use VR to connect to the metaverse. In many promotional presentations, the act of selling a superficial future rarely discusses in depth exactly how people will interact with this virtual world. Mark Zuckerberg's 2021 YouTube video "The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together" never actually delineates how the experience of virtual reality will affect how we interact with our environment.[192] The marketing tactics of selling a future tend to obscure the issues that need to be fixed within our existing relationship to technology and space. Is this because the platform is under development? Possibly. Are users still actively affected by the platform even while developments are being made? Absolutely.

I want to highlight the term *interact* or *interactivity* as being multifaceted, similar to the buzzwords *connection* or *flexibility* used by many collaboration platforms. Virtual reality was developed as an "alibi for a digital media culture that has taken a wrong turn, towards distraction, detachment, and misinformation".[193] The revolutionary interaction advertised by *Meta* is ambiguous at best when it comes to how employees actually use the platform. *Zoom* or *monday's* choice of connection or interaction is limited by its 2D virtual setting. *Meta's* choice of

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[190]"Meta Quest Pro." *Meta,* 2004, https://www.meta.com/ca/quest/quest-pro/.https://www.meta.com/ca/quest/products/quest-2/.

[191]"The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together–Connect 2021." *YouTube,* uploaded by Meta, 28 Oct. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvufun6xer8.

[192] "The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together–Connect 2021." *YouTube,* uploaded by Meta, 28 Oct. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvufun6xer8.

[193] Nakamura, Lisa. "Feeling good about feeling bad: virtuous virtual reality and the automation of racial empathy." *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 19, no. 1, Apr. 2020, p. 49. DOI: https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1177/1470412920906259. This essay develops wonderful arguments for the issues surrounding embodiment through virtual reality.

Figure 10: An example of *Meta's* promotional material for their Horizon Workrooms, found on their website.

To briefly define these three, the first is a customizable personal virtual room. The second, a larger version of the first with multiple individual set-ups within one shared virtual space, like cubicles in a physical office. Finally, the infinite office is a culmination of both those versions and more, including virtual representations of colleagues, desks, chairs, etc.[196]

As with other mass collaboration platforms, the futuristic abilities of *Meta* end up glossing over the structural elements of the workplace that are still not accessible. Virtual reality is not a unique innovation to the pandemic or to *Meta.* By the early 2020's, many accessibility concerns began to surround the platform including: clunky materials, motion sickness, physical pain, navigating public spaces, and more.[197] In addition to physical limitations, Lisa Nakamura unveils the harm of promoting emotion as an accurate way to embody marginalized and

[194] "Interaction" *Merriam-Webster Dictionary,* https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interacting.
[195] "A Journey to the Infinite Office." *Workplace from Meta*.
[196] "A Journey to the Infinite Office." *Workplace from Meta*.
[197]Ravenscraft, Eric. "What is the Metaverse, Exactly?"

threatened bodies.[198] Being a VR-focused platform, *Meta* has succumbed to several of these issues. The platform's "VR for Good" web page advertises VR's ability to embody "human-centric stories that promote empathy and empowerment".[199] This aligns exactly with Nakamura's concern of virtuous virtual reality. The act of embodying someone else's lived experience becomes toxic when one begins to "[occupy] the body of another who might not even own their own body".[200] Disabled employees fight for their own bodies to be able to safely and simply navigate space at work, especially in-person. VR is providing opportunities for able-bodied individuals to virtually embody disabled bodies without any consideration for the countless disabled individuals who could never use VR for work to begin with.[201] We must be cautious in our discussions of possible transformations for *Meta* that they do not repeat the same problematic aspects that already exist within VR spaces.

Aside from the environment of the metaverse itself, the devices which enable entry to these worlds are equally as disabling. Despite the accessibility issues with VR headsets themselves, bringing one's own gear into the metaverse can only work if compatible.[202] This is concerning once again for those who use assistive technologies in their daily lives. In addition, the reliance on physical movements when using VR is quite restrictive to many with disabilities. In *Meta's* discussion of their *Horizon Workrooms*, they emphasize hand-tracking and facial expressions as the only way to give your virtual avatars life.[203] If the only way to effectively embody one's true form in the metaverse is to interact through physicality, then this would reject many with physical disabilities.

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[198] Nakamura, Lisa. "Feeling good about feeling bad: virtuous virtual reality and the automation of racial empathy." p.48.
[199] "VR for Good." *Meta*, https://about.meta.com/community/vr-for-good/.
[200] Nakamura, Lisa. "Feeling good about feeling bad: virtuous virtual reality and the automation of racial empathy." p.51.
[201] Stoner, Grant." VR is Here to Stay. It's Time to Make it Accessible."
[202] "A Journey to the Infinite Office." *Workplace from Meta.*
[203]"Workrooms." *Meta*.

In addition, there are several ways in which the collection of data through VR specifically can exacerbate discrimination against disabled employees. As Ben Egliston and Marcus Carter explore in their 2021 critique of *Meta*, virtual reality headsets capture data regarding the physical space around the user and the user's body.[204] This means that sensitive information can be collected, revealing information "previously protected under anti-discrimination law," like disclosing one's disability.[205] These data points can eventually "construct (and exacerbate) forms of structural privilege and structural oppression",[206] of which we can see in platforms like *Zoom* and *monday* alike. The pitfalls of VR in relation to disabled individuals do not only reject certain individuals from partaking within the enjoyability of gaming, but also dismiss these communities from engaging in the future of work, with arguably more serious consequences.

It would be irresponsible not to emphasize that *Meta* has implemented some changes towards change similar to *Zoom* or *monday.* In terms of accessibility they have included an adjust height feature "which allows you to experience VR as though you are standing, even though you are in a seated position".[207] However, I want to emphasize this as also conveying evaluation around disabled bodies by normalizing standing as the ideal way to interact with one's environment. In order for *Meta* to continue to innovate responsibly, especially surrounding forms of working space, I believe it is crucial that they evaluate the present conditions of the workplace rather than focus on futurity. As emphasized by many disabled individuals, taking a user-focus approach is one of the only plausible ways to make informed decisions on design. If *Meta* strives to be the next evolution in social technology, they could equally signal a change in the industry

[204]Egliston, Ben and Marcus Carter. "Critical questions for Facebook's virtual reality: Data, power and the metaverse." *Internet Policy Review*, vol. 10, no. 4, p. 2, http://dx.doi.org/10.14763/2021.4.1610.
[205]Egliston, Ben and Marcus Carter. "Critical questions for Facebook's virtual reality: Data, power and the metaverse." p.12.
[206]Parentheses from the original piece Egliston, Ben and Marcus Carter. "Critical questions for Facebook's virtual reality: Data, power and the metaverse." p.3.
[207] "Responsible Innovation." *Meta.*

standard method of developing these technologies. With countless possibilities, one crucial shift which workplace platforms must partake in is to change their view of an ideal user in order to include more individuals.

The Fight for Access

There are certain collectives fighting for a noticeable change in the way we work. Although these organizations are not solutions and their outcomes are not perfect, I want to underscore their potential in order to highlight the affordances of technology. Some of these potentials include technology's ability to provide access, its malleability and flexibility, and how connection can reduce the employer/employee divide. The previous sections have focused on how many digital tools can be discriminating. However, if the development of these technologies reorient their design process, the outcome could harness all the positive potentials that technology has to offer. Three real-world examples that are already in development alongside these ideas are: *damn solidarity project, Inclusive Design Research Centre, and The Valuable 500*.

The first example relates back to Courtney Wade from the introduction to this chapter. The *disability, autistic, mad & neuroqueer solidarity project (damn)* strives to design "anti-oppressive disability, racial, & neuroqueer justice futures grounded in access-centered transformative praxis & cultural strategy".[208] The site includes an infodump, which is a method to collect and present multidisciplinary literature and discussions surrounding access, pride, and justice.[209] They also offer a plethora of resources for the active exploration of communities, identities, and histories.[210]

[208]Wade, Courtney. *Damn Solidarity Project.* https://www.damnsolidarityproject.com/.
[209]Wade, Courtney. *Damn Solidarity Project.*
[210] Wade, Courtney. *Damn Solidarity Project.*

Figure 11: Screenshot of *Damn Solidarity Project's* infodump on access.

As a remote resource, the infodump and other features can be accessed regardless of geographical location or mobility restriction. Wade's site also includes alt-text and image descriptions for those who use screen readers. *Damn* can be considered a form of mass collaboration platform similar to *Wikipedia*. The infodump is created through the collaboration of many communities. In addition, their promise of "access-centered transformative praxis & cultural strategy" means that they value lived experiences and honest discussions of justice from several points of view.[211] Wade's platform would prove especially useful for able bodied individuals as resources to advocate for accessibility, particularly by those who design technological devices such as VR headsets.

[211] Wade, Courtney. *Damn Solidarity Project.*

The next example I want to highlight is the *Inclusive Design Research Centre* (IDRC) which I have made reference to briefly in a previous section. The Toronto-based center, founded by Dr. Julia Treviranus in 1993, is formed of "an international community of open source developers, designers, researchers, educators and co-designers who work together to proactively ensure that emerging technology and practices are designed inclusively".[212] They, as with Wade's organization, are committing to proper access by creating technology alongside disabled individuals rather than for them. The focus of the IDRC is to make sure that digital transformations are designed responsibly with lived experiences in mind in a for-me rather than for-all approach.[213] The rejection of for-all designs is part of the larger universalism versus individualism debate that exists in disability scholarship. Many design-for-all ideas do not take into account the multitude of varieties of disability and how access needs can change multiple times in one day for one person.[214] The IDRC works with several large tech companies, like *Microsoft* and *Adobe,* in order to transform the socio-technical space.[215] Adopting a user-centered approach to design showcases the potential that technology has to be malleable and to shape itself to different needs and lifestyles. This is one affordance that should be taken advantage of when creating platforms that are meant to govern everyday life. Technological designs tend to be physically rigid but even *Meta* showcases the opportunity for a free flowing environment that can bend and adapt to unique needs at different times. If the lived experience of having a disability was recognized, it could go far in the making of an inclusive and adaptable software.

The IDRC have created several projects that critique ableism and discrimination in the workplace while focusing on how to improve access and reduce harm. A specific example

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[212]*Inclusive Design and Research Centre*, 1993.
[213]*Inclusive Design and Research Centre*, 1993.
[214]Ravneberg, Bodil and Sylvia Söderström. "Introduction." *Disability, Society and Assistive Technology.* Routledge, 2017.
[215]*Inclusive Design and Research Centre*, 1993.

relating to digital tools in the workplace would be Optimizing Diversity with Disability (ODD) that investigates "bias in hiring algorithms using non-disability specific and synthesized disability specific employment data".[216] We are already aware that platforms like *monday* and many others encompass discrimination that is inherent to their structure. Just the previous examples alone lead by example, showcasing how the inclusion of disabled individuals in the development process will go a long way to assure access to the future product.

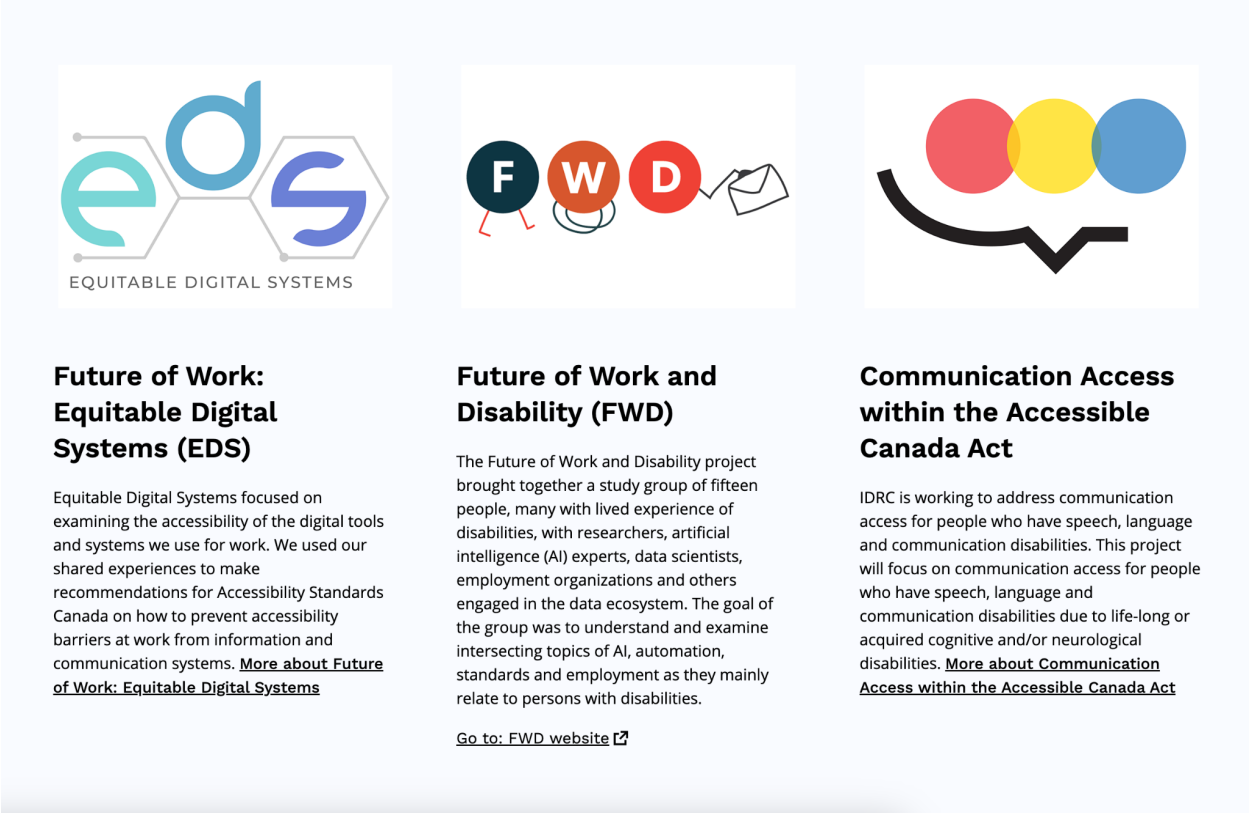

Figure 12: Screenshot from *IDRC's* ongoing projects.

The third and final example is Caroline Casey's *The Valuable 500*, a play on *Fortune 500* companies. This initiative supports disability inclusion by targeting CEO's and high-level directors.[217] This is a different model than the previous examples where management is the focus

[216]"Projects and Tools." *Inclusive Design and Research Centre*, 1993.
[217]Casey, Caroline. *The Valuable 500*, https://www.thevaluable500.com/.

of the collective, and not the employees. This might sound exactly like what I have been criticizing for the entirety of this project. However, relying on individuals to attempt to fix deeply structural issues only reinforces the deferral of responsibility that workplaces are already performing. Casey describes *The Valuable 500* as "a global business collective made up of 500 CEOs and their companies, innovating together for disability inclusion".[218] Although *Meta* is not a member, several other notable international names appear include *Microsoft*, *Apple,* and *Google*.[219] With 500 companies on the list it is interesting that *Meta* is not included (not even as *Facebook*).

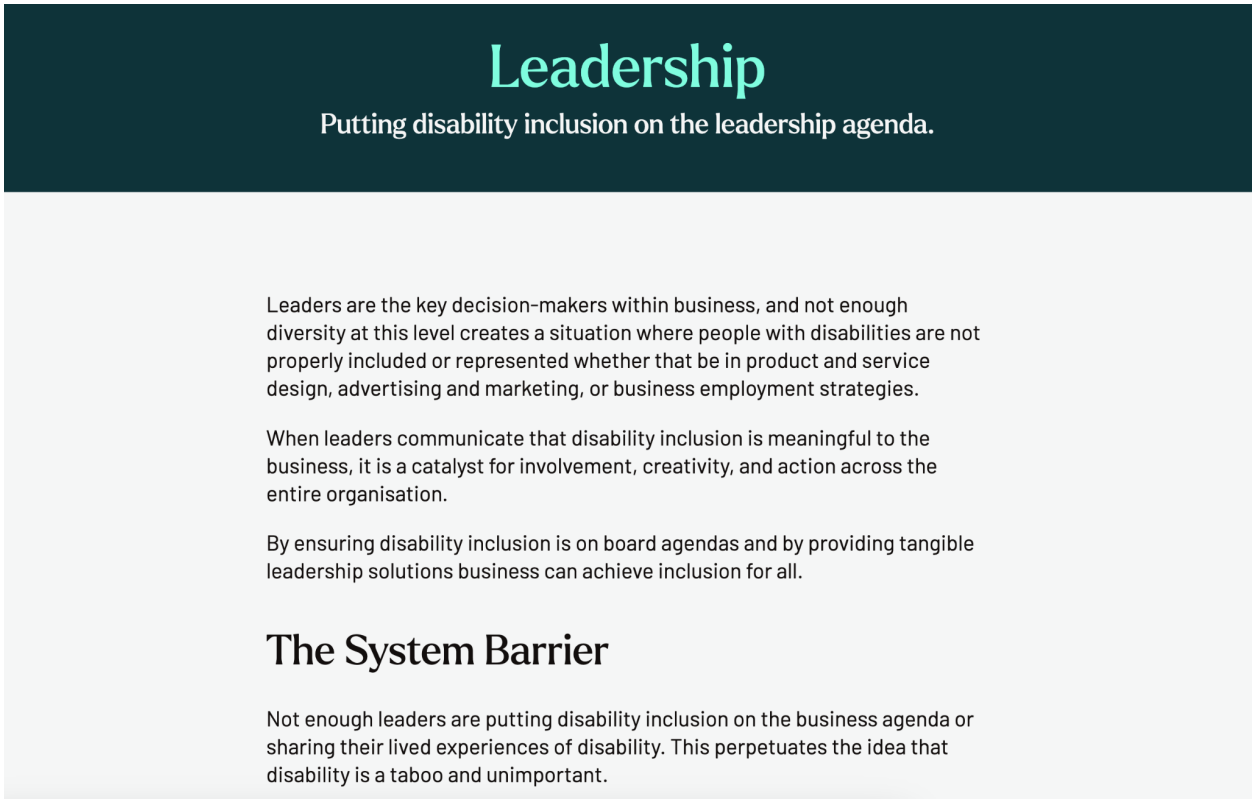

Figure 13: Why targeting leadership is important from the *Valuable 500* website.

The goal of Casey's platform is to create a *Transformation Program* hoping to increase

[218]Casey, Caroline. *The Valuable 500*, https://www.thevaluable500.com/.
[219]Casey, Caroline. "Members." *The Valuable 500*, https://www.thevaluable500.com/members.

inclusion and access for disabled communities.[220] Casey's initiative educates able-bodied individuals on disability so that they may make informed decisions about their structure and design. Educating individuals on best practice doesn't remove their power and control as high-level employees but it attempts to help make that control more responsible. Over time, actions like Casey's could result in an eventual reduction of the employer versus employee divide.

Discrimination tends to go unnoticed by those who do not experience it directly. In turn, inequalities continue to be ingrained in the design of technology and the cycle repeats indefinitely. Analyzing how disabled employees are being advocated for by organizations can simultaneously help us to understand how workplace platforms are producing accessibility issues consistently and what elements of the workspace are inaccessible. The emphasis on the importance of access represents the use of disability as a method. Arseli Dokumaci explores what this means in "Disability as Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism through Media-Creation". This method "takes disabled people's insights and creative workarounds as ways of tracing what otherwise disappears in everydayness".[221] An acknowledgment of this everydayness through a user-focus is the starting point for many of these organizations and the beginning of fleshing out answers to many of the questions that have been asked within this chapter.

A Sign of Things to Come

This chapter has tried to showcase how the platforms used for hybrid work only provide new grounds for the implementation of pre-existing discriminations. Eventually, rifts between in-person and remote workers even began to form. The gradual lifting of restrictions and move to

[220]Casey, Caroline. "Transformation Programme." *The Valuable 500*, https://www.thevaluable500.com/about/transformation-programme.
[221]Dokumaci, Arseli. "Disability as Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism through Media-Creation." p.1.

in-person work in 2021 increased the complexity of our new working environments. The ability to access space is already a prominent issue within disability scholarship. In a work-related context, these issues have not disappeared but have been extended to hybrid workspaces through methods such as virtual reality.

Many of these platforms base their developments on one ideal user who has a passive relationship to space and the ability to move freely and quickly between in-person and virtual work environments. However, the discourses analyzed above emphasize that many disabled employees do have a significant relationship to space, especially for work. The ability to continue to use the accommodation of remote work has limited the affective form of connection that is often experienced in a physical workplace. The complexity of connecting both virtual and physical employees within one shared space often leaves others behind. Similar issues have already been prominent in the traditional workspace before the pandemic forced a shift to telework.

The aspirations for the future of work are quite grand as *Meta* experiments with 3D immersive spaces. The possibilities of these advancements are noteworthy since they present many considerations for embodying a space. Someone who is a wheelchair user, for example, should theoretically be able to navigate immersive spaces like the metaverse without experiencing the accessibility issues of many physical environments. However, the technology that has been developed thus far has not created any semblance of actual access. If *Meta* is to use virtual reality they could pull inspiration from the gaming industry. *Sony's* Project Leonardo hopes to catch the attention of many in the disabled community as it introduces a "highly customisable kit of different buttons, triggers and sticks that lets players create a set-up that suits

[individual] needs".[222] Although *Microsoft* had also developed something similar, *Sony's* version is supposed to function as one cohesive piece without charging for each additional element.[223] Developments as such are a start, but I want to stress that real access changes need to begin at higher policy and structural levels.

[222]Gerken, Tom. "CES 2023: Sony unveils new controller for disabled gamers." *BBC,* 5 Jan. 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-64176441.
[223]Gerken, Tom. "CES 2023: Sony unveils new controller for disabled gamers."

Conclusion:
The Future of Work Post-Pandemic

In this project I aimed to discuss how platforms hold over older forms of workplace management as we shifted into remote and hybrid forms of work. We cannot disregard the fear that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic on a global scale and how the crisis may have caused a hurried series of decisions. It is hard to say conclusively whether this fear is what pushed many to overlook the consequences of these platforms or if that would have been the outcome regardless of the pandemic. I wanted to focus on how these platforms structure how we use our time and space at work differently.

When I began this project, I knew that I wanted to stray away from the often celebratory accounts of technological developments. I am not anti-technology, to clarify. I am constantly using platforms simultaneously to complete the writing of this thesis and perform my two other jobs. However, I am equally hesitant to celebrate all the good in technology while many individuals are written out of using them. I'd like to think that this is what my focus has enabled me to do differently. I was able to provide more of an academic perspective to these discussions that often take place in popular media. In addition, I wanted to make sure I could emphasize and expand on the discussions being held within disabled communities and the experience of limitations that often go unnoticed by others. This is why I chose a multidisciplinary approach to the scholarship included within this thesis. By combining media, industry, technology, and disability studies, I was able to glean a clearer picture of the normative perspective ingrained in most platforms and stress the undeniable fact that many structures are organized by others.

In my first chapter, I sought to explore how platforms' proliferation of workplace practices and culture alter our relationship to time and space at work. My goal was to try and pinpoint how exactly the pandemic altered how we value our time and space. As corporate

control began to encroach more on our private environments the more employees have attempted to reclaim their personal time.[224] The crisis of the pandemic drew us quickly into unfamiliar work environments and this is what allowed many virtual facets of control to feel compulsory and to go unnoticed. I chose *Zoom* and *monday* as case studies for chapter one as they evoke histories of simple communications that have continuously controlled our navigation of time and space. Working through the histories of telecommunication alongside disability studies demonstrated the issues that arise at the intersection of crisis and work. These issues only become problematic outside the framework of an ideal working body; neurotypical, able-bodied, and unwavering.

Chapter two picks up where the first chapter leaves off and demonstrates the consequences of control remote and hybrid workers must navigate daily. One of the largest issues is that the inherent design of the technologies ignores lived experience. This point is why I wanted to focus on how many disabled employees worked remotely prior to the onset of the pandemic. Their experiences could have helped to provide many pertinent insights for the development of new technologies amidst the pandemic. The oversight of these communities, although disappointing, was not surprising. To avoid the inevitable repetition of history I wanted to speculate a way to transform the limiting environment of workplace technologies. I chose *Meta* as a case study in this scenario as I felt that its up and coming nature meant more opportunities for discussion surrounding responsible innovation. In order to continue to emphasize lived experiences I chose to examine some collectives who are working toward a more inclusive future. These attempted solutions promote a positive direction for platforms, although not perfect in their form.

[224] Microsoft's Work Trend Index determined that 47% say they would put personal time over work than before the pandemic.

Determining the focus for my thesis was originally quite difficult. I knew that I wanted to assess how disabled individuals were impacted by the switch to remote work despite their experiences with telework prior to 2020. I found it interesting that a community with so much lived experience could be ignored even with the immense rapidity that surrounded the switch to remote work in the first place. The difficult part was pinpointing how exactly this linked to my simultaneous interest in media studies. I thought of digital platforms as I was in the midst of training myself on using several different management platforms for my own remote work positions. As I shuffled through all the various ways to track tasks, hold meetings, and collaborate with my teams, I couldn't help but notice a pattern. The speed at which these tools update and change is dizzying. The speed at which one must relearn navigating these platforms is even worse. Then I thought about how many elements of these platforms aim to track time. You can track the time it takes you to complete tasks with a running clock that you are required to start and stop, as with *monday.* The time of your meetings is displayed as a forty minute countdown if you do not pay for a license, as with *Zoom*. The persistent tracking of your time reminded me of a controlling manager looking over the walls of your cubicle.

This is just one of many angles that could have suited my project. For example, I chose to focus on white-collar divisions of labour and the corporate side of work. I felt this had the most predetermined structure and these workplace practices would be more obvious within the platforms I was analyzing. The gig economy could have also been a fascinating study and would have demonstrated how workplaces and personal spaces are merging more rapidly than ever. Many of the platforms that rose to fame within the gig economy, like *Uber*, have drawn attention for perpetrating discrimination similar to the platforms examined in this thesis.[225] Regardless of

[225] Rosenblat, Alex et al. "Discriminating Tastes: Uber's Customer Ratings as Vehicles for Workplace Discrimination." *Policy & Internet*, vol. 9, pp.256-279. Wiley Online Library, https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.153.

the path I chose or didn't, I still have some questions in mind. What regulations need to be developed to actually hold developers and corporations responsible rather than individuals? I have a sense this question is contingent on many complexities. It could be a useful start for a future project examining the process whereby responsibility transfers from corporations to individuals.

I hope to have provided an initial solid understanding of the expected norms of the media workforce today. Through the pages of this project I have examined how the introduction of platforms to increase productivity have actually been limiting many and how the move to remote work through these platforms has highlighted the extreme lack of access. Moving forward, it's imperative that we demand that user-focused research and design become mandatory in the production of digital platforms. To respond to this question would undoubtedly require much more research and community-based learning. One can only hope that the present-focused acknowledgment and questioning of our current situation can help to underscore dangerous repetitions and emphasize the need for more awareness about often overlooked aspects of the everyday.

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