"When [S]He is Working [S]He is Not at Home": Challenging Assumptions About Remote Work

Eric Lohman

The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor

Dr. Nick Dyer-Witheford

The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

© Eric Lohman 2015

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd

Part of the Other Film and Media Studies Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/3120

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca.
"WHEN [S]HE IS WORKING [S]HE IS NOT AT HOME": CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT REMOTE WORK

(Monograph Thesis)

by

Eric Lohman

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 United States License
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/us/
Abstract

In this monograph thesis, I explore how at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the prospects for telework, rather than following a straightforward and inexorably rising trajectory, became strangely complex and conflicted. This project explores the reasons for the apparently contradictory and certainly confusing state of telework. It is about these contradictions, and more specifically about who benefits from telework arrangements, and under what conditions these arrangements are deployed.

The study adopts a mixture of qualitative methodologies, including political economic analysis, reviews of popular press articles, and in-depth interviews. The political economic analysis explores the costs and benefits of remote work, specifically how workers and employers are affected financially. We may have to reconsider whether flexible work arrangements will be the norm in work environments of the future, because of capital’s inability to manage the work process effectively and its loss of the benefits of spontaneous interaction between co-workers.

In the chapter devoted to the popular press, I analyze news stories that discussed Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer’s 2013 decision to end telework. This is the first discourse analysis of telework coverage in the popular press. I argue that Mayer was subjected to unfair coverage in the press, which was largely based on her role as a woman and mother.

Finally, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with teleworkers, with unique arrangements and diverse professions. The insistence by tech company giants like Google that worker interaction is vital to creative labor is supported by my interviews with teleworkers, who contend that the biggest disadvantage to working from home is reduced social interaction with their coworkers.

The thread that ties all three of these methodological approaches together is the critique of the conventional assumption that telework is an unqualifiedly positive arrangement for workers, and an inevitable staple of future work environments. My research exposes the problems with this assumption. Overlooking the disadvantages that telework actually presents for workers, and also the very different disadvantages it can pose for capital, has also caused an overstatement of the importance of telework in Post-Fordist labour environments.

Keywords
Marissa Mayer, Telework, Remote Work, Telecommuting, Labor, Political Economy, Feminism, Autonomist Marxism
Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank Nick Dyer-Witheford for his expertise, insight, patience, and his willingness to look at unpolished drafts. I have benefitted tremendously from his guidance and friendship. Thank you to Pam McKenzie and Carole Farber for their help along the way, especially with methodology issues. I would like to thank Marnie Harrington, who like every good librarian, has been trusted counsel on all issues brought before her. From the day I landed in Canada, till the final throes of this project, Marnie has offered indispensable assistance, for which I am so grateful. I would like to thank Jonathan Burston for his mentorship, specifically around my teaching. I was fortunate to study with a brilliant group of scholars and collaborators in the Media Studies doctoral program; those who deserve the most thanks are Gemma Richardson and Estee Fresco, whose bright minds and warm friendship made this arduous endeavor seem less daunting. I have learned a tremendous amount from Austin Walker, Kate Hoad-Reddick, Indranil Chakraborty, Atle Kjosen, Jeff Thomas, Lillian Dang, Elise Thorburn, Warren Steele, Andrea Benoit, and Nichole Winger. This is not an expansive list by any means.

My time in London, Ontario was made all the richer by having a group of friends to commiserate with. Many of these people I met through my time serving in student organizations and or conducting union work. Amanda Vyce has become a surrogate aunt to my children, a lunch buddy, and dear friend. Desiree, Mike, and Remi Lameroux have become a family away from home, and will be truly missed. Finally, Josh and Marylynn Steckly deserve credit for being available for coffee and impromptu babysitting whenever I needed it, which was very often. I hope all of them know how much their friendship has meant to my family and me over the last five years.

All of the work I have done is truly for the benefit of my children, Deven and Delilah Velez, and Silas and Rosalie Lohman. I know it has been a sacrifice for you, but I trust that over time you will all come to understand this foolish enterprise. If nothing else, I hope that you find some inspiration in my desire to forgo money in the pursuit of intellectual stimulation, and do the same. After all this writing, I lack the words to effectively convey how grateful I am for Stephani Lohman. I will not lie and say that she was always patient, or that her tone was always helpful, but without her knowledge, wits, editing abilities, budgeting, humor, and encouragement, this project could simply have never been completed.
There is much, much more that she has done to help me, but I’m so tired of writing that you will have to take my word for it.
# Table of Contents

**ABSTRACT**  
III

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**  
IV

**LIST OF TABLES**  
IX

**LIST OF APPENDICES**  
X

**INTERROGATING TELEWORK: CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE AND BENEFITS OF WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY**  
1

**METHODOLOGY**  
5

**POLITICAL ECONOMIC ANALYSIS**  
6

**CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**  
8

**IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS**  
9

**CHAPTER OUTLINE**  
10

**A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON TELEWORK**  
13

**DEFINITION, MEASUREMENT, AND SCOPE OF TELEWORK**  
16

**MANAGEMENT OF TELEWORKERS**  
20

**TRAVEL RELATED IMPACTS OF TELEWORK**  
23

**ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND ISOLATION**  
25

**BOUNDARIES BETWEEN HOME AND WORK**  
28

**IMPACT OF TELEWORK ON THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE FAMILY**  
31

**GAPS IN THE RESEARCH AND AVENUES TO EXPLORE**  
34

**HARDLY THE PANACEA: UNPACKING THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF TELEWORK**  
38

**SAVINGS FOR COMPANIES**  
41

**COSTS TO WORKERS**  
47

**COSTS TO COMPANIES**  
55

**ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION**  
61

**THE MOTHER OF ALL HYPOCRITES: MARISSA MAYER AND THE YAHOO! TELEWORK BAN IN THE POPULAR PRESS**  
68
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter/Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>METHODOLOGY</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHY BAN TELEWORK?: “THE LATEST INNOVATION FOR CREATING INNOVATION.”</strong></td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TELEWORK: EMPLOYEE PERK OR A WORKER’S RIGHT?</strong></td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DEFENDING MAYER’S BAN</strong></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CRITICISMS OF MAYER AND THE BAN</strong></td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“PAINFUL IRONY:” CRITICISM OF MARISSA MAYER</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“THAT NURSERY!” MARISSA MAYER AS A HYPOCRITE</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I REALLY THOUGHT WORKPLACES WERE MOVING TOWARD MORE FLEXIBILITY.”</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DISCUSSION</strong></td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THE FLIPSIDE OF FLEXIBILITY: TELEWORK AND THE MYTH OF WORK/LIFE BALANCE</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LITERATURE REVIEW</strong></td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>METHODOLOGY</strong></td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’M IN THE ZONE”: THE ADVANTAGES OF TELEWORKING</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THE DREADED COMMUTE</strong></td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I CAN THROW IN A LOAD OF LAUNDRY:” WEAVING IN PERSONAL PRODUCTIVITY</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THE PROFESSIONAL, SOCIAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DOWNSIDE TO TELEWORK</strong></td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OUT OF THE FLOW: LATENCY IN OPERATIONS AND COMPLICATING SIMPLE WORK TASKS</strong></td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROFESSIONAL REPERCUSSIONS OF TELEWORKING</strong></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TELEWORKING AND OVERWORKING</strong></td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I GET TO HAVE MY CHRISTMAS PARTY IN MY KITCHEN!”: TELEWORK AND ISOLATION</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONCLUSIONS: “IT’S LIKE HAVING SHACKLES ON YOU ALL THE TIME.”</strong></td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER REFLECTIONS</strong></td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THE STRUGGLE OVER MOMENTS: COMMON THREADS BETWEEN THE CHAPTERS</strong></td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MARXIST FEMINISMS AND TELEWORK</strong></td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH</strong></td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BIBLIOGRAPHY</strong></td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDICES</strong></td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RECRUITMENT ADVERTISEMENT</strong></td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western’s Research Ethics Board Approval</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter of Information and Consent Form</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Vitae</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Demographics -------------------------------------------------- page 105
List of Appendices

- Recruitment Advertisement
- Western's Research Ethics Board Approval
- Letter of Information and Informed Consent Form
- List of Interview Questions
"He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home."

Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*
Interrogating Telework: Challenging Assumptions About the Future and Benefits of Workplace Flexibility

Since it was first conceptualized in the 1970s, telework— the use of digital technology to bring work to employees, rather than employees to work— has enjoyed varying levels of interest, but seems to have attained peak attention from businesses and governments alike after the turn of the 21st century. The Telework Research Network, a consulting and research organization that “specializes in making the business case for workplace flexibility,” published a report in 2011 that found telework had risen in the United States by 73% between 2005 and 2011, and was likely to increase another 69% by 2016 (Lister and Harnish, 2011). Fortune Magazine reported in February of that same year that 82% of the companies that made its annual “100 Best Companies to Work For” list allow employees to telecommute or work at home at least 20% of the time. In 2010 the United States government passed the Telework Enhancement Act, designed “to require the head of each executive agency to establish and implement a policy under which employees shall be authorized to telework” (United States Congress, 2010).

A 2012 press release from Cisco Systems, a leading technology firm that also promotes telework, reported that the one-quarter of federal employees in the US had adopted telework since the Telework Enhancement Act came into effect (Best, 2012). In 1997, executives at American retail giant Best Buy instituted their own brand of telework at the corporate offices in Minnesota called ROWE, or Results-Only Work Environments, in which employees were not required to attend any meetings or show up to work at all, so long as their designated tasks were completed correctly and efficiently.
The ROWE pilot program at Best Buy was so successful that the two human resource specialists who designed it became independent consultants with their own company, CultureRX, which specialized in converting traditional offices to ROWE.

Yet at the very moment telework seemed triumphant, contrary tendencies appeared. To the surprise of many, Best Buy terminated its famously flexible telework policy in late 2012, citing a need to have employees connecting face-to-face in order to identify ways to strengthen the bottom line. Best Buy’s spokesperson said, “when possible, all employees should be in the office so they can collaborate on making the company even better” (Ojeda-Zapata, 2013). Even more dramatically, the multinational Internet corporation Yahoo ended its telework policy in early 2013, much to the chagrin of commentators on workplace flexibility. Marissa Mayer, Yahoo’s CEO cited the exact same reason as Best Buy for ending the program. In a Fortune article from April 2013, Mayer said "People are more productive when they're alone, but they're more collaborative and innovative when they're together. Some of the best ideas come from pulling two different ideas together" (Tcaczyk, 2013). Mayer claimed that bringing people together to work alongside one another was the first step in producing the type of social interaction that she believed was necessary for innovative work (Ojeda-Zapata, 2013).

Indeed, some of the most successful technology companies of the information economy have prioritized located working over telework, citing collaboration and social interaction as the primary factor in making that decision. Google, Facebook, and Apple discourage telework, instead choosing to entice employees with free meals and pool tables to keep them in the office, working and talking with one another (San Jose
Mercury News Editorial Board, 2013). Google specifically has created a veritable playground at its Mountain View, California campus in order to keep employees comfortable and stimulated while working from the offices. Telework is kept to a minimum at Google, as it is at Facebook and Apple, reserved only for afterhours work (Amerland, 2013).

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the prospects for telework, rather than following a straightforward and inexorably rising trajectory, suddenly seemed strangely complex and conflicted. This project explores the reasons for the apparently contradictory and certainly confusing state of telework. It is about these contradictions, and more specifically about who benefits from telework arrangements, and under what conditions these arrangements are deployed.

Using a mixed methodological process encompassing multiple qualitative approaches, including reviews of popular discussions of telework in the press, political economic analysis of telework, and a series of guided interviews with laborers in telework environments, I discovered that some of the premises underpinning predictions about the future growth of telework are flawed. Certainly telework has benefits for both workers and employers, but ultimately capital’s interests determine how work is arranged, and those interests shift in unpredictable ways. The fact that the giants of the digital economy such as Google, Yahoo, Facebook, and Apple do not allow full-time telework, but do allow workers to connect from home after hours suggests that these companies are not completely against employees’ teleworking, they merely oppose it as a permanent, full-time arrangement. Moreover, the belief that workplace flexibility is an
unqualified benefit for working families must also be challenged. As I will demonstrate, the downside to telework is far more disturbing than has been previously considered.

In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx said of the worker: "He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home" (Marx, 1988). This quote perfectly captures the fact that a healthy, clear boundary between work and home is paramount to the worker’s ability to enjoy leisure time. In fact, according to Marx, home is defined as not being work, and vice versa. In this passage, Marx was writing philosophically, identifying the alienation or estrangement imposed by exploitative labour, rather than literally referring to the worker’s location. He was very well aware that in early capitalism workers were in fact sometimes forced to work at home, in what could be seen as a forerunner to telework—the domestic labour practiced in craft industries such as weaving—which he identified as amongst some of the most pitilessly arduous and poorly paid of its era. In *Capital*, Marx details the horrors of working in these cottage or home industries. Children as young as four or five were forced to work as much as 12 hours a day at a cottage, and then were sent home late in the evening with piles of lace to work on overnight (Marx, 1977, p. 596-7). In Marx's judgment, the feelings of alienation or estrangement wrought by capitalism were the feelings of not being "at home," which was unrelated to where one actually worked. However, in a contemporary context his words pointedly raise the question of how workers given the supposedly liberating option of working from home may find this actually destroys their one refuge from the discipline of labour.

The prevailing mythology is that telework is a win-win for workers and capital; that everyone benefits from increased flexibility between the home and workplace. The
reality of the situation is that capital is the primary beneficiary of telework arrangements, which are used strategically as a means of intensifying the exploitation of workers, who are made ever more precarious, and who are overworked routinely, when working by remote. Whether or not telework is increasing or decreasing, or whether a company allows telework, overlooks telework's main function, which is to allow capitalism to extract surplus value from workers all the time, from anywhere. Telework converts the proverbial home into a perpetual workplace; the teleworker then is never at home, but always at work.

Methodology

This research project sought to understand what is gained and lost in the North American telework environment of the early 21st century, from the perspective of both employers and workers by examining telework functions from a number of different perspectives. It uses a mixed methods approach combining political economic analysis, guided interviews, and critical discourse analysis. The unique combination of approaches allowed me to explore the economic, cultural, and subjective dynamics of telework in order to reach the core of my research question, which asks if we may be mistaken in our belief in the inevitability of remote work, and if so, what that means for the future of telework. A multi-directional method is an effective way to arrive at reliable conclusion about the evolving state of telework. This project is a response, in part, to the apparent reconsideration of corporate enthusiasm for telework that is signaled by Marissa Mayer’s telework ban. Though, as mentioned before, there are other companies that banned telework at the same time, or had prohibitions on telework in place, before Mayer took
over at Yahoo. Nonetheless, this project comes at a timely moment when a corporate shift away from telework appears to be materializing.

The political economic analysis includes studies from trade journal publications, industry research, and scholarly investigations, with the goal of understanding the financial incentives that exist for companies that adopt telework arrangements, and compare that to the employee savings, where they exist, in order to paint a complete picture of the costs and benefits of telework. The critical discourse analysis focused on news media stories surrounding Marissa Mayer’s decision to rescind telework privileges at Yahoo. A flurry of stories appeared in the popular press that discussed the impact of Mayer’s decision, including lengthy features in news magazines such as the *Atlantic*, *Forbes*, and *Slate*, and *US News and World Report*. Mayer’s decision served as the catalyst that generated novel discussions on telework and work/life balance in the evolving technical and knowledge work environment. Likewise, using stories about Mayer, who is a woman and a mother, helped me uncover the gender specific concerns present in popular discourses on telework. Finally, I conducted guided interviews with teleworkers from a variety of industries, which provided me with fresh data on how teleworkers see their labor under both telework and traditional arrangements, how they collaborate, and under which arrangement they felt they were best compensated. A more detailed synopsis of the methodology for each chapter follows.

**Political Economic Analysis**

Political economic analysis posits that in order to understand a given phenomenon, one must first consider “the formulas and conventions of production” (Kellner, 2003, p. 12). For my analysis of telework, I drew upon a number of data
sources, including scholarly journal pieces, governmental and Census data, popular press articles that specifically discuss the economics of telework, and industry sponsored research, to identify and unpack the “formulas and conventions of production” that are making telework widely used, and also explore why it may cost more than it is worth. One particularly important scholarly journal is *Gender, Work, and Organization*, which has devoted considerable attention to the effects of telework on family arrangements. Likewise, journals that focus on human resources, such as *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, or information management journals like the *European Journal of Information Systems*, have occasionally published articles that discuss the impact of teleworking on families.

Other scholars, many of which write for business and trade publications report on the cost savings to employees and employers under telework scenarios. These reports, while unapologetically favorable to telework, provided some very useful data and analyses. The Telework Research Network, the Conference Board of Canada, Jala International, and Cisco Systems are very prolific in publishing research that seeks to convince governments and employers to adopt telework arrangements. These organizations often make use of Census data, or make available poll data, which contains trends and shifts in telework that will be helpful in understanding how telework is being implemented, and how affects families. The final source of material is popular press articles about telework. These range from traditional mainstream news sources to the many blogs and Internet sources that discuss telework regularly. For example, Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson of Culture RX, the developers of the Results-Only Work Environment, comment extensively on developments in telework on their webpage. They
have also published two books: one on the reasons why they believe telework is better than traditional work arrangements, and one on how to manage teleworking employees. The business press, such as *Fortune, Forbes, The Economist,* and the *Wall Street Journal* also carried stories and opinion pieces that discussed labor and economic trends.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

To generate a sample of articles to study, I conducted a Lexis Nexus Academic search of all news articles containing the words “Marissa Mayer,” that appeared between January 1 and March 31 of 2013: the month of the telework ban, as well as the month preceding and following it. I narrowed the sample down further by filtering the articles to just those that were placed in the “Flexible Work Arrangements” content category. This yielded 148 unique news stories in the US and international press. Stories either appeared in news sections of the paper, and were assumed to provide a balanced approach, or appeared in a commentary or editorial section, and were assumed to be more opinionated and one-sided. Of the 148 total articles, seventy-six appeared in hard news sections of the paper, and seventy-two appeared in commentary sections, such as op-ed or employment columns. In a few cases, there were articles that were overtly supportive or critical of Mayer’s ban, but they appeared in the objective, hard news sections nonetheless, and so they are counted amongst the opinion pieces. These anomalies appeared mostly in highly opinionated, soft news publications such as the *New York Daily News* or *USA Today.*

The methodology I employed to examine the news articles is a critical discourse analysis, using an inductive data investigation method described by David Thomas (2006). The outcome of such an analysis, according to Thomas, is the “development of categories into a model or framework that summarizes the raw data and conveys key
themes and processes” (Thomas, 2006, p. 240). To build this framework, the researcher begins with a close reading of the data until a familiarity with the content is established, allowing the investigator to identify themes or categories in the raw data. Once these broad categories are identified, the data is continuously reread and refined to ensure that the themes are accurate and inclusive, and once no new categories emerge, then it is assumed that all the major themes have been identified. (Thomas, 2006, p. 241-2; Marshall, 1999, p. 419). Some of the features of established categories are thematic titles that identify their significance, descriptions of the categories, text from the raw data that is exemplary of the themes, links that are drawn between the categories and others in the study, and finally a framework or model in which the categories are situated, which explains the data as a whole (Thomas, 2006, p. 240).

**In-depth Interviews**

There is a lot to be learned from in-depth interviews with workers who have experienced both telework and office work arrangements. In-depth interviews provided insight into the effects telework had on their work/life balance, how their work was managed and evaluated, whether they experienced isolation, and what they enjoyed about teleworking. According to Roger D. Wimmer and Joseph R. Dominick, intensive interviewing is best for gathering data that is rich in detail. The interviewee is given the opportunity to produce long, well thought responses, and in turn the interviewer is free to engage in follow-up questions that may arise from verbal and non-verbal responses (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011, p. 139). There are some drawbacks to this methodological approach, namely the inability to easily generalize the data and the potential for researcher bias to be introduced into the interview process. In spite of this, I
believe that it still presents a fascinating opportunity to explore the advantages and disadvantages for workers in telework operations.

In order to attract potential teleworkers to be interviewed, an ad was placed on various social media sites such as Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter, asking for volunteers (See Recruitment Advertisement). Fourteen people responded in total, all of whom were interviewed. The interview questions encompassed four broad categories, each of which corresponded generally to one of the four chapters of the dissertation project. The first category was comprised of general questions, which were designed to establish their knowledge of telework, how they came to be employed in their arrangement, and how they structured their days. The second category was comprised of family related questions, which focused on how telework influenced their interaction with their families. For example, if they have children, how do the children feel about the work arrangement? The third category was comprised of financial questions. These sought clarification on how much money they may have saved in travel costs, or how much money they may have lost in personal costs (extra food, utilities, leisure, etc..) and if economic or ecological concerns influenced their decision to telework. The final category was technology questions, which attempted to better understand the ways in which employers use software to monitor teleworkers, or expect employees to be ‘available’ twenty-four hours a day via smartphones (See Interview Questions).

Chapter Outline

The chapter that follows is an extensive review of the literature on telework. There has been no shortage of scholarly interest in telework since its origins in the 1970s, and so any researcher of telework has to find an effective way to account for the vast
body of work. The method I employ is a conceptual review, using six categories defined by Nicole B. Ellison: definition and scope of telework, management of teleworkers, travel related impacts, organizational culture and teleworker isolation, boundaries between work and home, and impact of telework on the worker and the family (Ellison, 1999, p. 339). Using these categories, I am then able to identify the gaps and unanswered questions in the literature within which to situate my project.

The third chapter is a political economic analysis of telework, broken down into three interrelated subsections. First, I explored the ways in which telework has the potential to save a company money; second, I examined the costs and benefits to employees in a telework arrangement; a third sections details the costs for a company that offers teleworking. A number of private organizations, such as the Telework Research Network, have a financial interest in spreading the popularity of telework. Many private corporations and various governments were influenced by their research, which likely played a role in their adoption of telework. This chapter unpacks the economic and political advantages telework has for employers that use it, while also exploring the political economic advantages and disadvantages it may have for the employees themselves. This chapter also serves as an extended review of the literature on telework.

The fourth chapter is an analysis of popular press discourses surrounding Marissa Mayer’s decision to end telework at Yahoo. Mayer faced both criticism and praise for this decision, and the analysis of those discussions demonstrates how work/life balance is evolving in the knowledge economy. Telework is a popular topic of discussion in the news as of late, given that we are witnessing the convergence of a number of persistent problems that appear to have a common solution in telework (global economic instability,
work/life balance, global warming), but this analysis reveals that telework has the potential to reproduce, or at least protect, existing power dynamics under capitalism.

The fourth chapter analyzes guided interviews that I conducted with current and former teleworkers. I identify how workers feel about teleworking, how their lives have changed through the arrangement, how they spend their work and leisure time, and whether or not they feel it is an improvement over traditional work. Although research has been conducted before (Huws, Korte, and Robinson, 1990; Huws, 1999; Sullivan and Lewis 2001), I believe there are a number of reasons why this project is different. At the present moment, telework is being implemented on a scale far larger than ever before; more employees in an array of different sectors of work are now able to adopt telework, however some of the largest companies of the new economy are openly unreceptive to the idea of telework, and this chapter will seek to find out why this is the case. At this historical moment, telework is being renegotiated and resisted in some sectors, which means that there is an important opportunity to examine the struggle over remote work as it is happening.

The final chapter is a conclusion chapter, in which I pull together the main points of the three research chapters so that I can explain how they relate to one another, and to the questions that guided this project. I also provide some final thoughts on how this project makes contributions to important theoretical fields such as Autonomist Marxism and domestic labor. Beyond that, I discuss the limitations of my research, as well as avenues for future scholars of telework.
A Review of the Literature on Telework

Telework was originally borne out of the ecological and economic crises of the 1970s, as the environmental implications of industrial capitalism had become increasingly disturbing in that decade. The oil spill in Santa Barbara, California in 1969, as well as the burning of the Cuyahoga River in Ohio as a result of pollution in the same year, are both considered watershed moments in the birth of the environmental movement that put ecological concerns forever on the minds of American citizens, and forced industry, as well as local and national governments, to take steps to moderate pollution. The US Congress passed the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972, largely as a result of these environmental catastrophes (Adler 2002, p. 91). Telework was one of the methods floated at the time as a possible step to reducing US dependence on foreign oil, for eliminating traffic congestion in large cities, and as means by which air pollutions could be reduced over major metropolitan areas (Pyöriä, 2011, p. 388).

Ecological disasters were not the only contributors to a change in public consciousness about commuting. Some scholars claim that the OPEC oil crisis of 1973 brought complacent Westerners out of their postwar stupor, forcing them to face the fact that oil, and the lifestyle it facilitated, could not continue unabated. In an article published shortly after the crisis, Charles Issawi argued that prior to the oil embargo, heavy petroleum consuming countries had failed to explore other sources of energy because they held the “belief that cheap oil was available, because of legitimate environmental considerations, and because the Western world- and the United States, in particular-were behaving like spoilt children in thinking that they could have unlimited amounts of energy at no cost” (Issawi 1978, p. 11). In a nation dependent upon cars, the Fordist
assembly line, and cheap oil, the sudden realization that energy could become very expensive, or dry up completely, posed a serious threat to the social conditions that made postwar American capitalism possible. From a broader perspective, David Harvey points to the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, and the middle-east oil embargo that resulted, as a pinnacle moment in the shift from the rigid Fordist-Keynesian economy of the postwar years, to the flexible economy of the neoliberal post-Fordist era. Specifically, the oil crisis “pushed all segments of the economy to seek out ways to economize on energy use through technological and organizational change” (Harvey 1990, 145). What resulted, he said, was the formation of a new labor regime characterized by flexibility in processes, in markets, in products, and patterns of consumption. This new regime sought to diminish the number of “core workers,” those working full time at permanent jobs with benefits, in order to replace them with temporary or contract workers, those with limited skills, who could be hired or fired depending on the labor needs at the moment (Harvey 1990).

In 1973, a physicist named Jack Nilles coined the terms “telework,” and “telecommuting” while studying remote work at the University of Southern California’s Center for Futures Research (Mears, 2007). He proposed that workers could travel to and from their jobs by networked computers rather than in person, in order to save fuel during the oil embargo. This had the added benefit of reducing pollution and curbing public infrastructure costs for transportation. Nilles wrote several books and articles devoted to increasing awareness of the practice, as well as providing strategies for managing workers in remote labor environments (Nilles, 1998; Nilles, 1997; Nilles, 1994). He discussed how telecommuting could reduce traffic congestion, and mitigates urban sprawl (Nilles, 1988; Nilles, 1991). He distinguished telework from telecommuting.
Telework he says, is “ANY form of substitution of information technologies (such as telecommunications and computers) for work-related travel; moving the work to the workers instead of moving the workers to work.” Telecommuting is “periodic work out of the principal office, one or more days per week either at home, a client’s site, or in a telework center” (Nilles 1998, p. 1). The latter appears as an intermediate step where full-time telework might not yet be plausible or desirable. Throughout this project, however, I use the terms telework and telecommute interchangeably because for my purposes, Nilles’ distinction is unimportant. Whether one works out of an office principally, or only periodically, makes little difference in the overall arguments I offer. It is merely worth noting what the creator of the terms had in mind when developing them.

Telecommuting still protects the centrality of a principal workspace while allowing employers and employees to enjoy some of the benefits associated with remote work. Nilles argues that since the industrial revolution, capital was required to centralize its production operations near natural resources, workers, power, and supplies. But in the post-Fordist era, this need not be the case due to the increase in jobs that require the manipulation of information rather than objects. Decentralization of labor is possible, and, he suggests, beneficial, because “information technology has developed to the point where the necessary information can get to us no matter where or when we are” (Nilles 1998, p. 9-10). Nilles is largely responsible for creating the terminology by which remote work is described, and his consulting company Jala International has allowed him to remain one of telework’s most vocal advocates since the early 1970s.

By the 1980s, interest in and around telework had intensified, and futurologists began making sweeping, grandiose predictions about the emancipatory potential of
remote work. Alvin Toffler’s *Third Wave* was perhaps the most famous, which contained lofty prognostications about a future teeming with ‘electronic cottages,’ where every worker was wired to their job and to each other in their combination home/workplace (Toffler, 1980). Norman Macrae argued that telecommuting would bring about the end of the giant corporations, as nimble, dispersed workers created products using their home computers—although the dirty labor of production would still exist, only in China and India (Macrae, 1989). Although far ahead of his time, and not usually speaking specifically about labor, Marshal McLuhan made similar predictions about the ability of future technologies to extend our capacities for global interaction through decentralization (McLuhan, 1962; McLuhan, 1964). Despite projections from Nilles and these so-called futurologists about the inevitable growth of telework, or the prevalence of the “global village,” by the 1980s mass conversion to remote work had still not materialized (Felstead, 2012).

**Definition, Measurement, and Scope of Telework**

The literature on telework is quite extensive, covering a variety of topics, but a number of questions remain. Nicole B. Ellison completed a detailed review of the scholarly telework literature, organizing it into six groups: scope and measurement of telework, management of teleworkers, travel related impacts of telework, organizational culture and employee isolation, boundaries between home and work, and impact of telework on the individual and the family (Ellison, 1999, p. 339). Ellison’s work is incredibly helpful for categorizing the literature as a whole, as it provides a clean conceptual framework into which scholarly discourses on telework can be situated. Therefore, I will use the six subcategories of her model to explore the literature on
telework, taking time at the end to explain the gaps that exist, and where my project seeks to make a contribution within these categories. Before that, I present a brief history of how the concept of telework was first developed.

Ellison observes that research on telework and telecommuting is fragmented, “hindered primarily by the fact that practitioners, consultants, and scholars all subscribe to different definitions of telework, telecommuting, mobile work, and so on” (Ellison, 2004, p. 17). Although some people have attempted to develop schematics that would categorize different types of teleworkers, in the hopes of making scholarly and industry studies of them easier, disagreements still persist (Friz, Higa, Narasimhan, 1995). These disagreements are not simply a matter of semantics. The inability to agree on what constitutes a teleworker, or how much remote work is enough to be considered a teleworker, or if there is a noteworthy difference between a teleworker and a telecommuter, makes it very nearly impossible for researchers to even determine how many teleworkers there are due to the ambiguities these definitions introduce.

As technology evolves, office work and home work will continue to weave together, further muddying one’s ability to distinguish between the two (Wilkes and Billsberry, 2007) Ultimately, these authors argue that teleworkers cannot be considered a homogenous group, and that studies ought to focus on those teleworkers who are primarily working from home, what they call “home-anchored workers” (Wilkes and Billsberry, 2007, p. 178). Having an accurate count of teleworkers would be convenient, but the indistinct nature of the role of teleworker is what makes them such a compelling research object. If we cannot expect to reasonably estimate how many teleworkers there are, then we need to move beyond the flawed calculations and try to discover new ways
to understand the impact telework may have on a business, and what influence teleworking has on the worker.

Given the difficulties in accurately estimating the number of teleworkers at any time, it is no surprise that scholars found that not only were predictions about telework’s growth wildly overstated, but that the rhetoric about women using telework to combine child care and paid employment was short-sighted (Brockelhurst, 1989; Christensen, 1987). As Huws points out, these forecasts about telework were unfounded, as telework was mostly used by employers to create a flexible workforce of precarious, frequently female laborers who could be hired and fired based on fluctuating production needs (Huws, 2003, p. 97). As David Harvey argues, female workers were heavily exploited in this transition to more flexible workforces. Harvey claims that the new labor market structures make it “much easier to exploit the labor power of women on a part-time basis,” because they can now be more easily substituted for highly paid and “less easily laid-off core male workers” (Harvey 1990, p. 147-52). This is supported by an interesting project that found that when a person with little autonomy in their job, for example clerical or data entry work, began teleworking, they experienced a higher level of supervision and less autonomy than before.

The opposite was also true, in that a person with a high level of workplace autonomy could expect even more freedom if they began teleworking (Olson and Primps, 1984). Female teleworkers were increasingly casualized, as they became the staple members of peripheral labor (Holti and Stern, 1986). This has obvious gendered implications since women were mostly doing clerical work in the 1980s, and men were more often professionals. As Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay points out, female teleworkers in
this period were heavily concentrated in fields like “accounting, translation, word processing, and secretarial work” (Tremblay, 2002, p. 165).

An extensive study by Shoshana Zuboff supports a number of these claims. In her exploration of technology and office work, Zuboff found that many clerical positions were becoming more and more automated, leaving the exclusively female work force she studied feeling alienated, useless, and robotic (Zuboff, 1988). A great number of these employees expressed feeling as though the knowledge of the job used to give it meaning, and purpose, but changes in their work technology alienated them as emphasis was transferred to speed, stamina, and rote memorization. As one employee explained, the presence of her body was all that mattered now. More than one employee compared the new job to that of a monkey hitting buttons (Zuboff, 1988, p. 135-6). Zuboff’s study supports the notion that it is mostly women’s paid work that is likely to be displaced by advances in technology. Women have a complex relationship to technology when working for wages. Jobs in which women have been heavily concentrated, at least in the past, or in which they were only recently allowed to enter, are the positions most likely to be eliminated by changes in technology (Feldberg and Glen, 1983, p. 67). Feldberg and Glenn wonder whether it is possible that women are, or have been in the past, used as a “transitional labor force,” whereby women absorb the jobs once held by men, as advances in technology transform those positions into low skill, repetitive, highly rationalized jobs. This is a compelling suggestion, and one that is relevant to a study of telework, for at the end of this transition period, those positions are eventually eliminated, only after technology is able to maximize the reduction in labor power needed to complete these tasks (Feldberg and Glenn, 1983, p. 70).
Two problematic issues arise in this section of the literature. On the one hand, there are ambiguities in defining what constitutes a teleworker. As such, understanding the popularity, scope, and future of telework has been a guessing game fraught with disagreements. Second, scholars have focused considerable attention on how telework might help women experience more harmony between domestic and paid labor, but here too, scholars disagree on the overall impact. Defining the scope and impact of telework requires more than an accounting of how many people are teleworking, or how many can be expected to telework in the future: more qualitative methods must be used to try to predict what the future of remote work might look like.

Management of Teleworkers

Proponents of telework have written prolifically about how to effectively overcome the problems inherent to remote worker management. Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson, the developers of the Results-Only Work Environment at Best Buy, wrote two books on the subject: one describing the reasons why companies should adopt telework programs (2010), and a second book devoted to managing remote workplaces (2013). It has been argued that the benefits of telework, such as increases to productivity and reduced worker stress, are dependent upon a management apparatus that understands the unique needs of remote work forces (Nilles, 1998; Cascio, 2000). Scholars publishing in management or workplace organizational fields have made similar arguments, contending that telework is most successful when management creates the right environment (Vega, 2000).

Management and oversight of teleworkers remains a controversial topic partially because supervising teleworkers means finding new ways to measure their output. Some
managers are uncomfortable with their inability to oversee and manage workers using the traditional indices such as if they are on-time, dressed properly, and focused during work time (Kawakami, 1983, p. 76). Managers and executives are fearful that they would completely lose their ability to oversee the workflow process if too many employees are teleworking (Duxbury, Higgins, and Irving, 1987, p. 278). Measuring output and results over attendance, is much more time consuming and stressful for managers (Kinsmen, 1987; Huws, 1984). Baruch and Smith tackle the changing legal relationship for large-scale telework operations, arguing that many homeworkers now face new challenges unforeseen by managers and employers of the past. For example, telework reduces the power of workers to organize unions, and limits the ability for governmental regulatory agencies to monitor workplace health and safety standards (Baruch and Smith 2002, p. 63). These authors make it clear that telework presents a number of sites of potential exploitation.

A persistent managerial anxiety is the belief that teleworkers are not actually working as hard as they should be. A now infamous story from 2013 illustrates why it is not an altogether paranoid position for managers to take. A software developer from the United States was caught outsourcing his own job to a company in China, paying them approximately one-fifth of his annual six-figure salary to do the work he was paid for. He reportedly spent his workdays “surfing the web, watching cat videos on YouTube and browsing Reddit and eBay” (BBC News, 2013). While anecdotal, it showed that without direct supervision, a tech-savvy employee working from home could figure out clever new ways to shirk responsibilities. This employee is probably more sophisticated than most, but the prospect of “sunlighting” is a definite worry for many managers of
teleworkers. Sunlighting is a term for someone who is found “holding two telecommuting jobs simultaneously or telecommuting along with doing other work, such as telephone answering or providing child day care” (Cross and Raizman, 1986, p. 84-5). The fear that without visible supervision, employees will devise a plethora of new ways to avoid work has been a major factor in the limited popularity of telework.

Measuring and managing teleworkers is a complicated problem for employers, as the benefits of remote work arrangements depend on accurately calculating how productive teleworkers can be. A claim that is often made by telework advocates, and is supported by some scholarly research, is that telework increases the productivity of workers (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998; Gemignani, 2000; Reese, 2000). But some have argued that since these studies are based on surveys and self-identification methods, the data is flawed (Bailey and Kurland, 2002, p. 389). Measuring productivity can come down to whether a worker feels as though they are more or less productive, or claims to be more productive while teleworking. In Huws’ surveys, teleworkers reported that greater autonomy in how they structure their work was a main factor in why they choose telework, even though this sometimes causes more difficulties for managers (Huws, 1984, p. 57). A telling sign is that telework has grown at a slower rate than predicted by early advocates, part of the reason being that managers are resistant to the arrangement because they are unable to measure and manage their workforce as effectively as they could if they were located onsite (Gordon and Kelly, 1986).

Teleworking may play a role in whether or not an employee receives an opportunity for advancement. According to Viviane Illegems and Alain Verbeke, “the adoption of telework may negatively affect promotion possibilities, especially if the
practice is perceived as creating a ‘new class’ of workers, ‘out of sight, and therefore out of mind’” (Illegems and Verbeke, 2004). Professional experts have recommended that workers limit their teleworking so as not to jeopardize their potential for workplace growth (Ritterhaus, 1994; Wright, 1993).

One study proposed that in spite of concerns about reduced opportunity for advancement while teleworking, professional stagnation is not a genuine concern (McClosky and Igbaria, 2003, p. 31). The authors argued that because their sample focused on professionals only, and did not homogenize diverse groups of teleworkers and homeworkers, their conclusion was more reliable than those that found professional immobility in telework environments. However, the failure to include non-professionals risks glossing over the fact that they may be at a larger risk of limiting their advancement opportunities by teleworking, while perhaps the risk is low or nonexistent for professionals. This issue needs to be explored further because not only is it unclear whether telework hinders opportunities for advancement, but if it does, it may also be possible that workers who were already precariously employed unfairly experience reduced opportunities for professional development as a result of their decision to telework. Therefore, in my interviews with teleworkers, I include both professional and non-professional workers in order to better capture the variety of telework experiences.

**Travel Related Impacts of Telework**

Telework has been discussed in terms of its impact on the environment, most of which deals with travel, or general energy use. The repercussions of telework on the environment at large are a direct result of workers no longer commuting to a centralized workplace. Reducing carbon emissions, cutting energy costs, and saving on fuel are
frequently cited affordances of telework. Joseph P. Fur and Stephen Pociask argue for increased availability of broadband Internet services in the US in order to make possible more telework opportunities, and thus reduce greenhouse gases (Fuhr and Pociask 2011). They see the growth of high speed Internet as a site of opportunity for alleviating global warming. There has been scholarship arguing that telework can cut energy use for offices and commuters, benefiting both workers and employers (Kitou and Horvath 2008).

Commutes are a fairly unpopular activity, especially to and from work, so it is no surprise that telework advocates would highlight the lost commute when extolling the virtues of remote work. However, they often assume that when a commute is eliminated or reduced, workers are going to stay at home, which is not necessarily the case (Wilson and Greenhill, 2005). The overall environmental impact of increased teleworking and reduced commutes is, by some estimates, incredibly modest. For example, if 50% of eligible information workers in the United States began teleworking four days a week, they would only reduce national energy use by 1%, when increasing the average fuel efficiency of automobiles by 20% would lower national energy use by more than 5% (Matthews and Williams, 2005). A study of teleworkers in the Netherlands found that their homeworking occurred before they commuted to an office, or after they had returned home in the evening, which meant that the commute was not reduced at all in these cases (Rietveld, 2011, p. 148). Allowing flexibility in the times that they commuted did help reduce traffic congestion, but it did nothing to curb overall vehicle emissions or average annual energy use (Rietveld, 2011, p. 148).

Not everyone is convinced that increased telework will have a positive net effect on the environment. Teleworking has been found to increase urban sprawl as people
move further and further away from their jobs in urban centers (Rhee, 2009). Arpad Horvath found that the environmental benefit “depends on the individual or collective scenarios and modes of implementation” (Horvath, 2010). Telework may have a positive impact on the environment, but there are myriad complex factors that determine if it is going to be successful or not. According to Allenby and Richards, there are a number of unanswered questions regarding the positive environmental impact of teleworking. These authors cite the difficulty in accurately assessing these abstract and complex cost/benefit arrangements, such as whether or not a teleworker uses as much energy at home while working as they would commuting to an office, or whether or not a teleworker uses their flexibility to add miles on their car running errands (Allenby and Richards, 1999). A longitudinal study of survey data of teleworkers at AT&T was inconclusive in determining if the remote program actually reduced energy use, citing self-identification problems (Atkyns, Blazek, and Roitz, 2002). While authors can come up with estimates and guesses regarding these issues, they usually stop short of drawing categorical, definitive conclusions about the positive effects of teleworking (Allenby and Richards, 1999). It is ironic that teleworking was first developed as a response to ecological and environmental issues in the 1970s, and yet whether or not it actually addresses the issues that birthed it, is still unresolved.

Organizational Culture and Isolation

The impact that telework has on workplace organization is hotly debated. Discussions around the deskilling of labor associated with increased use of technology are complicated by the “flexible” nature of remote knowledge work, which provides considerably more autonomy to workers than may have previously been the case. Crystal
Fulton contends, “telework has the potential to change hierarchical structures and loosen centralized control over workers” (Fulton 1996, p. 76). Centralized location control of workers will be a mere trade-off for institutional, technological remote control over workers, however. As Cyert and MacCrimmon argue, reliance on computers and remote connectivity for work will increase the role of programmed options for workers, and decrease discretionary power for them (1968, p. 598). In other words, direct supervision will take the form of limited programmed options for workers. Greater workplace autonomy may be a benefit, but it is likely to be accompanied by a rapid deskilling of labor.

Teleworker isolation has been a consistent problem since the technology that made remote work possible first arrived. In the 1980s, several scholars had published articles explaining how early adopters were experiencing telework, and isolation was a major concern. For example, Joanne H. Pratt found that many teleworkers reported missing the social stimulation that comes from located work, and that this was especially true for women with young children (Pratt, 1984, p. 6). Tom Forester, who wrote an early criticism of Alvin Toffler’s theory of “electronic cottages,” argued that proponents of telework were failing to take seriously the psychological threat posed by teleworker isolation, and that most advocates were likely never required to telework themselves and thus never experienced the loneliness of remote work first-hand (Forester, 1988, p. 232). Kuglemass found that isolation was primarily found only in workers who were full-time teleworkers, but was not an issue for part-time workers (Kuglemass, 1995). Nonetheless, workers who do not spend time in the office recorded feeling out of the social loop (Baruch & Nicholson, 1997; Vega & Brennan, 2000; Reinsch, 1997). Because they are at
home, teleworkers often record being politically detached from the decisions that determine how their work is done, which is less of a problem for office located workers (Fulton, 1996, p. 78). This is not a universal feeling, of course, as some workers record being able to maintain a social connection to the workplace even though they do not spend time in a physical work location (Diekema, 1992; Duxbury & Neufeld, 1999).

Although the problem of loneliness and isolation associated with telework is well documented, very few studies have attempted a Marxist critique of this issue. Anita Greenhill and Melanie Wilson explore this problem, and offer a compelling Marxist-Feminist critique of telework, but they ultimately argue that the home offers a refuge from the alienation of compulsory waged labor, and so permitting telework, especially for women, destroys that haven (Greenhill and Wilson, 2005). As true as that is, this argument relies on a rather problematic liberal-feminist assumption that telework should be resisted because the alienation of waged labor that comes from working outside the home is automatically superior to the alienation of waged labor within the home, as the former is at least happening within the public sphere (Greenhill and Wilson, 2005, p. 169).

The authors rely on a traditional Marxist assertion that “incorporation into social production is a precondition” for women’s liberation (Greenhill and Wilson, 2005, p. 162). Socialist-feminists from the Autonomist tradition have challenged that assertion, saying that incorporation into social production simply opens up new avenues for gendered exploitation (James and Dalla Costa, 1972; Fortunati, 1989). Arguing that women can achieve liberation by going into the waged labor sphere, outside the home, is akin to trading “slavery to the kitchen sink,” for “slavery to the assembly line and the
“kitchen sink” (James and Dalla Costa, 1972). In other words, waged labor is not emancipatory. This project extends the Autonomist critique by looking at the ways in which telework exacerbates already existing gender labor issues.

Telework and isolation remains an unresolved issue in the literature on telework. The lack of social interaction between coworkers that comes with telework has been linked to higher levels of feelings of isolation (Kurland and Cooper, 2002). In a series of interviews with teleworkers, some scholars found that homeworkers do not always feel isolated, and sometimes actually recorded a high level of enjoyment because they could limit their interactions with coworkers to when they wanted to (Crossan and Burton, 1993). The nature of teleworker isolation remains unresolved, as some studies have concluded that workers enjoy the freedom that comes from limited disruptions while teleworking, while others maintain that workers relish the social dynamics of working in the office. This project will seek to bridge these arguments by assuming first that these arguments are not mutually exclusive, and second, that a more nuanced balance between telework and office work may actually offer workers their best opportunity for social fulfillment.

**Boundaries Between Home and Work**

Scholars have argued that telework blurs the boundaries between work and home. One of the problems that continually emerges in telework environments is the potential for overwork as a result of this lack of structure. Teleworkers who have families, especially women, find that they have to work around the schedules of family members, which can mean daily overwork (Gurstein, 2001, p. 40). Teleworkers have a difficult time setting and maintaining the boundary between work and family, which means that
both families and employers develop an expectation of constant availability (Kossack et al, 2009, p. 165). Scholars from the US Department of Labor found in 2012 that teleworkers put in an average of six hours of work per week more than office workers (Noonan and Glass, 2012). Some scholars have argued that overwork is less of a problem than it appears, as teleworkers are able to put in more hours than their non-teleworking counterparts before they begin to experience any negative effects on work/life balance (Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, and Weitzmen, 2001). While others have argued that telework is the best option we may have available for reducing the tensions between work and family life (Pratt, 1999; Duxbury et al, 1998). Nonetheless, there is a desperate need to conduct an updated study that looks at how the boundary between family and work is shaped under telework. Studies from the 1980s and 1990s often reported the opinions of people who were just being given the opportunity to telework, and workers with unabashed enthusiasm for remote work environments has likely changed since then (Duxbury et al, 1998; Haddon and Silverstone, 1993).

Penny Gurstein published a book on telework called *Wired to the World, Chained to the Home: Telework in Daily Life*, which is a fantastic primer for my own research, as she explores the issues that arise when the boundaries between work and home are eroded. But her book also opens the door to many more unresolved issues. For example, she argues that the claim that telework is a panacea for resolving longstanding workplace tensions between home and work is a myth, however her research does not explore from where this mythology originates, how it is perpetuated, and who benefits from it (Gurstein, 2001, p. 194). Another important contribution Gurstein makes is outlining how telework transforms the space of the home and the community in unique ways. She
contends that our “public world becomes more remote and impersonal,” resulting in our public spaces becoming “anonymous, fearful places” (Gurstein, 2001, p. 190). Conversely, our attachment to our home/workplaces will reinforce a “tendency toward narcissistic autonomy” (Gurstein, 2001, p. 190). While I do not disagree with her conclusion, it raises the question of what the impact is of this tendency on the subjectivity of teleworkers.

In other words, how do teleworkers describe the feeling of living under conditions in which the boundaries between work and home are increasingly fuzzy? One of Gurstein’s concluding remarks is that it is unlikely that “formal telework programs will become a widespread phenomenon,” a conclusion she bases on the unwillingness of corporations to jeopardize the hierarchical, face-to-face supervisory methods that are most comfortable for managers (Gurstein, 2001, p. 201). Again, I agree with her conclusion, but not with the justification. Certainly there is reason to believe that telework will never become widespread, and that supervisory discomfort may play a role in that decision, but the fact that some companies are moving back and forth between telework and traditional arrangements suggests that a reluctance to challenge corporate culture is an unsatisfactory explanation. My research suggests that there is more than just management culture at play in corporate decisions to limit telework.

Another way in which the boundary between work and home is fading is through technological surveillance mechanisms, which are taking on new intensity in telework environments. According to Ben Fairweather, “technological methods can allow managers to monitor the actions of teleworkers as closely as they could monitor ‘on site’ workers, and in more detail than the same managers could traditionally” (Fairweather,
1999, p. 39). This increased ability to monitor workers has been linked to lowered worker morale (Fairweather, 1999, p. 39). A study of Italian call-center teleworkers found that technological surveillance introduced far more problems than it solved. For one, it introduced a “panoptic effect,” whereby workers knew that they were constantly being monitored and so acted in superficial ways to avoid provocation by management (Valsecchi, 2006). Technological monitoring produces employees who act in such a way that they maintain the status quo, but also, according to Bain and Taylor, teleworkers devise new ways to resist detection altogether (Bain and Taylor, 2000). The literature is silent though on the psychological effects of having the home turned into a space of surveillance, a question my project addresses.

Impact of Telework on the Individual and the Family

Scholars have long debated the potential for remote work to address feminist concerns about women’s underrepresentation in the paid work force. Since the 1980s, there has been no shortage of utopian predictions about how telework would restore the centrality of the traditional nuclear family by allowing women to be home with their children and hold down jobs if they wanted to (Huws, 1991). But these lofty prognostications were universally panned. For example, a review of US Census data found that those who worked at home were comprised of people who had difficulty maintaining employment outside the home due to domestic needs, which usually meant mothers, the elderly, or disabled; however, because this group earned less than non-teleworkers, they also did not rely on this income to sustain themselves (Kraut, 1987). This is consistent with what Kathleen Christensen found, which was that female teleworkers were almost always part of a two-parent household, and worked to gain extra
income and enjoy the satisfaction that comes with contributing as a laborer (Christensen, 1987).

The role of women in the workforce would continue to play a significant role in academic discussions of telework throughout the 1990s and 2000s as well, and much of the focus remained on probing the assumptions that telework allowed women to better manage work and family. The 1980s were characterized by a focus on female teleworker’s casual, precarious status, while in the 1990s and 2000s, the focus shifted to the conflicts between their professionalization and domestic labor needs. As responsibility for attending to domestic labor continued to reside with women, some scholars suggested that telework was unevenly beneficial to men over women, and this is the result of the boundary between work and family becoming more permeable in telework scenarios, where each sphere significantly influences how life is experienced in the other. Telework has the potential to increase what they termed work/family transition periods (Hill, Hawkins, and Miller, 1996, p. 299). Traditional work arrangements see two work/family transition periods a day: one in the morning when workers leave home for their jobs, and one in the evening when they return. Under telework arrangements, there can be several of these per day at unpredictable times, which can lead workers, especially those responsible for domestic labor, to perceive their lives as hectically out of control, unstructured, and chaotic (Hill et al 1996, p. 299). Men in one study were found to use the time saved by teleworking for leisure activities or other paid projects (Kay, 1998, p. 435-54).

The impact of teleworking on men is a different issue altogether. According to a study by Kiran Mirchandani (1999), the difference between male and female teleworkers
and their ability to work from home is a matter of self-control. For men, interacting with family is a ‘temptation,’ but for women it is a responsibility. Men view the family as an impediment to getting work done, an enticement that must be carefully mitigated if they are to be productive. Women see the family as an essential part of their daily labor responsibilities, meaning the boundary between paid work and domestic work has to remain permeable if either is to be completed (Mirchandani 1999, p. 98). Therefore, in order for women to experience the benefits of telework, they would have to work on the same terms as men, essentially limiting their role as domestic caretakers.

One of the major effects of telework on individuals is physical, but scholars disagree on whether the impact is positive or negative. Teleworkers are often more sedentary than office workers because they do not have to physically move around an office, and when they are under stress to finish work, physical activities are the first thing to go (Gurstein, 2001, p. 70). Teleworkers often have irregular sleep, grooming, and eating schedules, which can lead to health problems arising from sedentary lifestyles and poor diets, such as weight gain, stress disorders, and migraines (Gurstein, 2001, p. 70). Although, other studies have found that when employees are given flexible work opportunities, they are more likely to participate in healthier behaviors (Grzywacz, Casey, and Jones, 2007, p. 1308).

Scholars are also divided on whether there is a positive or negative benefit to teleworkers’ emotional well-being. It can be less stressful for workers to avoid office politics, and for their commutes to be limited or eliminated (Gregg, 2011). They can better attend to domestic tasks, which can also relieve stress (Donnelly, 2006). The feeling of being autonomous and the joy that comes from feeling personally responsible
for productivity and workplace successes are also some of the oft cited benefits of telework (Cross and Raizman, 1986, p. 12). However, a study by Sandi Mann and Lynn Holdsworth found that teleworkers experience not only more feelings of isolation, but also guilt, worry, frustration, and resentment on a level that exceeded that of their office counterparts (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003; Mann et al, 2000). Overall, the argument that workplace flexibility leads to an increase in one’s quality of life is subjective and tenuous, and needs to be challenged (Vittersø et al, 2003).

Gaps in the Research and Avenues to Explore

The wide body of literature on telework covers a variety of important topics. Conceptually, all of the literature fits within the above six categories: Scope of telework, management of teleworkers, environmental and travel impacts, organizational culture and isolation, boundaries between work and home, and finally the impact of telework on individuals and their families. But within each of the categories, there remain unresolved questions. In this section, I will detail the major spaces that emerged in the literature, into which I hope my research can make a contribution. The first hurdle for any research project on telework, the most persistent, nagging problem, is defining teleworkers, or at least figuring out a useful way to distinguish them from non-teleworkers. For so much of the current research, the drive to define teleworkers is motivated by the pragmatic need to be able to count them. That is not my purpose. Instead my goal is to produce a definition that is fluid enough to capture the shifting, and often-conflicting characteristics of teleworkers so that I may be able to offer a critique of flexible work as a whole. To that end, I contend we should think about telework as simply a method of organizing the labor process. The Henry Ford assembly line is one method; the centralized office of the late
twentieth century is another, at least for organizing the rote white-collar labor of the period. Telework is yet another method of determining how a particular subset of intellectual labor is organized.

A key distinction that has to be made is between a teleworker and outsourced labor. In the 1980s and 1990s, it would have been common for corporations in the industrialized nations to purchase products produced in the global south: India, China, and Mexico or South America broadly. This has long been a standard trade practice, and was considered "outsourcing". At this point though, it has become commonplace for companies to purchase services as well, not just physical products. According to many economists, including those of the World Trade Organization, outsourcing is typically defined as the trade in services in which the buyer and supplier remain in their respective locations (Bhagwati, Panagariya, and Srinivasan, 2004, p. 95-6). If we subscribe to this definition, then it would be safe to assume that teleworkers have to be legally employable in the country where the employer is located. As such, outsourced labor is not the same as telework, although both play an important role in how labor in the Post-Fordist work environment is organized. I have opted to exclude this group of workers from my project, although their importance to the subject matter is incredibly important, their impact is far beyond what can be attended to here.

Another of the primary issues in the literature that I will address is the question of how teleworkers are managed. Specifically I want to understand whether or not teleworkers hurt their chances of advancement within a company by opting to telework. As it stands, the literature identifies a contradiction, in that professional and non-professional employees may be subject to different risks on this point, but there is no
attempt to reconcile it. By interviewing both professional and non-professional
teleworkers, I will be able to provide some insight into this inconsistency.

The transformative impact of telework, and its predicted growth, are two often
exaggerated components of telework. Scholars have claimed that telework is a solution
for all manner of workplace issues, but no studies as of yet have examined the growing
trend amongst tech companies to reject telework in favor of traditional office
arrangements, as Yahoo and Best Buy have recently done (Belkin, 2013; Bhasin, 2013).
The predictions about the inevitable growth of telework are inflated and grandiose, and
even the studies that arrive at this conclusion fail to address why this is so. The scholarly
arguments about whether or not productivity increases under telework misses an
important point, which is that perhaps productivity is a secondary concern to something
else, for example creativity and innovation. My project has at its core an inquiry into the
shift away from telework, which is explored in each of the three subsequent chapters, but
especially in the chapter that uses political economy to examine telework’s inconsistent
popularity.

Another problem that emerged in the literature on telework revolves around the
ways in which the gendered impacts of remote work have been continually
misunderstood. Scholarship has focused on the uneven effects of telework on men and
women, or the ways in which they experience telework differently, or the varying reasons
they have chosen telework, for example family and childcare responsibilities. While these
contributions are definitely valuable, none of the research takes into account the shifting
discourses on women and work more broadly. My project seeks to ground the telework
debate within the contemporary context of neoliberal corporate-sponsored feminism, the
type championed by successful female executives like Sheryl Sandberg, which has female agency, corporate success, and equal access to capital at the core of its ideology. The connection between work, family, and women is evolving constantly, and so making sense of the politics of this relationship is vital. Offering a critique of telework that assumes the potential alienation of both waged and non-waged labor, especially for women, is an absolute necessity for understanding the current post-Fordist knowledge economy.

The biggest gap in the research is the dearth of studies that specifically address the construction and circulation of discourses on remote work in the popular press. How citizens make sense of an event is largely influenced by how that event is discussed in the news media. Remote work has remained a popular topic of discussion in news media texts, but so far there have been no studies that critically analyze these discourses. As a result, we are missing a critical piece of the puzzle on the scope of telework. The key to understanding how we arrived at our current opinion about the future of remote work can be answered through a critical discourse analysis of telework. The chapter that researches the coverage of Marissa Mayer’s Yahoo telework ban provides insight into how and why these discourses continue to circulate.
Hardly the Panacea: Unpacking the Costs and Benefits of Telework

There has been a very public debate about the costs and benefits of telework. Employers have struggled to strike a balance between having an \textit{in situ} workforce and flexible teleworkers, as both are needed in the post-Fordist workplace. Both have their benefits: offering telework options to employees can help retain quality workers, as it allows employees the flexibility to attend to childcare needs and leisure activities, making for happier workers (Grzywacz, Casey, and Jones, 2007, p. 1308). Companies can also cut down on overhead costs for electricity, heat, building maintenance, grounds upkeep, and the like, by shifting workers to remote locations, where office space may be cheaper, or by allowing them to work in their own homes (Kitou and Horvath 2008). According to Jeffrey Hill and his colleagues, “one of the major benefits of mobile telework might be a greater flexibility to manage household chores and child care” (Hill et al, 1996, p. 298). On paper, it can often seem like a win-win for both workers and employers. However, that is not the whole story.

Some authors conclude that telework is likely to blur the boundaries between work and home, leading to increased frequency of “work/family transition periods,” which are moments when a parent is leaving for work, or coming from work (Hill et al, 1996, p. 298). These can often be very stressful periods of time, and so to increase the amount of work/family transition periods per day can lead to a subsequent intensification in feelings of anxiety, or the perception of being “out of control.” Much of the discourse on telework is occupied by stories of employee overwork and reduced worker
collaboration, we should not be surprised to see its popularity wavering in some circles, or slow to catch on altogether (Noonan and Glass, 2012; Mann and Holdsworth, 2003; Gurstein, 2001).

A March 7th, 2014 article in the New York Times entitled “It’s Unclearly Defined, But Telecommuting is Fast on the Rise,” perfectly captures this ambiguous state of telework at the current historical moment. The title is misleading because the actual content of the article demonstrates that determining the future of telework is just as difficult as defining what a teleworker is. The author Alina Tugend cites several scholarly studies, many of which argue that telework is increasing year by year—a 79% increase between 2005 and 2012 by one estimate—or that contrary to prevailing assumptions about teleworkers being stay-at-home mothers, teleworkers are actually comprised of women and men, young and old, parents and single people (Tugend, 2014). Tugend then conveys some of the problems with telework, bringing in research that demonstrates how it makes interpersonal communication more difficult, can lead to overwork, and hurts employee’s chances of promotions (Tugend, 2014). Ultimately, the article concludes that it is hard to pin down to what degree telework is increasing, if at all, and ends by reminding us that there is no consensus on just how much teleworking is too much.

This article makes the same mistake that much of the scholarly literature on telework does, which is that it attempts to conclude definitively that telework is either going to grow or destined to fail, is always good or always bad. This is an impossible task though, as the first step of defining teleworkers, let alone counting how many exist, is a futile effort. According to Global Workplace Analytics, a pro-telework consulting and research agency, the politics of defining and counting telecommuters is a struggle:
“Studying the work-at-home population is a little like trying to study meteoroids. We know there are a lot of them and we know they’re important, but we don’t know where they all are and not everyone agrees on which ones to count” (Global Workplace Analytics).

Studying teleworkers has been called a “methodological nightmare,” as the difficulties in “assessing both the quantity and quality of telework are compounded by problems of definition” (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993, p. 7). Depending on how one defines it, teleworkers can be full-time home based workers, or people who use their smartphone on the weekend to answer work emails after spending forty or more hours in the office during the week. Forbes publishes a list of 100 companies that allow telecommuting, and it contains many well-known corporations such as Xerox, Dell, IBM, American Express, Amazon, and Microsoft (Shin, 2015). Looking at the major companies that have telework programs can give us some sense of the extent of telework in large industries, but it fails to account for all of the small companies that have remote-work programs, or individuals who have autonomous flexible arrangements at their workplace.

Therefore, attempting to understand the scope and impact of telework by looking at how many teleworkers exist, and where they work, is not practical, ultimately misguided, and does nothing to illuminate the conditions under which telework is deployed. Instead, we need ask, is telework introduced into a workplace to the benefit of capital or labor—or both, or neither? If we want to understand why telework’s capacity and growth is uncertain, then we need to explore the factors that contribute to telework’s deployment in the workplace, and who benefits from the programs. We can learn more by
examining why telework is used, or not used, than we can by trying to quantify teleworkers, or devise a perfect set of definitions. A political economy analysis is the best method to address these questions because they concern the production, circulation, and distribution of products, as well as explore the interplay between profit motives and the organization and management of labor.

In this chapter, I will analyze the costs and benefits of telework policies to better understand the political economic justification for employers to support or reject telework, and also explore how teleworking impacts the workers financially. I address these questions in three parts. First, I look at the ways companies stand to save money by instituting telework policies for their employees, or a subsection of their employees. The second section examines telework from the employee perspective, particularly how and to what degree teleworking affects workers in positive and negative ways. In the third section, I explore the circumstances companies have encountered which cause them to reject telework policies in favor of more traditional location based arrangements. Following that, I tie these three strands together in a concluding analysis.

Savings for Companies

Since it was first introduced, telework has been floated as a panacea for all manner of workplace problems. The most often cited benefit is that it will save employers money. The Telework Research Network estimated in 2011 that if Canada’s 4.3 million workers with compatible jobs were to begin teleworking, it would result in a collective savings of $53 billion dollars per year. An employer that has 250 telecommuting workers would realize a $3 million dollar per year savings-- a $10,000 per year savings for every worker that telecommutes two days a week (Lister and Harnish, 2011). In a floundering,
post-recession economy, this type of cost reduction could keep a company’s profits healthy. There are myriad ways telework is purported to cut costs, and while many calculations are based on complex and imperfect economic models, workplace savings generally fit within two categories: direct and indirect cost savings.

Direct costs savings appear when an employer can easily identify exactly how much money was saved by instituting a telework policy, and precisely from where the savings originated. An example of a direct cost savings would be the sale of an office space. Building sales generate a specific price upon selling, and all the secondary costs like heating, electricity, and taxes, can be easily calculated. An indirect cost savings is usually based on estimates, assumptions, and trends. The savings are not always immediately realized, nor are they a fixed cost. An example would be worker satisfaction. Happy workers are believed to be more productive, but increased productivity may take time to translate into cost savings, and it is difficult to predict what type of savings will be realized. The effects of indirect cost savings are latent. Let us first look at direct savings.

Large companies are able to significantly reduce their real estate and energy costs by housing fewer employees on site. Computer manufacturer IBM converted much of its workforce to telework in the 1990s, and sold all the vacated real estate for $1.9 billion. They continue to enjoy a $100 million dollar annual savings on the space, some of which they lease out to other companies. The reduced cost in energy alone, for IBM, is $22.9 million dollars a year (Caldow, 2009, p. 9). In 1997, Pacific Bell instituted a telework policy for its sales department, as well as its internal auditing, programming, finance, and
marketing operations, which saved them $30 million dollars in real estate costs over six years (Johnson, 1997, p. 61).

Sun Microsystems has a telework policy that allows more than half of its employees to work from home, with employee reimbursements for heating and Internet use. They record $68 million dollars a year in avoided real estate costs, and $3 million dollars a year in energy savings, as it is cheaper for them to give teleworking employees an energy allowance over paying energy costs for an entire building of workers (Lister, 2010, p. 7). Clearly, one of the major costs for any employer, especially one with a large employee base, is the real estate. Eliminating this cost is perhaps the single biggest incentive for any company looking to keep their books in the black. Aside from the real estate and energy savings, there is potential to save even more when you consider the costs of building maintenance, janitorial upkeep, and the like.

Sun Microsystems avoided a staggering $25 million a year in IT costs when it instituted a telework policy (Lister, 2010, p. 7). A savings of this magnitude makes sense considering how much money is spent building and maintaining the technological infrastructure of the mass office. IT departments are made redundant when a company moves to a cloud based computing system, which are generally more effective in supporting teleworkers. According to Vincent Mosco, cloud computing is based on the premise that the architecture and data required for computing can be located on a remote server to which people can connect from their various devices and locations (Mosco, 2014, p. 16). Third party cloud companies concentrate and automate IT labor, allowing them to offer the advanced IT services needed for telework at a much reduced cost, thus encouraging companies to save money by outsourcing their IT work. Teleworkers are
reliant upon the cloud to perform their work from home, which means that where we find telework and cloud computing, the elimination of IT departments is sure to follow. This trend, according to Mosco, is already starting to play out. HSBC revealed a major reduction in its IT department in 2013, citing the “growing ability to outsource to the cloud” (Mosco, 2014, p. 164). Cisco, which is a major proponent of telework as they provide hardware, software, infrastructure and consulting related to remote work, made a similar claim when they laid off 4,000 IT workers the same year (Mosco, 2014, p. 165).

The indirect costs are much more difficult to quantify; nonetheless they are considered to be substantial enough that many employers cite these reasons among the main contributors to why they institute telework policies. One of the ways that telework can cut costs for an employer is by reducing worker absenteeism. According to one study, unscheduled absences cost employers almost $2,000 a year per employee, which is around $300 billion a year for US companies (Lister and Harnish, 2011, p. 12). Workers have to take time off in order to care for sick children, go to appointments, and attend to a variety of tasks and errands that simply cannot be done outside of business hours.

When absences cannot be avoided, and if the employee does not have a flexible work arrangement, they have little choice but to call in sick. However, telework allows employees to attend to their own needs while fitting in waged labor wherever they can during the day. Therefore, productivity for any one employee is never really lost; it is merely shifted to a more convenient time. Companies also record a noticeable reduction in worker attrition. Allowing employees the ability to work from home has been linked to increased job satisfaction, which leads to greater retention of talent, and avoids the costs associated with searching for, hiring, and training new employees. Cisco Systems
estimates that its telework program had resulted in 560 fewer voluntary terminations in 2012 than in previous years, a $75 million dollar savings (Everson, 2010).

A significant portion of the literature on telework contends that employees that are allowed to work from home are far more productive than their counterparts in the office setting (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998; Gemignani, 2000; Reese, 2000). This sentiment is taken as gospel by industry advocates especially, who often invoke the self-evidentiary nature of the telework/productivity relationship when discussing the merits. Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson, the creators of the Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE) argue that everyone who works under their signature telework arrangement becomes a “innovate thinker” as soon as they realize that getting work done faster or more efficiently means more free time for themselves (Ressler and Thompson, 2008, p. 131).

The Conference Board, a non-profit lobbying and pro-business research group published an article on telework in which they contend that teleworkers have fewer distractions, and have “less involvement in office politics, which results in less stress,” and more efficient work (Abel and Levanon. 2011, p. 6).

For the practitioner press, the jury is in and telework is a surefire way to get more work out of your employees. But for the scholarly press, the picture is more nuanced. It certainly is possible that having fewer interruptions may increase productivity, but it is not a certainty. As much of the research on telework demonstrates, reports of increased productivity originate from surveys and interviews of people who opt to work from home, making this a very problematic sample (Bailey and Kurland, 2002, p. 389). Montreuil and Lippel go so far as to suggest that the desire to prove to managers and bosses that telework “works,” may in fact be pushing employees to voluntarily increase
either the hours or intensity of their labor (Montreuil and Lippel, 2003, p. 343). In this latter case, increases to productivity may be short-lived, or completely fabricated. A study of home-located teleworkers at an Italian call-center in 2006 found that the precariousness of the teleworker was often used to prompt more productive labor from the worker: managers would threaten to revoke telework privileges if worker productivity showed any signs of diminishing (Valsecchi, 2006, p. 129). It is unclear, then, whether telework actually increases a worker’s productivity, or if working from home simply encourages people to temporarily increase their productivity— or even merely make the claim that they are working harder to avoid having to work in an office. This is perhaps why indirect cost savings are so unreliable. It is true that low productivity may be costing an employer money, but there is no guarantee that telework will actually do anything to solve that problem because it fails to address the root causes of low worker productivity—a point we will return to later.

The potential to save money by converting one’s workforce to telework is an attractive prospect for many companies. Shedding expensive and unnecessary property, and avoiding all the energy, taxes, and fees that come with, is perhaps the single biggest incentive and largest direct savings. As more and more businesses take advantage of the availability of cloud computing, corporations will replace expensive IT staff and technology with outsourced services. Direct costs such as these are hard to argue with. They are predictable and quantifiable. Indirect costs are a bit more contentious. One company may have a serious problem with absenteeism, stemming from any combination of factors (both workplace and home), while another company of similar size and industry may have no real problem with absent workers. In this case, instituting a
telework policy may not help solve the problem if absenteeism stems from an overbearing manager, for example: telework will likely exacerbate this problem. That being said, in general an increasing number of companies are willing to shoulder the risk in order to take advantage of the potential benefits.

Costs to Workers

Identifying how best to address workplace safety when the home is the workplace is a major hurdle for companies keen on increasing telework. Standards of workplace safety vary widely between countries and even different localities, which presents an entirely new set of challenges to worker safety, especially when the workforce is widely distributed. The United States government attempted a number of departmental telework pilot programs in the 1980s to determine the viability of the arrangement, but the programs were scrapped when auditors determined that workers would be eligible to collect Worker’s Compensation if they were injured at home, and thus this presented too big of a risk of fraud because officials reasoned that determining the validity of a claim was near impossible (Smith, Carayon, Sanders, Lim, and LeGrande, 1992).

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration in the United States rendered a decision in the late 1990s stating that all employers would be responsible for the health and safety of remote workers. This verdict was met with a firestorm of protest from business leaders and politicians alike, who claimed that such a move would be financially burdensome to employers, would be impossible to implement, and could allow for unreasonable and unconstitutional inspections into worker’s homes. It also did not address the Worker’s Compensation issue the government ran into a decade earlier. OSHA withdrew the ruling; however that did not stop a flurry of Republican politicians
from working to pass laws codifying their own powerlessness to oversee home offices into official policy (Kelli L. Dutrow, 2001). A fear of fraudulent insurance claims, and general ambiguity about responsibility for protecting remote workers, appears to be one of the leading fears inhibiting US promotion of telework.

The Canadian government has taken a similar approach. As of May 26, 2014, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety said on its website (www.ccohs.ca) that, “It is not clear how occupational health and safety or compensation laws cover [telework arrangements].” The centre goes on to say that “these laws are different in each jurisdiction.” Opacity surrounding liability is to be expected, at least in the early stages of mass telework adoption, but as it stands there is no movement towards universal workplace safety standards for teleworkers, even though telework is gaining more visibility. Rather than address the issue, the Canadian and United States governments are embracing the murkiness of telework safety standards.

A May 31st, 2011 article of IT News Australia reported that the Australian government had been working hard to increase telework amongst its citizens: they have spent billions building a National Broadband Network capable of sustaining increased traffic, as well as providing financial incentives to businesses that implement telework policies, with the hope of becoming one of the top five OECD member countries for teleworkers by the year 2020. Unlike the US and Canada though, Australian Workplace Health and Safety legislation covers any type of work that is done, regardless of where it is performed. According to the Australian government’s telework website (www.telework.gov.au), health and safety protections even extend to other people living in the home where work is being carried out. Therefore, it is possible for a country to
have sizeable teleworking populations without shirking workplace safety regulations. It appears the US and Canada are taking a “wait and see” approach before extending workplace protections to teleworkers, and this may mean that some workers have to sustain injuries on the job before these governments take action.

The state has historically been responsible for ensuring that employers provide safe workplaces to its employees, and that employees are fairly compensated if they are overworked. Office work poses significantly fewer health and safety risks than factory work does, but that does not mean that there are no risks at all. According to researchers, repetitive motion injuries are common to the 77 million American workers who use computers for their jobs (Ijmker, Blatter, van der Beek, van Mechelen, and Bongers, 2006). Surveys done with office workers have recorded incidences of extreme head, neck, arm, shoulder, and hand discomfort resulting from computer use to be as high 44% in a given year (Ijmker et al, 2006).

In an office setting, the employer can purchase equipment that is less likely to induce musculoskeletal injuries for workers, such as ergonomic chairs and keyboards, but companies are not likely to shoulder the costs of purchasing these for home use, and there’s no guarantee people would use them anyways. However, even if teleworkers did use ergonomically designed equipment, it would not necessarily prevent repetitive motion injuries from occurring (Green and Briggs, 1989). Telework can be quite precarious, and generally without union presence; teleworkers also have very little sense of the labor regulations or entitlements they should be afforded, making it easier for employers to circumvent responsibility for injuries that do occur. (Quinlan, Mayhew, and Bohle, 2001, p. 352). Given that teleworkers are isolated from one another, it is difficult
for them to communicate with each other about injuries and workplace safety, and they are especially disadvantaged if they wanted to collectively bargain for better conditions, as their dispersed working environments adds another layer of difficulty to the already sizeable task of organizing a union (Odgers, 1994).

Telework may provide productivity increases, but it comes with increased feelings of isolation for workers. Several scholars have argued that teleworkers record high levels of professional and social isolation (Gainey, Kelley, and Hill, 1999; Metzger and Von Glinow, 1988). It is easy to claim that interactions between workers is an interruption that hurts productivity, but it is also true that these social and professional exchanges play a large role in maintaining good mental well-being for workers. For example, some scholars have found that while teleworkers are generally more productive, this is only true for those workers who do not experience feelings of professional isolation (Golden, Veiga, and Dino, 2008, p. 1416).

In the workplaces where some employees are allowed to telework while their coworkers are located, studies have found that there is low worker satisfaction and high turnover, especially for those stuck in the office as they have the perception, real or not, that their teleworking counterparts have it easier as a result of the arrangement (Golden, 2007). Productivity tends to decrease for teleworkers who lack even occasional face-to-face interaction with their coworkers. Substantial increases in productivity, and the feeling of seclusion that accompanies it, is really just another way of describing overwork. A study by Noonan and Glass indeed demonstrates that teleworkers are being habitually overworked, making this perhaps the largest potential safety threat to remote workers. The research, which was widely reported in the popular press, concluded that
teleworkers on average worked six hours more per week than their non-teleworking colleagues. As many of these workers are salaried employees, they are not paid overtime, which means they are greatly weakening the value of their labor by working more hours for less money (Noonan and Glass 2012, p. 44). This trend effectively erases any cost benefit earned through energy savings or commuting expenses, and puts a new emotional burden on workers.

It would not be fair to say that teleworking only benefits employers, but it is likely the case that the economic savings are not equally distributed between workers and employers, as the latter stand to substantially improve their profit margins by converting their workforce to telework, whereas workers may only realize marginal cost savings (and in fact may actually end up losing money). For example, depending on the distance a non-teleworker travels to their office, the cost of fuel, insurance, and maintenance for a vehicle could be noticeably reduced by telecommuting one or two days a week. Telework has become an arrangement that nearly all office employees can take advantage of, to some degree. Sun Microsystem employees saved an average of $870 per year in gasoline and nearly $2000 dollars in wear and tear on their car by driving fewer miles (McKee et al, 2009). However, the commuting costs are likely offset by the fact that the employee has to cover the costs associated with working from home, such as increased home energy and Internet use.

By one estimate, the total teleworking populations in the United States in 2005 only reduced total energy use nationally by less than 0.4% (Matthews and Williams, 2005, p. 21). Teleworkers spent less time driving to the office, but the overall amount of driving stayed roughly the same. Another study concluded that the savings on fuel for a
single commuter is slightly greater than the cost of increased home energy usage for that person to work from home. Depending on the estimate, it may be cheaper, if only barely, for an employee to telework if you look at energy savings alone, but it is a very thin margin (Kitou and Horvath, 2008). It is impossible to conclude exactly how much teleworkers shift energy use, but the possibility that telework has a net zero effect on commuter and environmental output is real (Allenby and Richards, 1999). Even if telework does reduce carbon emissions and fossil fuel consumption, it is likely considerably less than proponents of telework estimate.

People may use supplementary teleworking, which Gareis defines as working from home less than one day a week, when they are sick and cannot make it to work, or who have children who require attention (Gareis, 2002). An article in *Computer World* magazine even found that there is often a spike in telework requests for located employees whenever gas prices rise in North America, as more and more people seek to avoid long and costly commutes (Hamblen and Thibodeau, 2005). Their typical arrangement may include absolutely zero teleworking days, but by virtue of the fact that so much office work can be done from distributed locations, teleworking on an as-needed basis is becoming more common. There is compelling evidence that teleworkers enjoy less stress from diminished commuting, and reduced anxiety about a lack of control over their work and leisure schedules (Kelly, Tranby, and Moen, 2011).

As one might expect though, there is also support to the contrary, especially in the cases of workers who have children. A study by De Lay concluded that telework is first and foremost used as a method for organizing paid employment, not organizing family life. De Lay argues that this results in an arrangement that is “specifically targeted toward
relieving stress due to job structure, and, thus, does not address family issues” (De Lay 1995 p. 53). Teleworking, it is often claimed, will help people attend to their family needs, but as Da Ley points out, telework actually functions so that the needs of the family simply interfere less with work. To put it another way, telework does not make it easier to attend to family life, it makes it so that family life interferes less with one’s ability to work: that is what it is designed to do. Other scholars have arrived at similar conclusions. Teleworkers are more likely to attend to domestic labor and child care during peak “office work” hours, which then pushes their paid employment into the late evening, early morning, or weekends (Kraut, 1989). This is hardly what one would call balance.

Telework arrangements rarely make it easier to manage other parts of one’s life, mostly because people generally feel that managers and profit interests ultimately determine how work is to be completed regardless of whether that work is being done from a coffee shop or from a cubicle (Kelly and Kalev, 2006). Not surprisingly, a survey of IBM workers in 1996 found that teleworkers experienced no more work/life balance than their office counterparts (Hill, Hawkins, and Miller, 1996). The situation is no better in Australia, where indeed they have workplace protections for teleworkers, but which have failed to be an effective deterrent to the stress of overwork, especially for women. A February 12, 2012 article in the Sydney Sun Herald reported on a study, which found that 30% of Australians were working more than 45 hours a week, 70% of women with children under the age of 9 in Australia reported feeling “often or almost always rushed or pressed for time” (Browne, 2012). In the same article, several of the interviewees expressed mixed feelings about workplace flexibility, saying that they were grateful for
the opportunity to attend to family needs, but were disgruntled at the intrusion of their work into all areas of family and leisure time.

This confounds perhaps the single biggest advantage telework allegedly offers workers- a less stressful work/life balance. The added stress has an undeniable and deeply problematic gendered component to it. Data on who is teleworking from a February 2014 study by the Flex+Strategy Group found that men make up 71% of teleworkers, and that people with children were no more likely to take advantage of teleworking than single people (Yost, May 2014). The most interesting finding is that women are far more likely to be office and cubicle workers than men, and it is cubicle workers who most often reported feeling as though they had less work/life balance than in the previous year (Yost, February 2014). There is a pervasive myth that teleworking is most beneficial to women with children, and while this may have some merit as a conceptual argument for increasing telework, in reality women are far less likely to be in a position to take advantage of it.

Telework is more likely to be used as an employment incentive to attract or retain highly skilled managers and technicians, most of whom are men, rather than a mechanism to alleviate stress for employees struggling to balance careers and families. In the same study it was discovered that nearly 50% of teleworkers received training and guidance on how to balance their work and family lives, while only 35% of office workers received similar attention (Yost, February 2014). Clearly, it is the cubicle workers who are need of training on balancing work and families, yet remain the least likely to receive it. In a subsequent chapter of this project, I explore the subjective experiences of teleworkers more closely by focusing on the contradiction over who is
allowed to telework, why they do it, and what the implications are for doing so.

In brief, there is good reason to believe that teleworking is at best a mixed blessing for working families and in all likelihood engenders overwork, stress, isolation, reduced workplace safety, and precariousness into the knowledge economy. Shifting employees to a telework scenario makes good business sense for a company: it can reduce real estate costs tremendously, and save on energy expenditures. They have the potential to retain high quality workers over longer periods of time, and can reduce absenteeism. Workers, on the other hand, may enjoy a negligible reduction in the cost associated with commuting, but in most cases are going to work more hours for their employer, immediately nullifying their personal savings, and exposing themselves to dangerous new levels of workplace precarity. Perhaps most troubling is the fact that telework does nothing to bridge the gender gap. Women with children who are in a position to take advantage of telework arrangements simply increase their already overburdened work lives.

Costs to Companies

The decisions by Yahoo and Best Buy to end its telework policies in 2013 is evidence that flexible work arrangements are less a sign of employer respect for the personal and familial obligations of its employees, and more a strategically deployed cost-cutting measure, or at best a benefit that can be manipulated for strategic managerial purposes. The fact that Yahoo, Best Buy, and other major companies rescinded its telework policies creates a lot of questions about the profitability of the practice as well. In a March 2013 article in Business Insider, Best Buy CEO, Hubert Joly, said that the culture of the company was in trouble and they needed to put “all hands on deck” in order
to recover (Bhasin, 2013).

Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer expressed a similar sentiment in a memo leaked to the press, in which she called her employees back to the office. “Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people, and impromptu team meetings,” she said. “Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home. We need to be one Yahoo, and that starts with physically being together.” The justification for ending the work-at-home policies is unique because it suggests that there is more to be gained by having workers present together than there is by cutting real estate costs or lowering attrition.

Mayer, who was formerly an executive with Google, helped to build that company’s famously attractive corporate offices in order to encourage Google employees to spend time working together. A Business Insider article from March of 2013 revealed some of the most beloved Google perks. They offer free gourmet food to employees, available 24 hours a day, and a concierge service to attend to mundane tasks such as oil changes, laundry, dry cleaning services, and even party planning. Google allows employees to bring their pets to work; they have on-site day care, full gyms, massage therapists, and intramural sports leagues. They even provide free transportation in the Bay Area via private busses equipped with Wi-Fi to get workers to and from home in comfort (Kevin Smith, 2013).

This partly explains why Mayer has a preference for an office free of teleworkers, as the success of Google is partially explained, at least according to senior managers, by the fact that most employees are working together. Mayer’s replacement at Google, Chief Financial Officer Patrick Pichette explained in a February 2013 interview with the Sydney
Morning Herald why Google doesn’t allow teleworking: "There is something magical about sharing meals,” said Pichette. "There is something magical about spending the time together, about noodling on ideas, about asking at the computer ‘What do you think of this?’ These are [the] magical moments that we think at Google are immensely important in the development of your company, of your own personal development and [of] building much stronger communities” (Grubb, 2013).

It is clear though that Google’s workplace perks are designed to keep employees in the office because that is where Google can extract the most amount of surplus value from their labor, as well as most efficiently manage the labor process. If people have to be working somewhere, management would prefer them to be at Google’s office rather than at home or in a coffee shop. Harry Braverman provides an answer as to why this might be the case: he argues that the “purpose of the office is control over the enterprise, and the purpose of office management is control over the office” (Braverman, 1998, 211). While Braverman’s analysis is more pertinent to early clerical offices that served as the nerve centers for industrial and financial enterprises, it can be extrapolated to cover the knowledge work of tech companies like Google or Yahoo. Remote work technology may be primed to allow increased flexibility for laborers to perform their work tasks from just about anywhere, but the job of managing those workers has not been made any easier by technology. Directing work, answering questions, driving increases to productivity, and evaluating performance are all important tasks of the work manager that are made more difficult, not easier, by having a remote workforce. In other words, it’s not as easy to control the office if no one is working there.
The need to exercise more control over the work process at Yahoo may partly explain Mayer’s decision to rescind telework privileges for her employees. As reported in a Huffington Post article from February 2013, several current and former employees of Yahoo celebrated the decision to end telework because they believed there was a culture of abuse and unaccountability at the company that needed to be reined in (Hindman, 2013). One former employee said that at Yahoo, “there are people slacking off like crazy, not being available, spending a lot of time on non-Yahoo projects.” Several said that there simply was too much flexibility and liberty with the work-anywhere policy. A March 6, 2013 report by Brett Molina of USA Today found that Mayer had checked the company’s Virtual Private Network, the cloud software that allows remote workers to log in to do work from home, and found that people simply weren’t logging in very much, but were still collecting a paycheck (Molina, 2013).

Mayer could have fired all the employees who were not registering enough hours though, so why the full-scale telework ban? It is possible that Mayer’s strategy was simply to prompt a voluntary layoff of workers by eliminating the tech industry’s most beloved perks, thereby avoiding being seen as a ruthless and cold industrialist. If this was indeed her plan, it virtually ensures that the most talented and hard-working employees would disappear en masse, as they have the most opportunities for other employment in the industry, leaving only the lowest skilled, least creative, and most resentful employees at Yahoo to fester. A more likely possibility is that Mayer rescinded the telework policy at Yahoo because the work-anywhere policy was being abused, and because she was intimately familiar with the success of workplace collaboration while working at Google.
A study by Margrethe Olson, working in conjunction with the Diebold Group at New York University’s School of Business Administration found that “the organizational culture and managerial attitudes” are the factors most likely to influence whether employees are allowed to telework (Huws et al., 1990, p. 2). A significant contributor to why telework has been slow to grow since its conception is that management feels its ability to supervise and motivate workers would be compromised in a telework scenario. The situation at Yahoo before Mayer arrived may have confirmed some of the anxieties held by many managers.

Another alternative to the ending of the telework program at Yahoo would have been to increase the electronic surveillance of teleworkers, although this too is an imperfect solution. According to Fairweather, the deployment of computer based employment monitoring systems has been one way in which managers have been able to allow teleworkers the freedom to work from home, while also keeping tabs on their productivity (Fairweather, 1999, p. 41). Typically, this is in the form of key-stroke counters, timers on idleness and phone calls, website tracking, and so on (Aiello and Shao, 1993, p. 1011). Implementing such a program is often associated with decreased employee morale, as workers register dissatisfaction over their loss of privacy, freedom, and trust (Fairweather, 1999).

Given that teleworkers are already prone to feelings of isolation, adding heightened surveillance to their work arrangement could lead to severe psychological consequences (Bibby, 1996). As one worker suggested, surveillance while teleworking was like “working as a slave and being whipped, not in our bodies but in our minds” (Bibby, 1996). In addition, tech workers, such as those at Yahoo, would be the most
capable of circumventing technological monitoring software, which means that Mayer would have lost her workers’ trust and probably gained nothing in return.

There appear to be two major impediments to the corporate profitability of telework: lack of managerial oversight over the work process, and the loss of a unique type of workplace interaction. In the former case, a considerable amount of new technology and software is proliferating specifically to make the oversight of remote labor more effective. At some point it may become possible to monitor teleworkers using less invasive surveillance techniques, but for the time being employers will have to balance the benefits of having remote workers who may be occasionally taking advantage of the limited oversight by refusing work. The second impediment is slightly more abstract. Google, Yahoo and Best Buy all refer to this intangible, fleeting labor quality that they believe is absolutely vital to a successful company, but cannot exactly explain why or how. For example, they suggest that having people interacting spontaneously leads to creative solutions to problems, and fosters teamwork and camaraderie. This could be true, but it remains unclear if is this more important, and more profitable, than the money saved by increased teleworking?

It is possible, indeed quite likely given the findings, that telework is only viable for routinized, non-creative clerical and date-entry type work, but is a hindrance to the creative labor elements of the post-Fordist workplace. These former activities are referred to as “business processes,” an umbrella term for all the core work of a bureaucratic institution that allows them to service employees and customers, such as payroll, accounting, customer service, or accounts receivable (Dossani and Kenney, 2003, p. 5). The authors argue that this labor is increasingly being outsourced to places like India and
the Philippines, but that which necessitates face-to-face contact remains in Western workplaces. “In a digital world any activity not requiring a physical presence can be undertaken almost anywhere that is connected” (Dossani and Kenney, 2003, p.8).

Although the technology was not always capable of accommodating teleworkers in the Fordist era, perhaps employers can now take advantage of cost savings by outsourcing this back-end labor. However, Western workers in the new economy are increasingly performing creative knowledge labor, which relies upon collaboration, interaction, and spontaneity, things that simply do not work well, and perhaps never will work well, for teleworkers. If employers are poised to realize the benefits of telework, they will most likely be only able to employ it in the diminishing unskilled departments where routinized work is carried out, or outsource it to low wage centers in the global east and south.

**Analysis and Conclusion**

Telework arrangements are employed or withheld depending on the benefit it brings to capital, and this decision alone determines when and how it will be used, if at all. The contradictions outlined above encompass the historical antagonism that has existed between capital and labor, and underlie this conclusion. In each of the above three sections, we can see how this conflict manifests itself relative to remote work. Strategies for growing a company’s profits can take many forms, but they are always paramount to whether telework is adopted or not. Sometimes it benefits workers to have a telework scenario, but only if it benefits workers and managers, or just managers, would it be implemented. Telework occupies an ambiguous space in the spectrum of class struggle because telework is seen as an attractive perk to employees, so that even if it benefits
workers very little in the big picture, or not at all, workers are still willing and eager to accept it. And even in the case where telework significantly contributes to overwork, the negative consequences are easily overlooked. In short, capital is ambivalent about telework.

In the first section, it is apparent that converting a company’s workforce to telework has the potential to save a substantial amount of money. Real estate alone is one of the biggest costs a large company has to shoulder: the larger the company gets, the more space needed to house the workers, and the higher the costs become. Growing the workforce but avoiding the costs associated with giving them a place to work, is a very attractive prospect for any company. Telework can also increase productivity, cut down on attrition, and save on energy. Both the United States government and the Canadian government offer substantial tax credits to businesses that hire workers with disabilities, a group that is highly skilled and in many cases already prepared to work from home (West and Anderson, 2005, p. 117). The avenues by which a company could increase its profits by taking advantage of telework are plentiful.

Some of those methods are hostile to workers, such as the laying off of IT workers as their labor is outsourced to the cloud, and some are less hostile- for example selling off real estate and having workers located completely at home. How and to what degree telework benefits employees, if at all, is not nearly as clear. The economic benefits are ambiguous. Workers can save costs on their commute, but end up increasing their home energy use, or driving their car to run more errands, or may move further away from urban centers and contribute to suburban sprawl when a long commute is no longer a deterrent to living where they want. The ramifications for working extra hours
with no overtime pay and experiencing isolation, which are the standard in telework scenarios, need to be explored further. Telework is still finding its legs, and many of the potential drawbacks to this type of arrangement are still unknown to both employee and employer, but rest assured that the latter is well prepared to ensure that the effects of those problems never reach them.

In the industries where telework is being resisted by capital, a different paradigm exists, and a familiar type of exploitation is manifesting itself, one in which overwork is coupled with the relentless capture of cognitive value. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue, working in certain industries such as tech or video games carries with it an ambiance of “cool,” which masks the requirement that workers log excessive hours in the office. In a workplace such as Electronic Arts, the video game giant, where deadlines are merciless and “crunch time” is all the time, the need for collaboration between workers is really the only way to deliver a product on time (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2006). For this industry in particular, the need for balance between work and family was captured famously by the disgruntled partner of a video game worker in a blog post in November of 2004, in which the author detailed regular eighty-five hour workweeks with no overtime pay, and a “put up or shut up and leave… human resources policy” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009, p. 35-6). Having workers widely dispersed, outside of direct supervision, and potentially unavailable in a pinch, is a liability that cannot be afforded. Here too, the logic of neoliberalism conceals the exploitation by positioning overwork as a privilege of working in a high tech “cool” industry like video game production (or for Google).

In these industries, the money saved by implementing large telework operations
would not be worth what is lost when employees are logging standard forty-hour workweeks (or less), or where the value of creative collaboration slips into the ether. Moreover, that these companies are the vanguard of resisting telework illustrates that the network model is inaccurate for predicting how labor will be organized in the post-Fordist environment. Physical centers are indeed necessary, especially for those companies most attuned to the needs of the information economy.

It is a zero-sum game, in other words: corporate gains typically translate to worker losses. The expectation is that time saved on a commute for example, is to be translated into extra time spent working. Workplace flexibility becomes a metonym for the absolution of employer responsibility for the mental and physical well-being of workers. When asked if employers have any responsibility for the safety of a teleworker’s home office space, one executive replied, "[i]f an employee wants . . . to work at home, the employer should be absolved of any workplace liability if that workplace now becomes the employee’s home” (Dutrow, 2001, p. 965). Never mind that a company may have a policy that all or most employees are to telework, or that some managers may strongly encourage telecommuting because it saves money, or that employees may have other factors such as a family or a disability that contribute to their desire to telework: all that matters is that workers are “choosing” to telework, thereby voluntarily forgoing all workplace safety they expected from their employer. If workers “get” the flexibility perk, then they can’t expect anything else from their employers. Here too, the antagonistic relationship between capital and workers is clear.

There are two important avenues for future research on this topic. First, it is difficult to predict how labor is to be organized in the post 2008 economy, or what role
remote work will play in that reorganization of labor. Google CEO Larry Page said in an interview that the economy could easily function, and would actually benefit, if we ended the 40-hour workweek and allowed more people to have well-paying part-time jobs (Fiegerman, 2014). Arguing that the amount of labor actually needed to sustain our society is about 1% of what is currently being done, Page suggested that we “reduce the work week and perhaps split one full-time job into multiple part-time jobs” (Fiegerman, 2014). He does not express whether these multiple part-time jobs would pay the same as the full-time one they replaced, or have the same amount of benefits, but he appears to be suggesting that they would, making this perhaps one of the most progressive suggestions by a corporate CEO on the subject of unemployment.

In a July 18th article of the Financial Times, Jude Webber reported that the Mexican telecom magnate Carlos Slim, allegedly the world’s second richest man, said at a conference in Paraguay that reducing the workweek to three days would increase productivity and contribute to increased quality of life for workers. Those employers able to shoulder the risks associated with a revolutionary overhaul of labor practices are considering their possibilities (Weber, 2013). This illustrates that the question of how to organize labor in the Post-Fordist economy is far from settled. High unemployment is a barrier to economic health, and splitting work hours between several different people may prove to be one of a number of worthwhile, short-term strategies.

Another avenue for future research on this topic would be to explore the expanding legal battles over whether workers have a fundamental right to adopt telework policies, regardless of what their employers think is best. Companies like Google and Yahoo may not be able to restrict telework for long, according to some legal experts in
the United States, who believe that a company’s decision to prohibit programs that contribute to increased work/life balance may be in violation of US labor laws.

In a July 28th, 2014 article in Forbes magazine, Caroline Fairchild suggests that industries known for long hours and inflexible scheduling, such as banking or technology, may unfairly hinder a woman’s chances at professional success because they do not take into consideration the responsibilities of childcare and domestic labor, which falls disproportionately on women. Men can succeed in these industries because they are less likely to need flexible schedules to attend to domestic responsibilities, so the policies against telework rarely apply to them. Under US employment law though, a workplace rule cannot unreasonably affect one group more than another. Policies against telework can be construed as an attempt to treat women differently, a problem the courts may soon remedy (Fairchild, 2014).

To conclude, rather than a panacea for all types of workplace problems, telework is nothing more than one potential method that managers of capital can employ under specific sets of circumstances to increase profits. Predictions from the likes of Alvin, who contends in the Third Wave that large groups of people with compatible jobs would all be soon working from home, are simply too lofty and unrealistic. It fails to account for that nuances of capital, the realities of workplace management and worker resistance, or the changing needs of a post-Fordist economy. In some cases, it is much more beneficial to the employer to have a quarter of the employees doing the work that once took many more, and to make them work in the office rather than the “electronic cottage,” where they can be pushed, evaluated, monitored, and forced to collaborate, all for the benefit of the employer, and where an army of highly educated unemployed masses are waiting at
the office doors for a chance to take the place of any workers unwilling to comply with company demands. It is more likely that telework will be used to attract in-demand labor of highly skilled managers and technicians, who prefer to telework so as to avoid relocating, than it is to be offered to the millions of working mothers who are forced to balance child care and work responsibilities. In the future battles between workers and capital, telework will play a significant role, and this analysis suggests that it is far more likely to be used as a means of controlling workers rather than liberating them.
The Mother of All Hypocrites: Marissa Mayer and the Yahoo!
Telework Ban in the Popular Press

In February 2013, the CEO of Yahoo, Marissa Mayer, declared an end to telework for her employees. News of Mayer’s controversial policy reversal quickly spread throughout the mainstream media, and was widely discussed by experts and commentators. Many analysts were genuinely concerned with figuring out what this move meant for the emergent knowledge economy as a whole, and predicting what it might mean for the millions of working families trying to create lives that truly balance work and leisure. Yet, Mayer was not the first person to end telework at a major company. Google and Facebook, two Silicon Valley giants, had been openly limiting telework at its headquarters for years. Best Buy and Bank of America also ended its telework programs at virtually the same time as Yahoo.

Marissa Mayer’s telecommuting ban garnered significantly more media attention, both in quantity and quality, than other similar bans, which failed to generate much public discussion at all even though they appeared at approximately the same time. The continued struggle for work/life balance appears to be why Mayer’s decision was so provocative, for it signaled a potential shift in the prevailing discourse that suggested unimpeded telework was the wave of the future, and that it was an indispensable arrangement for workers trying to juggle careers and family. However, analysis of the extensive media discourse surrounding Mayer’s announcement revealed that gender, and contradictions surrounding domestic labor, were key drivers in how this story was told and why it was considered important.
Alvin Toffler predicted in the *Third Wave* a world of tiny ‘electronic cottages,’ where worker/citizens would all be comfortably toiling from home, enjoying reduced commutes, closer proximity to family and community, and increased leisure time (Toffler, 1980). As we saw in the previous chapter, this lofty prediction has failed to materialize. We may in fact be working at home more, but we are definitely not working less overall. Americans, employed full-time, averaged about 47 hours per week in 2014, according to a Gallup Poll (Saad, 2014). And yet, there does seem to be a sense in the popular press that Toffler’s calculation is inevitable, that because the technology allows for telework, it can only increase over time. The scholarly literature on telework has become much more complicated since Toffler wrote the *Third Wave*, but is often limited to a discussion about whether telework has “good” or “bad” outcomes (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007).

Despite the richness of the literature on telework in general, covered in the previous two chapters, the contribution this chapter seeks to make is in the area of the popular press coverage of telework, where there has been a noticeable lack of research. Sue Shellenbarger performed a minor study that was published in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1997, in which she compared popular depictions of telecommuting to informal surveys she did with teleworkers (Shellenbarger, 1997). Her conclusions were essentially that advertisers needed to ditch the stereotypes of the haggard teleworking woman, sitting in bunny-slippers and pajamas all day, and instead start representing the diversity and dedication of home-based workers (Shellenbarger, 1997). A limitation of her research is that it focuses exclusively on early popular representations of telework in advertising, however it does offer some valid criticisms, such as the growing need to move beyond...
the idea that teleworkers are all mothers, or even that we need to consider that teleworkers may actually be working more than their office counterparts (Shellenbarger, 1997).

A study by Sebastian Böll, Dubravka Cecez-Kecmanovic, and John Campbell looks at the comments sections of online news stories of Marissa Mayer’s telework ban, in order to understand how the public more generally responded to it (Böll, Cecez-Kecmanovic, and Campbell, 2014). However, that study does not look at the news stories themselves, only the comments sections, and while it does illuminate what a small group of interested readers think of the telework ban, it does little to explain how the news was presented to us, and what ideological discourses are conveyed through those stories. My study differs from the previous project by attempting to better understand how newspaper readers – including readers of the digital versions of news publications – were presented with news about Mayer’s ban, how the story is framed, and what ideological tropes are conveyed.

Methodology

To generate a sample of articles to study, I conducted a Lexis Nexus Academic search of all news articles containing the words “Marissa Mayer,” that appeared between January 1 and March 31 of 2013: the month of the telework ban, as well as the month preceding and following it. I narrowed the sample down further by filtering the articles to just those that were placed in the “Flexible Work Arrangements” content category. This yielded one hundred and forty-eight unique news stories in the US and international press. Stories either appeared in news sections of the paper, and were assumed to provide a balanced approach, or appeared in a commentary or editorial section, and were assumed
to be more opinionated and one-sided. Of the 148 articles, seventy-six appeared in hard news sections of the paper, and seventy-two appeared in commentary sections, such as op-ed or employment columns. In a few cases, there were articles that were overtly supportive or critical of Mayer’s ban, but appeared in the hard news sections nonetheless; they are counted amongst the opinion pieces. These anomalies appeared mostly in highly opinionated, soft news publications such as the *New York Daily News* or *USA Today*.

The methodology I employed to examine these articles is a critical discourse analysis, using an inductive data investigation approach described by David Thomas (2006). The outcome of such an analysis, according to Thomas, is the “development of categories into a model or framework that summarizes the raw data and conveys key themes and processes” (Thomas, 2006, p. 240). To build this framework, the researcher begins with a close reading of the data until a familiarity with the content is established, allowing the investigator to identify themes or categories in the raw data. Once these broad categories are identified, the data is continuously reread and refined to ensure that the themes are accurate and inclusive, and once no new categories emerge, it is assumed that all the major themes have been identified. (Thomas, 2006, p. 241-2; Marshall, 1999, p. 419).

Established categories contain all of the following, according to Thomas: thematic titles that identify the category’s significance, descriptions of the categories, text from the raw data that is exemplary of the themes, links that are drawn between the categories and others in the study, and finally a framework or model in which the categories are situated, which explains the data as a whole (Thomas, 1999, p. 240). The final task of the researcher is to explain the data using the framework that has been built, to construct a
cohesive explanatory model, so that readers can make sense of the mass of information. The application of this methodology led me to identify key terms or phrases that appeared frequently to describe the Mayer ban. For example, terms like “innovation,” “perk,” “privilege,” and “nursery” showed up in a large proportion of the articles, which made decoding their meaning a central task in understanding the context of the ban.

This method alone is incomplete, though; it must be considered in relation to the broader tradition of critical discourse analysis, which provides a clearer context about the goals of the methodology. According to Norman Fairclough, critical discourse analysis is an “analytical framework—a theory and method—for studying language in its relation to power and ideology” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 1). It is a source for people who are “struggling against domination and oppression in its linguistic form” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 1). He goes on to say that, “Power is conceptualized both in terms of asymmetries between participants in discourse events, and in terms of unequal capacity to control how texts are produced, distributed and consumed in particular sociocultural contexts” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 1-2).

To conduct a critical discourse analysis then, a researcher integrates “(a) analysis of text, (b) analysis of processes of text production, consumption and distribution, and (c) sociocultural analysis of the discursive event” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 23). Using Thomas’ method as described above allows me to analyze the text, in this case news articles that cover Marissa Mayer’s telework ban. But to analyze the processes of text production, consumption, and distribution, and to conduct the sociocultural analysis of the discursive event (the ban), I will employ Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Model (1980). Hall’s model contends that the mass media transmit messages to us in a series of distinctive
moments: production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction, and that an event must become a story before it can be communicated to us (Hall, 1980, p. 128). When they communicate to us, the media encode ideological meaning into a text in order to transmit it to us in an understandable way, and then we as the consumer decode those messages in ways that often, but do not always, reflect the dominant understanding (Hall, 1980). Consumers can read texts in dominant ways, which are the preferred interpretation according to the producer, or they can decode the texts in ways that are largely oppositional to what the producer intended. Finally, consumers can decode a text in a negotiated manner, opting to make sense of the producer’s intended meaning in relation to their own experiences (Hall, 1980, p. 136-8).

The sample of news stories that cover Marissa Mayer’s telework ban are analyzed using Thomas’ inductive method, which provided me with the ability to create conceptual categories that explained the data as a whole. Using critical discourse analysis theories from Fairclough and Hall afforded me the capability to situate those conceptual categories within a wider context of journalistic standards, gender, power, and ideology. The categories that emerged have limits in their explanatory power. To truly understand the scope and impact of Marissa Mayer’s telework ban, attention needed to be given not only to the content of the news stories, but also the structures of meaning that circulate in and through the news media itself. For example, stories that were supportive of Mayer’s telework ban may have avoided referencing the fact that she was a woman. Fairclough calls this “implicit content,” or the absence of content, which itself can provide “valuable insights into what is taken as given, as common sense” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 5-7).
Ideology is often considered beyond the scope of debate, ergo the importance of Mayer being a woman did not need to be mentioned, as readers would already suspect her gender, given her name, and would understand the ideological paradigm in which her gender operates. Likewise, using Hall’s model, we could explore the ways in which this example demonstrated the dominant code, the likely intended reading of the story, which might have deliberately ignored the fact that Mayer was a woman in order to satisfy a professional norm of journalism, such as objectivity (Hall, 1980, p. 136). In short, a critical discourse analysis necessitates a comprehensive framework that not only organizes and explains the content of the sample, but also situates it within the wider contextual and ideological discourses.

One of the ways to place a critical discourse analysis of news stories within its proper context is to examine how and why a particular news story is selected for coverage in the first place. Understanding how Mayer’s telework ban was covered in the press requires us to explore why journalists felt it was newsworthy to begin with. The first scholars to investigate this topic were Norwegian researchers Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge, who presented their findings in the Journal of International Peace Research in 1965. They began by asking how an event becomes news, arguing that the decision to cover an event, or ignore it, was a culturally determined phenomenon (Galtung and Ruge, 1965, p. 65). Given the inability for journalists to cover everything that happens every day, they argued that there needed to be a set of criteria by which journalists determined what gets covered.

Galtung and Ruge developed twelve factors that they posited were satisfied whenever events became news: frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness,
consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons, and references to something negative (Gatlung, and Ruge, 1965, p. 70-1). This study has long been considered the foundation of news values research (Bell, 1991, p. 155). Their twelve factors are still considered and cited as “prerequisites” for news selection (Herbert, 2000, p. 72-3).

Critics of Gatlung and Ruge have argued that their study privileges the idea that news is ‘out there,’ waiting to be covered, when in reality news is constructed by journalists, it is produced by them and situated within particular contexts of meaning (Vasterman, 1995). Stuart Hall adopts a similar critique of Gatlung and Ruge, suggesting that the factors they outline may be useful in explaining how an event becomes news, but these conditions do little to explain the ideological justification behind these news factors themselves (Hall, 1973). In other words, Gatlung and Ruge are correct that elite persons generate coverage, but Hall would argue that there is no discussion as to why this is the case, or what that tells us about our societies’ structures of power. Hartly points out that some news stories receive considerable amounts of news coverage without fulfilling any of Gatlung and Ruge’s news factors (Hartly, 1982). This is explained by the fact that political and economic concerns, which fluctuate considerably, do not fit into Gatlung and Ruge’s system very well (McQuail, 1994, p. 271). All told, there are political, economic, and ideological factors that shape how news story are selected, which are not captured in Gatlung and Ruge’s schematic.

Attempts have been made to update Gatlung and Ruge’s theory. For example Deirdre O’Neill and Tony Harcup developed an alternative set of factors that addressed the shortcomings of the Gatlung and Ruge (O’Neill and Harcup, 2001). In their ten
criteria they include entertainment news, which can comprise stories about sex or human interest, and also a category dedicated to the ideological or political economic interests of the news outlet (O’Neill and Harcup, 2000, p. 279). They claim that journalists do not have an accepted list of values that determine what stories to cover, but the scholarship on news values has afforded researchers a solid set of criteria that explains, with relative accuracy, why an event becomes news.

Stories that involve elite persons, in surprising circumstances, in which many people are affected, tend to garner significant news coverage (O’Neill and Harcup, 2009). This could easily explain why Mayer’s telework ban was so widely commented upon. As one of only fifty-three female CEOs of a Fortune 1000 company, Mayer was also 33 and pregnant when Yahoo poached her from Google (Weise, 2013). Her youth, her parental status, and her gender made her a unique focus of public analysis on the hot topic of telework. The Yahoo telework ban satisfied a number of conventional news values according to Gatlung and Ruge, as well as the one developed by O’Neill and Harcup. In this chapter, I used the study of news values to situate the telework ban within its discursive context.

Situating the news stories into proper context also means exploring the journalistic convention of objectivity, and balance. The news stories in this sample fall into two distinct categories: stories that were supportive of Mayer and her ban, and stories that were critical. Using Mayer as the focus of a discussion about telework highlighted a clear dichotomy of supporters and critics, which maximized the drama, increased interest in the story, and allowed journalists a semblance of objectivity. This dichotomous news coverage reflects the fact that like most news stories, journalists
attempted to cover Marissa Mayer’s telework ban in an objective way. According to Gaye Tuchman, objectivity in news reporting is a reflection of a journalist’s desire to insulate him or herself from professional risk by providing readers with at least two opinions from opposing sides of an issue (Tuchman, 1972). Journalists can plausibly claim that they are reporting just the facts, and are not injecting their own opinions into a story. (Tuchman, 1972, p. 666).

However, according to Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke, and Brian Roberts, this drive for objectivity is a problem because it is sometimes manufactured: stories are presented as a debate between two opposing forces so as to maximize drama and enhance the newsworthiness of the story (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts, 1978, p. 58). Positioning a story this way is a journalistic convention that serves to make stories understandable to the public. “An event only ‘makes sense’ if it can be located within a range of known social and cultural identifications,” states Hall (Hall, et al, 1978, p. 54). Therefore, it is clear that Mayer’s ban was newsworthy partially because it allowed journalists to discuss telework using a specific person as the central character, while at the same ensuring that the story could be told in an objective way, with unambiguous boundaries between sides.

The following analysis is separated into two broad sections that reflect the objective coverage, with several sub-themes that fall into those sections. Through this analysis, I exposed two extremely problematic issues within the second category, both of which revolve around Mayer’s treatment in the press. First, the fact that Marissa Mayer was singled out for attention by the media reflects the circumstance that as a woman, and a mother, she was an attractive target for public media scrutiny. Second, as a result, the
media placed Mayer into a classic double bind, meaning that because she is a woman, she would be exposed to negative consequences in the public sphere regardless of if she opted to end telework or not. But first, let us examine the results of the critical discourse analysis to see how these problems were identified.

**Why Ban Telework?: “The Latest Innovation for Creating Innovation.”**

*New York Times* journalists Claire Cain Miller and Catherine Rampell argued that Mayer was “taking on one of the country's biggest workplace issues: whether the ability to work from home, and other flexible arrangements, leads to greater productivity or inhibits innovation and collaboration” (Miller and Rampell, 2013). Comments such as this are common for the articles in the sample. One of the major sub-themes of this category is a preoccupation with the concept of “innovation.” This word appears a staggering seventy times in the sample, and is used in a variety of ways. It is one of the central terms by which we are to make sense of the media’s justification for Mayer’s ban. Understanding how it is used is key to making sense of the news coverage of the telework ban. The term innovation is used to describe the unique product of interaction and communication that happens spontaneously between coworkers in a collocated work environment and it is thus also used to explain Mayer’s telework ban as being an innovative decision.

In the former manner, innovation in the workplace is considered fundamental to tech industry success, and it is only possible when workers are together, bouncing ideas off each other. The *Christian Science Monitor* defended Mayer in an op-ed published on February 26th, 2013, arguing that perhaps a new work arrangement was exactly what was
needed to stir creative, innovative ideas at the struggling Internet giant: “Companies rise
or fall more quickly than ever based on their ability to generate new services and
products” (Christian Science Monitor, 2013). They even suggested that unhappy workers
might soon grow to appreciate the new arrangement, if it works out as Mayer hopes. A
story from National Public Radio also from February, 2013 suggested that workplaces
can either be flexible, or be “serendipitous,” but they cannot be both at the same time
(Noguchi, 2013). Researchers from various disciplines such as occupational psychology
and economics have repeatedly found that random interactions and spontaneous
collaboration can lead to unintended positive benefits to workers and their employers
(Noguchi, 2013). Innovation in this sense is used to signify the types of new, creative
ideas that are needed in order to sustain companies in the highly competitive knowledge
economy through particular working conditions.

If you do not have new ideas, then you have a failing tech company—or so goes
this logic. As such, banning telework was a business decision for Mayer, a strategy to
combat a lack of creativity, increase collaboration, and generate new ideas. As one
commentator put it, Mayer “inherited a complete mess” at Yahoo (Weise, 2013). The
culture of the company was not conducive to the type of innovation that would make it
competitive. Another use of innovation focused on Mayer herself as being tough enough
to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth about located working and collaboration, and
deploying an innovative, if unpopular, solution. Innovation is the term used to defend
Marissa Mayer by arguing that she was going against the grain, trying something new,
and taking a much-needed risk. Susan Milligan of US News and World Report called the
idea of everyone working face-to-face “refreshingly retro,” arguing that Mayer has forced
us all to confront the reality about the inherent value of collaboration (Milligan, 2013). Banning telework may be “the latest innovation for creating innovation” (Christian Science Monitor, 2013). Articles referred to innovation being “driven,” “produced,” or “created” by clever, yet tough technology company CEOs like Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Eric Schmidt of Google, and now Marissa Mayer (Cook, 2013).

Mayer’s approach at Yahoo was characterized as “borrowing from the playbook of Google” (Miller and Rampell, 2013). When Mayer left Google, it was the most successful tech company on the globe, with a number of important perks and policies that ensured happy, productive employees, and a litany of successful, innovative commodities to show for it. When Mayer got to Yahoo, she found low morale, unproductive workers, falling profits, and policies that seemed to be fairly evident contributors to these problems. She introduced free food in the cafeterias, and handed out free iPhones and Android devices to all her employees in order to boost morale and keep workers on site, policies that were met with a high degree of satisfaction (Miller and Perlroth, 2013).

While Google may not have official decree banning telework like Yahoo now has, their entire philosophy of the workplace was designed to indirectly encourage workers to stay put in the office. The success that Mayer had at Google was often mentioned in the sample articles. According to Michelle Gillet, there are Silicon Valley companies that allowed telework, such as Yahoo and Sun Microsystems, and there are others that do not, such as Google and Facebook. Mayer was brought from Google to Yahoo with the purpose of making the work culture of the latter more like the former. Google is the “vanguard of the hip workplace culture” (The Miami Herald, 2013), while Yahoo was described as “a ship in danger of sinking” (The Times and Transcript, March 5, 2013).
That Mayer was with Google from its inception, being the 20th employee, that she helped create the iconic Google Search page (amongst other popular products), and was the first female engineer to be on staff there, are all-important factors in demonstrating that her role was specifically to bring all of the magic of Google to Yahoo, including the former’s work culture (Gillet, 2013).

Telework: Employee Perk or a Worker’s Right?

Another common sub-theme characterizing the defense of Mayer’s ban suggested that her critics were mistaken in believing that telework was a right of workers, rather than just another perk that could be extended or revoked depending on management needs at the moment. The word “perk” appears eighteen times in the sample, and when used it often situates telework within a discursive context of workplace bonuses, which can include gym memberships, smartphones, gourmet food, and other non-essential incentives offered to employees. The word “privilege,” is also used to describe telework broadly, and it was used thirteen times in the sample. These are loaded terms, as they convey an important ideological sentiment. A perk or a privilege is a bonus, it is extra, it is not a standard component of the workplace agreement, and certainly not something offered to all employees at every job. It is not something that has to be given to employees, rather it is something that is earned, or used as motivation. Perks and privileges imply impermanence. This distinction is central to understanding how some commenters defended Mayer’s ban.

As one commentator put it, “I feel privileged to telecommute, but I know it’s not a right” (Reighart, 2013). Telework was placed alongside other Silicon Valley perks such as free food, smartphones, or intramural sports leagues as tools to attract and retain talent,
but needs to remain contiguous to the actual work of the company. According to an article in the *National Post*, the move to ban telework was celebrated by some in the corporate world who lamented the transformation of telework from a perk to an expectation. "Clearly there's a sense of entitlement amongst the ranks [at Yahoo] that seem to think that irrespective of how hard they work or how maybe uncomfortable they are in community work that the company's just going to continue to perpetuate it - that's not the case," said Nick Ballettais, the CEO of a web company called TalkPoint (Boesveld, 2013). It seems that other CEOs may have been her staunchest defenders if only for doing what they themselves felt was beyond their own ability to do. Penelope Trunk, a Silicon Valley career advisor, says that telework has been “implicitly banned” in the tech industry for years, largely due to the reasons Mayer articulated (Boesveld, 2013). Trunk suggests that Mayer simply was the one with the nerve to talk the talk, and walk the walk.

Defenders of the telework ban pointed to the many other companies that were restructuring their employees’ work arrangements at the same time as evidence that Mayer had done nothing unusual by banning telework at Yahoo. Bank of America and Zappos, the online retailer, both ended telework programs in 2013 (Miller and Rampell, 2013). Booz Allen Hamilton and Aetna are maintaining, although modifying, their telework programs in order to figure out how to better balance the collaboration/productivity dichotomy (Miller and Rampell, 2013). Katherine Rushton, the Media, Telecoms, and Technology editor for the *Independent* said that Mayer’s decision marked a “radical step” in an industry that favors flexibility and innovation, while noting that a “flurry of resignations” are sure to follow, and that might be the ultimate strategy
of the move (Rushton, 2013). As Rushton suggested, eliminating a coveted perk like telework may have triggered massive resignations, eliminating the need for Mayer to lay off workers. Bringing workers back in house would mean, “jettisoning a lot of deadwood” (Weise, 2013).

An obvious reason to ban telework is that it can be difficult to monitor workers by remote, which gives credibility to Mayer’s defenders who argued that telework ought to be a perk reserved only for workers who have demonstrated that they can work efficiently from home, and was not a right of all workers. Hamish McRae of the Independent asked, “How do you manage people if you cannot see them” (McRae, 2013). McRae suggested that Mayer was simply trying to discover a solution to a longstanding problem of the flexible workplace, and while telework is not likely to disappear from our midst as a result of Mayer’s decision, it may be reined in worldwide before it becomes the norm for core workers with the technology to take advantage of it (McRae, 2013). Edward Glaeser said that Mayer’s decision reflects the fact that telework is neither always right nor always wrong, but is right for certain circumstances (Glaeser, 2013).

Furthermore, Glaeser argues that the telework ban proved that face-to-face time between employees is more important than anyone could have realized, and technology is unprepared to ever fully replace real contact. (Glaeser, 2013). If it is difficult or impossible to oversee employees, then it is possible that workers are going to slack off on the job, or at the very least, they will be prone to repeated interruptions at home. Katie Roiphe of Slate made the case against telework in an article published February 27th, 2013. Roiphe was skeptical about the prevalence of what she deemed to be “righteous insistence that we should tear down the walls, break down the barriers, and all toil away
in our bathtubs,” arguing that she is not convinced it is possible that “domestic life can hum on unfettered around us as we are all concentrating like Tolstoy on the task at hand” (Roiphe, 2013). The Washington Post listed “Lack of oversight and the potential for employees to shirk duties” as one of the main drawbacks for employers with telework policies (Russell, 2013).

**Defending Mayer’s Ban**

To summarize, the articles that defended Marissa Mayer’s telework ban contained a number of salient sub-themes. Innovation was thought to be lacking at Yahoo, requiring someone to make an honest assessment, acknowledge that collaboration and teleworking were incompatible, and crack the whip. Creating innovation required innovation. The culture at Yahoo before Mayer arrived was defective. Mayer was a superstar at Google, whose work culture was the complete opposite of Yahoo, so there is good reason to believe that she was brought in to Yahoo in order to make it more like Google. Defenders were eager to point out that Mayer was simply bringing Yahoo in line with other successful tech giants like Apple and Facebook, companies with more efficacious work cultures. It was argued that workers communicate better when they are together, and management can more efficiently observe their employees, and prevent shirking work, if they are all in a single location.

Perhaps the most controversial argument of Mayer’s defenders was that people do not have a legitimate expectation to be able to work by remote. Telework is a perk and a privilege, and as such it can be revoked and re-implemented whenever the boss sees fit. This line of argument was more contentious because while telework may be, legally speaking, just another perk, the ability to have flexible work arrangements is a major
determinant in how families live their lives, and that makes it seem like more than just another workplace privilege. As we turn now to the articles that were critical of Mayer’s ban, we can better see how this conflict was reflected in the press coverage.

Criticisms of Mayer and the Ban

The other major category of articles was critical of Mayer’s ban. She was attacked in three ways: for failing to recognize the irony in her decision, for being a hypocrite, and for being inflexible. First, many found it ironic for a technology company to ban telework when that firm produces and relies upon remote Internet connectivity; second, critics targeted Mayer’s personal circumstances, specifically focusing on her age, gender, personal wealth, and parental status, and the expectations the public has for her to act in a certain way based upon those characteristics. Some of these articles were critical of Mayer personally, but not all. These articles appear in the next section. In the third section, I examine the articles that criticized Mayer for being inflexible, and harboring an outdated sense of workplace organization. What they all had in common was a generalized uncertainty about whether or not Mayer’s identity as a woman and role as a mother should have altered her decision to kill telework at Yahoo. Moreover, questions arose about whether some of these personal factors, such as her extreme wealth and corporate power, made her disconnected from contemporary workplace needs; this opened her up to a barrage of criticism from which many of her peers in the industry were largely immune.
“Painful Irony:” Criticism of Marissa Mayer

Commentators had a field day exploiting two awkwardly ironic circumstances of the Yahoo telework ban. Irony, or some variation on that phrase, appeared eighteen times in the sample. In many cases, commentators made mention of the fact that Yahoo helped build the Internet that made possible remote work in the first place, and that it continues to try and sell the public the idea that it can provide the best technology for keeping people, and workers, interconnected. And yet Yahoo was signaling that no amount of technology could replace the effectiveness of face-to-face contact. Charles Toogood of the Birmingham Post mused if anyone else found it as “deeply ironic” as he did that “those very firms who market and sell the products and services that encourage telecommuting are the same ones who seem to frown on the practice?!” (Toogood, 2013).

Jena McGregor said it was hard to ignore the “painful irony” of an Internet giant, whose very product is remote connectivity and that houses a human resources department insistent that good work can only be done in a central physical location (McGregor, 2013). The editorial board of the Australian Financial Review said, “of course it’s ironic the memo came from a chief executive whose company is in the business of promoting all things Internet” (Australian Financial Review Editorial Board, 2013). Farhad Manjoo of Slate called Mayer’s inability to recognize the irony in her telework ban as “myopic, unfriendly,” and even “boneheaded” (Manjoo, 2013). Manjoo attempted to make the case that flexibility has to be a central workplace principle for any company that wants to keep talented people happy. While Manjoo supports the idea that collaboration is important, and he can understand Mayer’s logic, he is skeptical of the idea that proper collaboration cannot be recreated through technology. This is a recurring theme in many of the articles.
criticizing Mayer. If collaboration is so important, then foster more connections through technology, they argue. After all, the goal of a company like Yahoo is to create products that make remote collaboration possible.

The media did not attack Mayer on a personal level for this ironic circumstance. Jena McGregor’s article referenced the fact that Google also does not allow telecommuting, and this was ironic for the same reason (McGregor, 2013). Charles Toogood’s article also made reference to the fact that the tech industry in general frowns upon remote work while at the same time selling a product that makes it possible (Toogood, 2013). In fact, all of the above mentioned articles place Yahoo’s telework ban within the context of a larger trend of physically located work within the tech industry. This is important because, even if the commentators do not agree with the telework ban, they do not necessarily blame Mayer personally for making a poor decision, but instead suggest that she is simply one more CEO to adopt a trend with which they disagree. In other words, this particular criticism – that it is ironic for a tech company to ban telework – was impersonal and professional.

“That Nursery!” Marissa Mayer as a Hypocrite

The same cannot be said for the second oft-referenced irony, which is that Mayer built a luxurious nursery into her Yahoo office in order to split work and childcare duties, while ignoring that need for her employees. This is another situation in which Mayer was depicted as the number one nemesis of working mothers. In the 148 unique articles in the sample, fifty of the articles made mention of the fact that Mayer built a nursery into the Yahoo offices for her newborn son. Ten of the articles used the word “hypocrite” or “hypocrisy” when reporting on the nursery. In a Daily Mail article from February 26th, an
employee asked what would happen if his wife brought their son to work at Yahoo and set the baby up in the adjacent cubicle (Larson and Peterson, 2012, p. 1).

Another anonymous staffer interviewed by the *Independent* was angry that Mayer had the audacity to complain about empty parking lots at Yahoo offices, presumably because workers were working from home, when she was the only one with the money or authority to simply build a nursery wherever she liked, effectively bringing her home wherever she goes (Brown, 2013). This staffer articulated one of the major complaints typically made about powerful corporate women, which is that they invoke feminism as the foundation for policies that are disconnected from the realities of working mothers. “When a working mother is standing behind this,” said one Yahoo working mom, “you know you’re a long way from a culture that will honor the thankless sacrifices that women too often make” (Brown, 2013). Likewise, it was suggested, that Mayer did not make any friends with working mothers when, after having her first child, she publicly stated that it was “way easier” than people had made it out to be (Peck, 2012).

Working mothers writing in the press registered some of the most vitriol for Marissa Mayer, calling her a hypocrite with no intention of helping working mothers, and “completely out of touch with the modern workplace” (Blakely, 2013). Many commentators identified the privilege gap between Mayer and her employees as it relates to child care, suggesting that what makes a real working mother is the unique class position that forces them to struggle to make work and family stay in harmony. Barbara Ellen in the UK’s *Observer* argued that the criticism that Mayer was receiving was justified because her position as CEO did not excuse her “arrogant lack of interest in her employees’ lives” (Ellen, 2013).
In another article called “The New Mommy Wars,” Joanne Bamberger of USA Today alleged that Mayer had launched “the latest salvo in the war on moms.” “The amount of household help they [wealthy female executives] can afford to manage their family lives,” she continued, “isn't a reality for the vast majority of women and never will be” (Bamberger, 2013). With Mayer’s decision, there was a sense in the articles that not only are her childcare concerns completely different from her working class employees on a personal level, but that people felt they were fundamentally unimportant to her on a professional level, as well.

There was a sizeable contingent that took aim at Mayer for undoing the hard work that feminist activists had put in trying to build a workplace that is less hostile to working mothers. Angela Mollard suggested that Mayer has embraced a working model that simply demands too much from people, regardless of if they have children or not. Mayer shows that we are unable to break free from “the conventional working model as patented by the patriarchy” (Mollard, 2013). Margaret Carlson leveled vicious criticism at Mayer for publicly declining the feminist label, while at the same time sitting in a position where she clearly enjoys the benefit of its power – and also for treating important and hard won benefits like maternity leave as though it were “for sissies” (Margaret Carlson, 2013).

The same was true for many of the experts on work/life balance, who also argued that Mayer was setting back a trend they had been carefully nurturing for years. Kate Lister of the Telework Research Network said that while Yahoo may be moving away from telework, 100 more companies were going in the opposite direction (Smolkin, 2013). Kathie Lingle, from the Alliance for Work-Life Progress, said that the problem at Yahoo was poor management and oversight, not telework, and that Mayer was sending
the wrong message with her ban (Smolkin, 2013). Jack Nilles of Jala International, the man who is credited with coining the terms “telework” and “telecommute,” was quoted in an article as saying that “Yahoo’s Mayer is misguided if she believes just having staff in the same place will lead to innovation (The New Zealand Herald, 2013). He went on to say, “Telecommuters come into the office when togetherness is necessary and work at home or elsewhere when togetherness is an impediment” (The New Zealand Herald, 2013). In these cases, advocates of telework had struggled to change the hegemony of remote work, to transform its public perception. Then out of the blue, Marissa Mayer casually and carelessly destabilized years of their hard work with a simple company edict.

The popular press articles that were critical of Mayer’s decision tended to rely on the argument, true or not, that flexibility was better for working families than inflexible work arrangements, and that Mayer represented an old way of doing business: an unfriendly way. The information revolution means that work need not be located, and Mayer is depicted as treacherously out of touch with the evolution of the modern workplace, and thus with modern families, by instituting such draconian policies. Mayer became in many ways a metonym for antiquated business policies, the quintessential boss of the twentieth century: cold, calculating, distant, obsessed with profits at all costs, and entirely willing to allow her employees to live under a set of circumstances from which she is both financially and politically immune. What makes her different, however, is the fact that she is a woman, a mother, making her decision to act like an emotionless industrialist somehow surprising.
“I Really Thought Workplaces Were Moving Toward More Flexibility.”

One of the popular sub-themes for criticizing Mayer’s decision was to defend the concept of flexibility, and these pieces maligned Mayer for being the enemy of working families, all of whom desire more flexibility. Flexibility appeared in the sample 177 times, more than any other term. Generally speaking, flexibility is looked at favorably, as its opposite is a pejorative term. Therefore, using it in reference to the telework ban automatically situated Mayer in a negative light, as someone who is inflexible, rigid, and detached. Lisa Belkin, a columnist for the Huffington Post, accused Mayer of being out of touch with the needs of working mothers, and of being stuck in the past when she ended telework (Belkin, 2013).

Emma G. Keller of the Guardian said, “Whatever flexibility Yahoo employees previously enjoyed will completely vanish” (Keller, 2013). Another article pointed out that Mayer missed the fact that most young workers had an expectation to workplace flexibility. “Employees, especially younger ones, expect to be able to work remotely, analysts say. And over all, the trend is toward greater workplace flexibility” (Miller and Rampell, 2013). There was sense in some of these examples that people were genuinely surprised at the Yahoo decision because they felt that telework was on an inevitable upswing. Carol J. Auster, professor of sociology at Franklin & Marshall College, was quoted in an article as being stunned by the sudden Yahoo move. "I really thought workplaces were moving toward more flexibility," she said (Cassidy, 2013).

Flexibility was an especially contentious topic when discussing mothers. The language used to describe flexibility was not about choice, but of necessity and rights.
“Moms need flexibility,” said Joanne Bamberger in *USA Today* (Bamberger, 2013). Ruth Marcus of the *Washington Post* said workplace flexibility “allowed me to cling, however tenuously, to the level of adequate mommy” (Marcus, 2013). Katrina Onstad of the *Globe and Mail* said, “It’s symbolically brutal that a woman reaches rarely scaled corporate heights and then immediately eradicates work flexibility, an arrangement so many women rely on to stay in the working world” (Onstad, 2013).

Genevieve Meegan of the *Advertiser* in Australia contended that Mayer’s decision flew “in the face of global employer trends offering greater flexibility and choice, particularly to working parents” (Meegan, 2013). In this line of argument, Mayer was depicted as out of touch with the business and workplace trends, which showed that workplace flexibility was globally a popular option. They also painted her as hopelessly disconnected from the needs of working mothers specifically. She was criticized for her lack of attention to the global workplace trends that placed employee work/life balance on par with profits.

**Discussion**

At the forefront of criticism was both Marissa Mayer’s class position as a wealthy CEO, and the expectations placed on her as a young mother, and therefore somehow representing the interests of mothers everywhere. It is easy to understand the outrage at Mayer’s decision to rescind flexible work arrangements, especially when Mayer herself enjoys the finances to create whatever childcare model is most convenient for her: a luxury that most other working mothers could never imagine. It makes her a very easy target of the frustrations felt by working people stretched beyond their financial and personal limits. The trope that Mayer is unsympathetic to the needs of working families
was not made any better by the fact that she built the nursery into her Yahoo office, and took a very short maternity leave: two circumstances that did not go unnoticed by the press.

While Mayer was crucified for prioritizing the interests of capital over the interests of families, the criticism was compounded by the fact that Mayer is a woman and a mother, who was accused of betraying her gender. Her critics charged her with starting a trend, or at least giving credibility to a trend, of reduced telecommuting options for working families. This is not accurate, since the discussion about work/life balance has been ongoing for years, and she was not the first to end telework. What is unique about her though, are the expectations placed on her as a mother and a woman, a pressure to represent the interests of those like her. Advocates of telework argued that she could have solved the problems at Yahoo while protecting the flexibility the workers came to expect. But Mayer was the CEO of Yahoo, and she felt that telework had to go. To argue then that the workers deserved telecommuting options; that she owed it to her workers to protect that option, or even that it is a need of workers, is a different argument altogether, one that goes far beyond Mayer and Yahoo.

What is newsworthy about this story then is not that a Silicon Valley tech company ended its telework policy; it is that a mother in a position of power acted more like a boss than a mother. According to O’Neil and Harcup, journalists often attempt to tell news stories by focusing on the elite persons involved in an event, rather than struggling to make a meaningful, interesting story about an abstract concept (O’Neill and Harcup, p. 165). This is likely why Mayer’s telework ban was so inviting as a discussion topic by news outlets, because it gave a face to an important, yet elusive concept.
Advocates for working families demonized Mayer in the press, depicting her as out of touch with workplace trends that place a larger importance on flexibility and less significance on face time and direct supervision.

Supporters of Mayer focused more on the toxic environment at Yahoo, and whether or not the telework ban stood a chance at alleviating it, than they did on whether the telework ban was harming working families. The opinions that were supportive of Mayer focused considerable attention on whether or not workplace analysts and commentators had misjudged the future of flexible workplaces. In order to be supportive of the telework ban at Yahoo, one had to ignore the effect it was going to have on working families, particularly parents of young children. When mention of the nursery appears, it becomes very difficult to portray Mayer as anything but a complete villain. The nursery is a loaded term, a sign of her duplicity, and the stand-alone evidence that Mayer is the enemy. Within the example of the nursery adheres the ideologically powerful connotation that obliterated Mayer in the press. The rhetorical muscle of the invocation of the nursery is unquestionable. If you are trying to argue that Mayer cares little for the struggles of working families as evidenced by the telework ban, then this nursery heaps insult to injury, rubbing her employee’s faces in the distinction between them and her. Moreover, it reinforces the fact that Mayer is personally aware of just how difficult it is for people to juggle career and family, and that one of the only mechanisms to achieve work/life balance is to converge the two into shared spaces. Mayer’s nursery is symbolic of the general critique of her in the press, as it represents both her privilege and her hypocrisy.
Conclusion

The story told in the news about Marissa Mayer was important because it came at a crucial moment when mythologies circulating about flexible work in the knowledge economy were entering the hegemonic order, and apparently nearing a point where it was beyond debate. Stuart Hall has written about this concept extensively, incorporating and extending Antonio Gramsci’s theories of ideology and hegemony to apply to all manner of popular culture texts. Hall says that over time, ideas become hegemonic when they presents themselves as the “traditional wisdom or truth for the ages,” when in fact they are a product of historical processes (Hall, 1996, p. 431). This is the case for flexible work, as many in the popular press saw its growth, at least until the Mayer ban, as inevitable.

Many assumed the long term trend was for flexibility to increase as the benefits piled up, but instead Mayer and her colleagues at Bank of America, Best Buy, Google, and other giants, either ended their telework policies, or made public their desire to limit flexible work schedules. So why then was Mayer so viciously attacked for her ban at Yahoo, while these other CEOs received little, if any scrutiny for doing the same thing? The answer to that question lies in the journalistic conventions that encouraged stories to be told using elite persons as the focus, and manufacturing two sides of a debate in order to maximize drama and conflict. The fact that Mayer was herself a working mother made her telework ban appear more ironic and hypocritical than it did for the above mentioned companies, all of which had male CEOs. This is indicative of the way in which these journalistic conventions can have uniquely gendered repercussions. After all, the expectation is for men to act in the interests of the companies they run, where a steadfast
dedication to work over family had been a requirement for years. The articles that showed support for Mayer and her position generally referenced this principle, making it clear that work arrangements were organized according to commercial interests. It should come as no surprise to us when the CFO of Google Patrick Pichette says that they have as few teleworkers as they can get away with, and no one even asked if he, himself had children (Grubb, 2013). Virtually all of the news stories that were critical of Mayer mentioned that she was a mother, and used this to ground a critique of her policy, as though she should be expected to institute policies that were contrary to profits but favorable to families, when men were exempt from such expectations.

The criticism that Mayer received after the telework ban was troubling because it demonstrated that not until a female CEO with children instituted a work policy that was unfriendly to families were we able to start to understand that the interests of capital and the interests of workers with children remain fundamentally at odds. However, this was obfuscated by Mayer’s role as CEO and mother. Rather than blaming her, along with every other CEO, for putting profits ahead of families, she was targeted for being a mother who betrayed other working families, when a number of men escaped criticism for doing the same thing.

For example, there were 148 articles that discussed Mayer’s telework ban, but in an identical Lexis Nexus search of Best Buy CEO Hubert Joly, who ended the telework policy at his company during the exact same period, yielded only five articles that discussed changes to the company’s telework policy. A search of Bank of America CEO Brian Moynihan, who ended his company’s telework policy in December of 2012, two months before Mayer, turned up zero results in an identical search. Mayer reexamined the
role of flexible work, a prevalent trend in her industry, in order to try and increase profits and make her company more competitive. Her role was never to make the lives of her employees with children easier, nor was it the role of the CEOs of other companies. Perhaps some like Sir Richard Branson, CEO of Virgin, who called Mayer’s decision “old school thinking,” were of the mind that flexible workplaces are superior to located offices. However, if his workers suffered from the same low morale and stunted productivity as was found at Yahoo when Mayer took over, one would not be surprised to find his tune change abruptly, and perhaps in a way not unlike Mayer (El Akkad, 2013).

The debate about the future of telework – whether it produces good work and happy employees, or whether it is more trouble than its worth – was encapsulated in the press debate over Marissa Mayer’s telework ban. Articles that supported her position remained fairly neutral towards her as a person, instead focusing almost exclusively on her role as a CEO, except when referencing her critics, who made it clear that there was an expectation that Mayer should act to support working families, and especially working mothers, because she herself was a mother with a demanding job. The discussion in the news mirrored the actual issue in a unique way. The dichotomy between Mayer’s professional role and her family life was conflated by her critics, who were under the impression that she, like every other working mom, would have no choice but to fulfill multiple roles simultaneously: this would mean being a CEO and a mom, not just a CEO. Being a mother would mean she would empathize with other working mothers, and would not be so willing to make their plight more difficult. Her supporters, however, ignored her position as a mother, arguing that as a CEO she had a tough decision to make, and that was all that mattered.
Three of the most heavily used terms in the sample convey crucial ideological information about the stories. The term “flexibility” is an unqualified positive word. No one wants to be associated with a lack of flexibility, to be labeled inflexible. Therefore, to ban telework is to turn against flexibility, to prefer rigidity, hierarchy, structure, and control. The popularity of this term helped to solidify in the minds of readers that Mayer was an inflexible boss, an enemy of emerging workplace trends that favor worker happiness. The “nursery” is similarly used, as it symbolizes the hypocrisy of Mayer. It represents her class, her wealth, and her privilege, but more than that, it is evidence of the unresolved contradictions between worker and capitalist in this relationship. And finally, the term “perk” is deployed to reinforce the managerial position that telework is no more a right of workers than smartphones are, and that expectations of such things are symbolic of a growing selfish worker culture.

The fervor of debate over Marissa Mayer’s telework ban at Yahoo served to reinforce the point that even a female CEO, herself the mother of small children, cannot be relied upon to create corporate policies that protecting the personal familial interests of her workers. If forced to weigh the work/life balance of her employees against increasing profits and company success, any CEO, even a mother, has to sacrifice the former for the latter. Anne-Marie Slaughter said it best when she wrote an article at the time of Mayer’s ban defending the decision, saying “Marissa Mayer is a CEO first, and a woman second,” freeing her from any responsibility for helping working mothers achieve work/life balance (Slaughter, 2013). The criticism Mayer received originated from the double-bind that places women in an untenable situation where, even those in positions of power are under tremendous pressure to satisfy two conflicting needs simultaneously.
If Mayer protected the work/life balance of her employees by refusing to institute a telework ban, she may have been unable to put Yahoo back on course, and would have been fired, much like her predecessors. It is entirely possible that she would have faced public criticism that her sentimentality and maternal instincts prevented her from being a shrewd enough CEO to make the tough decisions. If she forbade telework, she would be publicly tormented for betraying her gender and destroying the working lives of her employees, particularly working mothers. It was lose-lose for Marissa Mayer, a classic double-bind, and not entirely unlike the one faced by many working women every day. If they focus on work, they are guilty of neglecting their families, and if they focus on their families, they are insufficiently committed or incapable of workplace success. Mayer’s dilemma is analogous to that of her employees. She has to balance the familial expectations of all of her employees, and also the pressure to succeed at her job.

Had she been a man, like any of the other CEOs who ended telework at the same time, her gender and her familial status would have been a non-issue and she would have been congratulated for making a tough, but fair decision. Under a capitalist system, simply wishing and hoping for more flexible, family friendly policies is pointless at best, given that all families are at the whim of capricious CEOs who’s first and only responsibility to is to profits. Working under the assumption that the CEO of a billion dollar tech company would ever truly consider sacrificing the solvency of a company under her stewardship in order to allow her employees with family commitments to enjoy a less stressful work/life balance, is an assumption that needs to be dispelled sooner rather than later.
The Flipside of Flexibility: Telework and the Myth of Work/Life Balance

It is hard to deny the appeal of a flexible workplace. Flexible workplaces offer freedom to work when and where a person chooses. If you prefer working in the evenings, it is no problem. If you like to go to the gym in the middle of the day, that is also fine. If something comes up unexpectedly, workers have the freedom to respond quickly, without concern for bosses and schedules. Work is something that you do, not somewhere you have to go. The opposite of flexible workplaces are something most people are quite familiar with, as they were the norm for most of the twentieth century: rigid, bureaucratic, hierarchical, and inflexible, with centralized control over the workflow process. Labor was performed in core locations, close to resources and management power structures. As we saw in the previous chapter, there is reason to doubt whether the future of workplace organizing is going to include more flexibility. The telework ban at Yahoo demonstrated that the value of workplace collaboration to capital is substantial enough to warrant strong prohibitions on flexible working. This chapter extends that discussion, but also questions whether telework is the best model for achieving more work/life balance that is promised from greater flexibility.

Some companies hold that worker interaction is of such paramount importance as to outweigh any of the benefits associated with telework. If this is indeed the trend, and knowledge work is more likely to favor located employment than previously thought, then what does this mean for the workers who are reliant upon flexible work arrangements to achieve work/life balance? Is teleworking the ideal arrangement to create
a more harmonious interaction between work and leisure, or should a shift back towards located working be welcomed by working families? Located working may have significant value for employers, but what is the value to workers of increased face-to-face collaboration and social interaction with their peers? To address these questions, I performed guided interviews with teleworkers in order to get the worker’s perspective on issues of work/life balance. But first, let me provide a review of the literature specific to how telework impacts the worker and his or her family.

**Literature Review**

This chapter is an assessment of the subjective experience of teleworkers, with a focus on identifying and understanding the impact that telework has on the balance between work and leisure time. In this short review of the literature, I will focus on Ellison’s fifth and six categories: boundaries between work and home, and impact of telework on the individual and the family (Ellison 1999, p. 339). One of the main problems for teleworkers is the potential for overwork, which is often discussed within Ellison’s fifth category of telework research: boundaries between work and home. Several studies have revealed that even though many working people seek out flexible arrangements to alleviate the stress of family commitments, teleworkers frequently put in more hours than their office counterparts (Hill, Erickson, Holmes, and Ferris, 2010; Noonan and Glass, 2012). Because telework obscures the boundary between work and leisure, it can encourage workers to attend to child care and house work during the day, pushing paid work into the evening, and thereby effectively eliminating any leisure time (Kraut, 1989). It seems that telework arrangements may be very good at making workers *feel* as though they are working less, when in reality they are working the same amount or
more (Hill, Tranby, Kelly, and Moen, 2013).

The impact of telework on the individual and the family is where I hope to make the most radical contribution with this project, especially with regard to the elusive pursuit of work/life balance. There are two competing camps on whether or not work and life can be balanced with telework. On the one hand there are scholars who claim that telework is exactly what employees need in order to achieve the tenuous balance between work and leisure (Jenson, 1994). And on the other hand, there are those who found that telework erased the line between work and life, which had the opposite effect (Jones, 1997). Especially when one attempts to combine care of a dependent child or elderly parent with telework, the possibility of experiencing balance between work and leisure all but disappears (Christensen, 1993; Riley, 1994). The research thus far has been unsatisfying on this topic; very few attempts have been made to reconcile the contradictions that continue to appear. Other scholars have arrived at more nuanced conclusions than the above research. For example, workers feel that they benefit from having increased control over their remote work options, but also feel that they work too much and cannot effectively balance work and leisure as a result (Hill et al, 1996). Strong evidence indicates that the ‘flexibility’ of anytime work has been disastrous for Type-A workaholic personalities who already struggle to balance work and leisure, but may be acceptable for certain other personality types (Olson, 1988; Olson and Primps, 1984).

This is a major unresolved question in the literature, as the two competing camps disagree on whether telework is the best-case scenario for bringing work/life balance to employees, or whether it simply erodes the boundaries between work and leisure, creating less balance. In this chapter, I will work to reconcile this issue by ascertaining
what teleworkers themselves prefer about located working over teleworking, and pushing them to consider what their ideal work arrangement would look like. Teleworker overwork is a persistent problem as well, and the literature has not been able to fully explain what it is about the telework arrangements that make overwork a persistent problem, or what it is about located working that is preferable for employees. Both of these issues I explore in this research.

**Methodology**

Defining teleworkers is not easy. As one researcher famously put it, identifying teleworkers is akin to measuring a rubber band: “The results depend on how far you stretch your definition” (Qvortrup, 1998, p. 21). One way to add some structure to the stretched definition is to categorize teleworkers using the terminology developed by Gareis, who delineates three groups of teleworkers: supplementary, alternating, and permanent (Gareis, 2002). Supplementary teleworkers labor at home less than one day per week, while alternating workers telework one day a week or more, and permanent teleworkers work at home all or almost all of the time (Gareis, 2002). Therefore, I sought out participants who self-identified as teleworkers, making it clear that they need not be permanent, full-time teleworkers in order to qualify for the study.

In order to attract potential teleworkers to be interviewed, an ad was placed on various social media sites such as Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter, asking for volunteers (See Recruitment Advertisement). Fourteen people responded in total, all of whom were interviewed. Eight of the respondents identified as men and six identified as women. Eight of the participants had children and the other six had none. Seven of the participants were married, three were in long-term committed relationships, two were in
the process of divorcing, and two were single. The sample reflects a diversity of telework options. Included in the sample were university professors (both tenure-track and adjunct), lawyers and telemarketers, IT interns and IT managers, social media marketers and environmental activists. People in all professions work by remote and define themselves as teleworkers; a few do it every day and others as little as half a day per week. But if a job does not absolutely require a worker to be in a specific place to complete work tasks, for example a manufacturing assembly line or a bank teller, then people can be found teleworking in that position.

The interview sample contained members of all three telework groups. Seven of the fourteen interviewees were permanent teleworkers, in that they spend all of their work time, or almost all of it, working from a home office. The other half of the sample was either supplementary or temporary teleworkers, working barely a few days a week from home. For example, one interviewee was an IT specialist for a small insurance company, who said he frequently took off Friday afternoons and worked a few hours over the weekend, when he could have uninterrupted access to the company’s IT networks. According to Gareis’s schema, he would be a supplementary teleworker, working less than one day a week from home. Another interviewee was an attorney who worked from home only on Wednesdays in order to spend more time with his children; he would be characterized as an alternating teleworker. All but two of the teleworkers interviewed for this project had the option to work in an office if they chose, where they had dedicated space set up for them (a cubicle or a personal office).

The study conforms to the requirements of the Canadian Tri-Council Policy on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (2014) and was approved by Western’s
Research Ethics Board in a delegated review (See Western’s Research Ethics Board Approval). All participants gave free and informed consent (See Letter of Information and Consent form) and pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant confidentiality. Interviews were conducted between July and December of 2014, and all but one was conducted using videoconferencing software (the outlier took place in-person). The interviews followed a loose, open-ended format in which I directed workers to explain how they arranged their work and leisure time, and what they enjoyed and disliked about remote work (See Interview Questions). I also asked them extensive questions about the telework policies of their employers, with particular attention paid to how their work is monitored by management. They were asked to explain if they had ever experienced feelings of isolation and loneliness while working from home, and to describe their ideal work/life balance scenario. Each interview lasted around one hour, was recorded and then transcribed using notes taken during the interviews. Below is a table (Table 1) showing the demographic breakdown of the fourteen participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>7 Permanent Teleworkers</th>
<th>7 Alternating/Supplementary Teleworkers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 Men</td>
<td>6 Women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Had Children</td>
<td>6 Had No Children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Married, 3 in Long-Term Relationships</td>
<td>2 Divorced/Separated, 2 Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Self-Identified as Having Same-Sex Partners</td>
<td>12 Did Not State Sexual Orientation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The methodology used to analyze the interviews is a grounded theory method. Charmaz describes grounded theory as “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 1). The researcher constructs a theory “grounded in their data,” hence grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Coding data in grounded theory is a three-step process. Initial coding is the first step, which means that the researcher names sections of the data with a label that “simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 111). At this stage, the researcher pays close attention to the emergent principles, and is open to any and all theoretical possibilities that may be contained in the data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 116). In the axial coding stage, the categories defined in the initial coding are compared against each other to understand how they fit within the category to which they have been placed, and how they differ from the other categories (Corbin and Strauss, 1990, p., 13). The final stage is the focused or selective coding stage, where the most frequently appearing or significant codes from the other stages are used to “sort, synthesize, and conceptualize” the data as a whole (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012, p., 356). At every stage, the researcher must make constant comparisons between the new codes and themes, and the ones previously identified, in order to recognize and account for anomalies, contradictions, and accuracy. “Making comparisons assists the researcher in guarding against bias, for he or she is then challenging concepts with fresh data” (Corbin and Strauss, 1990, p., 9). Explaining these core categories, how they function, what they consist of, and using specific examples from the raw data, is the ultimate function of this methodology.
The interviews followed a predictable pattern, in that the participants discussed what advantages telework offered them, and what drawbacks it contained. Therefore, the results and discussion are separated into three sections that reflect this pattern. In the first part, I examine what people generally liked about remote work; for example, why do the informants telework, were they given a choice, how did the arrangement originate, what do they like about the arrangement, and how is their work evaluated while working under remote situations. In the second part, I focus on the downside of telework, such as its limitations and disadvantages. In the third section, the findings are analyzed and a theory explaining the data emerges.

“I’m In the Zone”: The Advantages of Teleworking

The goal of this research is to ascertain if telework actually increases work/life balance, and also to determine what benefit collocated working has for employees. The argument proffered by Marissa Mayer and other tech industry leaders is that collaboration is good for business, but what do teleworkers think of this? To answer these questions, interviewees were first asked questions that were intended to get them to explain the details of their own unique telework scenarios. For example, they were asked how many days a week they telework, how they structure their day, if they track their work hours, and what they like most (and least) about remote work. These questions were also intended to get the interviewees talking and thinking about their work arrangement prior to being asked more complicated questions, such as “have you ever experienced isolation while working at home?” or “Do you feel you work more or less while teleworking?”

The ability to focus, to work for long stretches of time without distraction, is the single biggest advantage for teleworkers whose jobs favor uninterrupted time. Being in
the zone, or in other words working without distractions is one of the central codes in the data. Frank is an IT intern, who does internal and external website building for a company, said that it can be disheartening to have your workflow interrupted. “I’ll be in the zone, I’ll have earbuds in, coding away, then someone comes to talk to me or something will happen that will break everything. I’ll lose my train of thought and it sucks.” Sam was a web security consultant that converted to permanent telework after two years in the office, who said “the little interruptions that happen in an office, I find, I was really underestimating how destructive they were.” “It takes me some time to get back to where I was.” Coworkers and managers pose a risk of splitting worker attention in different directions, which makes the main task more difficult and less enjoyable because it takes time to get back into a mental state of work, and because having multiple tasks to attend to is stressful. Cecil is a web applications manager who oversees a number of employees, both teleworkers and located, who described the advantage this way:

The biggest reason that is great is giant chunks of time uninterrupted. For our work, once you get in the zone it’s the most precious thing in the world. To have anyone come over and interrupt you... our developers desk can’t call people, our managers can’t call them. Part of my job is making sure that developers have large, uninterrupted times of work on one thing. So that is what is gained, the biggest advantage to not being here. That’s it, that’s the biggest advantage, period. From a managerial standpoint, being distraction free means Cecil’s employees are happier. “If you look at developer happiness, a lot of the time, it’s just no fun to work on four different projects. It’s really hard.”

Some teleworkers felt they could only experience this level of uninterrupted, in-the-zone work while at home, and others made it clear that home was the place in which distractions were far more likely to be a problem. Not surprisingly, for the people with
children, telework as a method of balance is treated with caution and skepticism, especially if they occasionally work with children around. Ramona does part-time social media work for a nonprofit while her son is in daycare four days a week. She said this about working from home while her son is there: “it has to be short things, I can’t do intensive work. But if I need to send a couple quick emails, or there’s an edit I need to do, I can squeeze that kind of stuff in. I might do emails on my phone if he is a little distracted and doesn’t need me.”

Mary, a tenure-track professor with two children, who teleworks one day a week, echoed this point about mechanical work: “I try not to take on any projects that are going to require intense and prolonged focus, or that have a strict deadline of the next day.” She goes on to say that she usually prefers to manage the “mindless tasks” when her kids are home with her. David, an attorney who teleworks one day a week to spend more time with his children, claims that the more mentally taxing work is best left till the kids are asleep. “I try to work when they… the more focused work, when they’re napping, because if you can get them down to sleep for the afternoon, then I can just try to plug away on my work.” Telework then, is not a universal solution for eliminating interruptions to the work process. Or rather, the home is not always the best place to avoid distractions.

**The Dreaded Commute**

After mitigating workflow distractions, which was cited by nine of the participants, reducing a lengthy or stressful commute is the most frequently cited reason to telework. Seven of the participants argued that saving time on commutes influenced their decision to telework (or allow telework in Cecil’s case). Ramona explained “Part of
the reason I telecommute is so that I get an extra hour a day, be that an extra hour to work, or to do house stuff, that’s an hour I’m not in the car,” and when you have children and other domestic tasks, you can’t afford to waste any time. “Your time is very precious,” she says. But when you have children, “it focuses you a lot more. I get done working and I go pick him up, and then it’s those few hours… that I have leisure time, but then it’s spent doing housework and running errands.” For Ramona, the time crunch of the day is too oppressive to waste an hour or more sitting idly in a car. Cy is an environmental and political organizer who fought hard at her previous job to get a telework arrangement, saying “My commute was really long, that’s why it was important for me [to telework]. It was a 45 minute drive each way, which I despised.” Sam, who works in Silicon Valley, said his commute used to be short by Bay Area standards, a meager 30 minutes each way, but even that reduction is noticeable. “That affects my leisure time,” he said. Cecil summed it up by saying telework does not really increase leisure time, so much as it eliminates “time holes, like commutes, things that are totally nonproductive.”

For those whose commute is an annoying 30 minutes per trip, saving 5 hours a week is a fairly attractive incentive. For others, their job was located a hundred miles away, or more, making telework the only way to keep working. Two of Cecil’s employees were located too far to commute regularly. Allowing them to telework meant he could retain quality talent, and keep that talent happy. “The fact that I can free up 4 hours of his week out of a car just to have him work from home is a no-brainer,” saying of an employee who lived about 80 miles from the office and telecommuted 2 days a week. Another of his employees was located in a completely different state, but Cecil
fought to hire him anyway, arguing that he could not find equal talent in the city.

For Alica, who was a part-time telemarketer, her telework job was her second income. She would work a standard, located 9-5 day job, and then come home to start her telework job in the evening. “I would work until 5pm, and my job is about 4 kilometers from my house. It’s pretty close, so I’d rush home and try to gobble down some food, then start my [telework] job at 5:30.” This exhausting regime began as a way to pay down some consumer debt with a part-time job, but she could not bear the thought of working weekends because that would mean having no regular scheduled days off. Not having a commute allowed her to avoid working weekends because the work started as soon as she got home. George was a systems development consultant for a company in Sweden, who was working from Canada while his partner attended graduate school. For him, telework meant not having to try and find a new job in Canada. He got to keep his seniority, benefits, vacation, and other perks. “The best thing is just that I could move to Canada and still keep my job, no problems.”

“I can throw in a load of laundry:” Weaving in Personal Productivity

Being able to telework means being able to occasionally participate in tasks that normally would have to fit around a work schedule. The ability to weave personal errands into the workday is another frequently cited code. Flexibility is really about maximizing personal productivity. George says that he’s been “exercising during lunch,” which could be done when working from the office, “but it’s much more difficult from the office.” Stephen, a purchasing manager, said that teleworking allows him to easily attend to errands and engagements that cannot usually be done after work hours. “I’m having a
counter top put in my home,” he said, so he called his boss and asked to work from home that morning, planning to come into the office after the contractors were finished. “As long as I don’t have any important meetings, and I get my stuff done,” it is not an issue.

For Cy, working from home allows her to walk her dog, which is good exercise and relaxing. She goes on, “I can just go in the kitchen and throw together leftovers for lunch; I can do a load of laundry.” Dana, a manager in a purchasing department at a heavy machinery factory, said it allowed her to pick her kids up and take them to the doctor. She too suggests that doing laundry in the middle of the day is a significant bonus of remote work. “Throwing in a load of laundry takes no more time than if I’m walking down the hallway and person stops me to ask me about my weekend.” Ramona said that her lunch break might involve, “throwing in a load of laundry, and running to the grocery store.” Doing laundry is a popular activity for teleworkers. It operates as a substitute term for the mundane domestic tasks that telework allows you to do during the workday, rather than after work. Telework allows people to double their productivity by doing laundry (or grocery shopping, or going to the doctor) without having to wait until they enter their personal leisure time in the evening.

When asked to describe what they like most about teleworking, why they chose to do it, or what they would miss about it, one answer kept appearing. People enjoy working under circumstances where interruptions and general losses to productivity can be avoided or eliminated. Telework is a fairly solid solution to this problem. If you do not have children at home at least, telework can minimize spontaneous disruptions. It can also allow for prolonged focused attention, it can eliminate lengthy (or impossible) commutes, and it can make time available for other tasks, such as laundry, exercise, and
banking to be woven into the day more seamlessly. When scholars have recorded that teleworkers report being more productive, it is possible that workers merely mistake their own productivity in non-work tasks for increased productivity overall.

The spontaneous collaboration that happens when coworkers interrupt each other, or chat around the water-cooler, or simply bump into each other in the halls, is precisely the type of interactions that teleworkers say they like to avoid. Perhaps this is because to workers, these interactions are not productive. But at least some employers, like Yahoo, have signaled that they see these interactions very differently.

The Professional, Social, and Psychological Downside to Telework

In spite of the considerable, albeit subjective boost to personal productivity that my participants described as coming along with teleworking, both teleworkers and their managers recorded a number of drawbacks. In this section, we will explore the rationale for why both teleworkers, and those who manage them, occasionally prefer working in traditional located office settings. Or rather, what might be the factors that contributed to limiting teleworking? The responses in this section came after interviewees were asked if there was any resistance by their management apparatus to them teleworking, or if their remote work program was ever abused by fellow coworkers. They were asked what they would change about their remote work program if they could make a change, and also asked if they saw themselves continuing to work by remote in the future. All told, managers and teleworkers were in agreement on the assessment of the downside of teleworking.
Out of the Flow: Latency in operations and complicating simple work tasks

One of the major reasons workers dislike remote environments is it inhibits certain tasks that are made easier by being physically located in the same place. One of the codes then is that telework often adds difficulty to tasks that were once completed without much trouble. It complicates simple work operations. For example, employee training, or learning new tasks, is easier when there are people around to assist and answer questions. Frank the IT intern said that he prefers to spend as much time in the office as he can while he is still learning the job. He described it this way:

It’s very helpful to have other people in the office. If I have a problem, or something’s going wrong I can easily talk over something, ask for help. I’m new, I gotta learn more systems, learn how the business grows.

Telework has a built-in latency to the communication between coworkers and networks that is frustrating. Frank said that when working from home, it can take several seconds or longer for updates on his work to populate, which when he is trying to get a project done before the day is over, it can mean having to take himself out of the flow and pick up a project the next day.

David says he avoids trying to communicate with coworkers while he is teleworking. “I try to do things that don’t necessarily require collaboration.” As someone who supervises employees and legal aides at the law firm, he reiterated the point that training and managing is a social exercise that does not translate well to remote locations. “I don’t think I’d have as good of a working relationship as I do with people right now,” he said when asked if he was interested in taking on more telework in the future. Sam, the web security analyst spent two years getting acquainted with the nuances of his job
before switching to a telework arrangement. He cited having access to his trainer as the main reason for wanting to be around the office for the first several months, and one of the drawbacks to going to remote work. “Now that I’m teleworking, it means typing at her, sending her an IM, sending her an email,” which takes more effort because it is “not in the regular flow of things I have to do.”

Communication technology, such as email, instant-message, videoconferencing equipment or software, and telephones make telework possible, but most teleworkers find them to be an insufficient long-term replacement for face-to-face communication. Ramona’s company is primarily teleworkers, although there is an office where workers can gather, most of the employees and board members are scattered throughout the United States. She was new to her job when interviewed, and so getting information from coworkers who were not in a position to respond for several hours created many frustrations for her. In the office, she gets quick answers to questions, as well as a long history of why a certain thing work the way they do. “It’s a 28 year old nonprofit, there’s so much history and sometimes when I ask a question, there’s a ten minute response even though the actual answer is 30 seconds because I get the whole history of why they do something the way they do.” This is an important and rewarding component of working at her company, she said, but you do not get that when you instant message or email each other.

Some technology is better for remote communication than others. Videoconferencing for example, is perhaps the most advanced technology associated with remote work, but teleworkers in the sample found it to be more trouble than it’s worth. Stephen said that they have videoconferencing rooms to use with teleworkers in
his office, but everyone avoids using them. David made the same point, saying everyone in his office prefers phone calls or instant-message to communicate with remote workers. George, whose entire operation is in Sweden, attempted to have video chat software open with his team all the time in order to feel more physically connected to them. He describes the experiment:

That didn’t work, we almost never use it now, we just use messaging or just voice phone. Or Skype with just a voice on. It’s not a natural situation to sit in front of the camera with your face, being filmed; it didn’t work. That’s not how you talk to someone either, with your face looking directly at theirs. You get better connection if you only use voice, that’s our feeling. You get a normal connection; you talk and work. It’s not like 100% taking your attention, this video thing.

On the other hand, Cecil said all of their meetings use video for the remote workers in order to make up for their physical absence. “I try to get as much in-person, but at least I see [the teleworkers] every day on the video screen. They’re always videoed, never just a phone call.” Stella, a software development engineer whose entire company is virtual, said she opts for video before phone calls, but tries to meet up with local coworkers whenever it is convenient. Video conferencing technology and software, although occasionally useful especially for permanent teleworkers, can be cumbersome and awkward.

Increased distance and non-standardized work schedules also create latency for teleworkers. For example, remote communication can actually be an impediment to productivity and efficiency because it presents a delay where one does not usually exist if employees work together. Frank said that working by remote means dealing with technological delays that really add up. “I’m 80 miles away, sometimes there’s a delay of
a couple of seconds, which is really frustrating.” Technological delays aside though, there is also latency in having to wait for other coworkers to respond to a question, or provide approval. Cy is in a different time zone than many of her coworkers, which means getting approval or answers can mean burning through her work hours just waiting for someone else to get back to her.

I think, “I have this idea, I’m going to write it in an email, and I’m going to wait the next two hours and see what everyone thinks about that.” And there’s also those times when I need something and the person is not working, so I have to wait for them to get to work… When I’m in the office, I can get what I need when I need it.

This can be demoralizing for employees, who have successfully eliminated “time holes” such as commuting, only to have it replaced with new time wasters specific to telework, such as waiting around for updates, or for coworkers to respond to issues and questions.

The disconnection from the professional discourse at a workplace can be a major issue when teleworking. For George, time stopped when he left his home country for Canada and began teleworking. He describes it this way:

I know what we’re doing in the project, but I don’t know what’s happen in a general sense. What are people doing, where are we going professionally? When I’m at the office, I can always have my eye on the future, or it looks like these projects are coming in, this is where we’re going and what we’re doing. You feel like you’re wasting a little a bit, a part of the thing about having a job, you’re missing out on it.

Professional Repercussions of Teleworking

Being disconnected from the work discourse in this way can have professional
repercussions as well. The negative toll teleworking may have on people’s careers was
another of the codes in sample. Stephen said that there is a belief amongst his coworkers
that a person needs to be seen working if they want to advance their career. When asked
why an employee who does good work by remote would find it difficult to advance their
career, Stephen said, “you can be a stellar performer, but if you’re not in the office,
building the relationships, it’s gonna be more of a challenge. That’s just the breaks.”
Upper management does not explicitly say that working from home will hurt your career,
in fact at Stephen’s work place, they strive to give the opposite impression because “they
want people to enjoy their work/life balance.”

When Stephen was asked if he thought this system of surreptitiously punishing
teleworkers might be unfair to women with children, he replied that it does. It was
obvious this bothered him, so he tried to clarify that it might not be the case at every
workplace. “I’m in a silo of a silo within this company so I can only speak to that, but
from what I know, working there, I’ve been there 8 years. I would definitely say that
there is still an unwritten thing, it’s not going to be looked down upon, but it’s not gonna
get you to the next echelon.” It appears that telework comes at a professional cost,
especially for women with children who do not see telework as an option.

At Stephen’s work place, telework is permitted, but it is widely known that too
much remote work limits a person’s ability to advance their career. In other workplaces,
managerial resistance to telework is more overt. Part of the problem is that remote
workers are believed to be unaccountable. Managers at Stephen’s office can, and often
do, monitor the activities of workers by observing indicators built into instant-messenger
software. “If someone walks away from their computer, their status changes… [we] can
see if they are doing laundry, doing TV, by their status being orange for four hours.” Sam agrees, even though his employer is more supportive of teleworking overall. “There is a feeling in the office that these people [teleworkers] are out of hand, like they’re away, who knows what they’re doing, when they turn in their reports, but they’re not really here. They’re not a part.”

The belief that teleworkers are unaccountable is so widespread that it can be difficult for some workers to get a flexible arrangement approved because it can lead to animosity between those who telework and their located coworkers. Cy encountered resistance from her employer because of what she described as a “conservative work culture.” Employees who had been at her job for longer than she had believed that “when you’re not in the office, you’re not working.” For Sam, this was especially true with his trainer, who felt that teaching was an ongoing, mutual process among all employees. In both cases, there were located workers who complained to managers that it was unfair to pay people to telework when their productivity could be measured against their located counterparts.

**Teleworking and Overworking**

The belief that teleworkers are constantly slacking off might be common, but there is little evidence in these interviews to suggest it is actually true. In fact, the opposite seems more likely to be the case, in that teleworkers are more likely to overwork, which is an important theme in the data. “The challenge for me, certainly in this environment, is regulating how much I work,” said Stella, who is a permanent teleworker. In practice, she says she tries to keep a 9-5 schedule, but flexibility means working until the job is done. There are no formal requirements to work nights or
weekends, but the work is there to be done all the time. “It’s just having that flexibility means it’s much, much more difficult to place restrictions on the amount you’re working. It’s like the opposite problem of the standard workplace, in a lot of ways.” When asked what she meant by this, Stella argued that in a located workplace, there are structures and rhythms that determine your maximum work output for the day, such as commute times, lunch breaks, schedules, closing time, meetings, and coworker interaction. But in a telework environment, “there really aren’t pieces of structure that would necessarily say, ‘you’ve been here, you’ve worked for 40 hours, it’s time for you to go home.’ Because you are home.”

Cy, Sam, and George, the other permanent teleworkers in the sample, echoed this anxiety about the potential for overwork, and expressed the need to set a strict time boundary in order to keep from working long into the night or on weekends. As Cy put it, “That’s actually one of the things that telework really invites, is spending way more time at the office than if you were actually going in to an office. I don’t do that, I make a very pointed practice of not doing that, unless I absolutely have to.”

Permanent teleworkers appear to be more aware of the potential for overwork, and take steps to mitigate it, while alternating and supplementary teleworkers seemed oblivious to the risk of overwork. Dana said that she liked to work in the evening after her children were in bed. When asked if she considered this telework, she responded with surprise that she had not thought about it that way before. “Good question. I guess so because I’m still doing my work, my normal work away from my physical work location. Would I have driven to the office to do that same work that I’m doing in from of my TV in my jammies? No.” When asked how much he worked away from the office, in
addition to the standard 40 hours, Stephen seemed genuinely incapable of determining it. “If I’m home after 5pm, a lot of time I’m working on stuff, maybe 10%, 20%?”

Ramona is responsible for social media, which means there is pressure to be participating in a sphere that does not conform to 9-5 schedules. When a major news story broke over a weekend, she went to work, even though nobody told her she had to. “I felt compelled to be involved… I wanted to be able to respond to things in a timely manner. My free time was spent on social media that week.” For these teleworkers, there is an expectation that you use the available technology to log a few hours of extra work from home, in addition to the time already spent in a physical location. And because it falls outside the standard work time, or workplace, they do not easily register it as real work.

“I get to have my Christmas Party in my kitchen!”

Telework and Isolation

Professional isolation is a problem for some of the teleworkers interviewed, but it mainly affected those who teleworked most: either permanent or heavy alternating teleworkers. Its importance as a theme in the data is undeniable, as the repercussions appear the most serious for this factor. When they had no office to go to, no regular social interaction with physically located coworkers, teleworkers were at risk of becoming professionally ineligible from promotions and disengaged from the day-to-day business.

It became clear during the interviews that there was a significant social component to this professional isolation that was, I argue, an even bigger problem. For example, Sam’s trainer and office manager, both of whom were not permitted to telework, led him to believe that what they really enjoyed most was simply “being in the
office, having all the people there,” he said. “[The office manager] is always baking cakes, bringing them in,” and moreover, “having people not in the office deprives her of her ability to maintain a community in the office.” For some who prefer office environments, allowing telework denies them of the camaraderie of shared experiences that accompany mandatory located working. When asked what the biggest drawback to teleworking was, or what he or she would change if they could, every single interviewee said that it is the feeling of isolation that comes from working alone.

Psychologically, this type of social isolation can be quite dangerous. Dana said that she is prone to introversion, and if she was not forced to be social amongst coworkers, she might find herself retreating into solitude. This would be a major problem for her: “I don’t think that’s good for me psychologically. I think people need other people, whether we want to admit it or not, we want to be with each other, our own kind.” Ramona said that she could go for days without talking to anyone but her toddler and her partner, which can be maddening after a week or so. It makes her jealous of people that get to have expansive social connections with work friends. Sarcastically, she said “I get to have my Christmas party in my kitchen.”

Stella, who was perhaps the staunchest defender of telework, said “there’s not a lot I miss about working in a located office.” But the thing she did miss was “being able to form the types of relationships with my coworkers that tended to lead to socializing outside of the workplace.” She claimed to have formed good, friendly relationships with colleagues; however they mostly stuck to work related chats. The problem she said is that the spontaneity is gone. “If you’re going to do things with colleagues after work for those that live close, it can’t be spontaneous. It’s structured, you have to plan ahead.” And
when that is the case, social interaction becomes too big of a chore. “The ease of having that interaction at the end of the day, when everyone is leaving work – that is the good opportunity to get together and do something spontaneously.” While explaining this, it was clear that Stella missed this spontaneous social interaction more than she initially realized. When asked if the lack of spontaneous social interactions was what led to her overworking, she agreed that it was possible. “Turning off work in some sense does lead to turning off the social group, the social network. It’s true.”

Richard was an adjunct professor in an online university in the United States, who said that he desperately needed to explore volunteer opportunities in order to combat the loneliness and isolation of remote work. “I have two volunteer jobs now that I do, just so that I can meet people and talk to people,” he said. For him, there was no question that the isolation he experienced while teleworking directly resulted in his desire to engage with his community in this way. As a graduate student and lecturer, Richard was involved in a community of scholars and students with whom he felt he could engage in spontaneous leisure activities, but once he completed his degree and moved to a new city, the fact that he was no longer required to appear physically at a workplace had quick and devastating effects on his mental well-being. He recorded having debilitating anxiety attacks and was diagnosed with depression.

To conclude, the interviews revealed a considerable dark side of teleworking. Interviewees felt that teleworking made certain tasks more difficult, things that used to be easy are now a problem: asking questions of coworkers, receiving instructions, or taking advantage of a more sophisticated technological network, are all complications specific to teleworkers. Communicating with and between remote workers is easy enough, as most
workers do not find it to be inhibiting, although videoconferencing software and technology is considered largely inadequate. A major drawback of teleworking is the disconnection that comes with not being visible in the workplace. This has two potential repercussions. On the one hand, it can be personally and professionally unsatisfying to be disconnected from the culture of the workplace. Discussing issues with coworkers, solving problems, and participating in office events, are contributors to heightened personal engagement. Moreover, this absence from work culture can mean that employees are sometimes overlooked for career advancement. Promotions have as much to do with office politics as they do with job performance, making the choice, or need, to telework potentially very costly.

The interviews showed that many of the informants’ workplaces were still wrestling with the belief that workers must be under direct supervision if they are to be expected to produce, and since teleworkers are not directly supervised, it is believed that they must be shirking responsibilities. As a result, some workplaces limit telework to as-needed situations, or they monitor teleworkers more closely in an attempt to mitigate animosity between located workers and teleworkers. This assumption about the duplicity of the wily teleworkers is problematic, primarily because telework appears to invite overwork rather than underwork. The lack of work structure and the remote connection capabilities means that employees are never without the technological capacity, and the professional compulsion, to be working. Finally, the biggest problem cited by interviewees was the social isolation that comes from teleworking. The fact that when teleworking, it is easy to go for prolonged periods of time with very little human contact, is a troubling dynamic of this work arrangement, and one in which virtually all the
interviewees were aware.

Conclusions: “It’s like having shackles on you all the time.”

This research project sought to discover if telework is the ideal scenario for workers to achieve work/life balance. What is fascinating about these interviews is that flexibility, for the most part, was seen by teleworkers as a minor advantage, a convenience at best. This is far from the life-altering paradigm shift advocates of work/life balance through telework claim it to be. George argued that he liked being able to take a jog in the middle of the day, although he said he could do that from the office, too. And Cy expressed her affinity for a mid-day dog walk. Ramona was able to keep her son out of day care one day a week, which saved them a few hundred dollars each month. David was able to spend a few extra days each month with his children. Dana could take her kids to a doctor’s appointment, or throw in a load of laundry. While these benefits of telework should not be overlooked, they represent only modest mitigations of the conspicuous lack of balance modern workers experience. There are some advantages to telework scenarios, but work/life balance is not large amongst them.

The attraction of telework, and presumably the reason that it is suggested as a mechanism for increasing balance, is that it allows workers to prevent work tasks from taking up all the usable time in the day, every day. Teleworkers are free to take a walk in the middle of the day, do laundry, make appointments, go shopping, even spend time with children, all while technically at work. In this sense, the term ‘flexibility’ means having the ability to attend to non-work obligations during work hours, which is no doubt an attractive feature of telework – but unfortunately, the opposite is also true. This flexibility means having the ability to attend to work obligations during non-work hours,
as well. While it appears as though employers are slow to adopt telework, in reality managers simply wish to maximize worker output, which can mean having workers put in a full day at the office first, where they can be monitored and evaluated, and then setting them free to work from home as much as they wish, always ensuring there is more work to be done.

The flipside of flexibility is that you may be expected to work, or required to work, or feel indirect pressure to work, even when you do not want to. As George made clear in his interview, employers make a big deal out of giving workers unprecedented levels of freedom to work anywhere and anytime they wish, but this ends up being a burden, a compulsion to work all the time, no matter where you are or what you are doing. “You could be working right now, on the beach,” he says of how his and other employers discuss telework. “It would be much better if I can’t work right now, because I’m on the beach.” “It’s like having shackles on you all the time,” he said.

Employers invest in technologies that make it possible for their workers to have remote connectivity, allowing them to work at night and on the weekends, after the standard workday is done. Employers, even the ones who are reluctant to allow full-scale telework, see no problem with workers telecommuting on their free time. As Dana became aware, she would not have driven to work after putting her kids to sleep, but often attends to work tasks while watching television in the evenings. Her realization points towards the fact that telework is not really a problem for employers, as they actively encourage it, so long as it happens after workers have already put in the requisite workday or workweek.
True freedom does not come from flexibility then, but from the opposite: from the concept that work can only be done during certain times, and at specific places. While working for a client with sensitive security needs, George was required to complete all work on-site, inside of a high security zone. He was not allowed to discuss details of the job, or do any related work outside of that space, but he remembers the experience fondly. “It was such a liberating experience,” he said, because when he was not in that zone, he did not have to think about work. “The ability to not work remotely is such a freedom, because I’m so free when I go out of the office.” Flexibility is a catchall term for reduced structural pressure to complete paid work tasks during specific times and at designated spaces, which is attractive to workers who are often pulled in many directions at once.

While the structural pressure may decrease in telework scenarios, the indirect pressure to work more, to work harder, to sacrifice free time for work time, to never let work slip out of mind, increases dramatically. The freedom to work anytime ends up manifesting itself as an expectation to work all the time. It should come as no surprise that eliminating the boundary between work and leisure would lead to less, not more, balance between the two. Stella had unlimited and unstructured vacation at her job, but found that she took less vacation than she did when she had a set amount of days every year. “I think I did take more vacation time when it was structured. I made sure to take 3-4 weeks vacation, but now there’s not the same type of pressure to use it before you lose it.” During the interview, she estimated that she took two weeks of vacation in the last year and a half, but could not remember how much vacation time she had actually used in the last two years.
Balance between work and leisure also means having enough free time to engage in social activities. In Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, he details four types of alienation under capitalism. In the fourth type, called social alienation, it’s assumed that Marx meant that workers are forever forced to confront other workers as competitors (Ollman, 1971, p. 148). As a result, social isolation is often associated with prolonged periods of time spent at a workplace, rather than away from it. This project complicates the accepted Marxist view that has long argued that waged labor is an alienating experience in itself. This research suggests that the experience of working alongside other people plays an important social role for us, and the lack of it can have disastrous effects on our mental health. The teleworkers interviewed for this project reported that spontaneous social interaction with coworkers was extremely enjoyable to them personally, professionally, and emotionally, and the loss of it while teleworking was the single biggest reason to consider working in an office with other people. Even the interviewees who are permanent teleworkers describe the lack of social interaction as the only thing that would compel them to accept a located office job again.

An undervalued side effect of located working is the propensity for workers to cultivate personal relationships with their coworkers. Work has an important social function, which is jeopardized under telework scenarios. In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg developed the theory of the “third place,” which are the coffee shops, bars, community centers, main street shops, or other social hubs that are the foundation for a thriving democracy (Oldenburg, 1989). These places have a number of things in common that make them attractive spaces for citizens looking to recharge depleted social batteries. It is called the “third place” because it is neither home nor work—the first and second
places respectively—but the “other” place that a person goes to experience social or

The problem, according to Oldenburg, is that North Americans no longer have
any spaces that serve as this third place, and our emotional and civic lives are suffering as
a result. Worse yet, in the absence of opportunities to frequent such places, citizens often
rely on their workplaces to satisfy their need for spontaneous social conversation. The
coffee break and the water cooler conversation are frequent, although imperfect fill-ins
(Oldenburg, 1989, p. 12). If you are a teleworker, then your workplace is also your home,
and so not only are you without a “third place,” a space for social communitarian
interaction, but you also do not have the “second place.” Under a telework scenario, we
just have the home, which is the workplace, the leisure space, and the social space all
collapsed together.

Given the findings of this undertaking, it is hard to conclude that telework
facilitates anything resembling balance. Indeed, some tangible improvements to the
maximization of leisure time are possible in telework scenarios, but they are largely
subjective and undeniably modest. The conclusion of this project is that work/life balance
cannot be achieved through “flexibility” because there are two sides to flexibility in the
workplace. Certainly there are more opportunities to take the dog for a walk or wait
around for the cable installer to arrive, but it comes at a heavy cost. The sensation that
you could always be doing work is a constant, oppressive feeling that many workers
argue is always there. It leads to overwork, and an inability to enjoy leisure activities due
the anxiety that work needs to be done. As Marx famously said about the worker: “He is
at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home” (Marx,
1988). Workers need a clear separation between the spheres of labor and leisure; otherwise the former colonizes the latter. Work and leisure cannot exist in the same place at the same time.

If we include social needs in work/life balance, then telework further impedes our ability to achieve harmony. For example, spontaneous disruptions are what we hate most about working with other people, and what we miss most when we no longer have them around. On the one hand, this illustrates that work tasks, actual work, is more enjoyable when it is uninterrupted. But this too, comes at a price. Not having coworkers around to interrupt your work tasks also means that they are no longer around to have lunch with, or to socialize with after work, or to help solve unforeseen problems, or simply to commiserate with.

In conclusion, if we truly seek to achieve more balance between work and leisure, then I would argue the answer is quite obvious. Assuming that the relationship between work and leisure is in disequilibrium, then we have to conclude that we are devoting too much time to one of these spheres, and I doubt anyone believes we are spending too much time at leisure. Therefore, a wholesale reduction in hours spent working, and a more distinct boundary between work and home is the only real way for workers to achieve balance. Programs that promote workplace flexibility are nothing more than managerial efforts to circumvent this obvious solution. It allows workplaces to justifiably claim that they are prioritizing employee health and happiness by allowing flexibility, while at the same time ensuring that work output stays the same, or even increases.
Conclusion

This dissertation project interrogates the ways in which the concept of flexible work had been fetishized in telework discourses, specifically around how workers in the global north are expected to arrange their work and family life if they wanted balance between the two. This fetishization is based on a set of assumptions that telework is a natural feature of creative post-Fordist work environments, and that flexible workplaces are better for both employees and employers. The rigidity of the Fordist work environment, characterized by strict adherence to shifts and schedules, located working, and ruthless Taylorist oversight of the work flow process, is presumed to be replaced in the post-Fordist environment with flexibility in when, where, and how work is to be completed. But is this accurate, and if it is, what are the implications of such a shift?

The broad goal of this project was to investigate if telework to see if it indeed operated within the post-Fordist mode of production as its promotional rhetoric suggested, and to critically examine if telework and flexibility are beneficial to workers. A mixed methodology combined several different perspectives on telework that addressed these questions. It distinguished capital’s interest in telework from that of the workers’ experience, which was contrasted with press representations of remote work.

The findings are that flexible tele-workplaces are not as inevitable as once thought, and even in such workplaces, they bring some significant disadvantages for working families. What follows is an overview and reflections on each of the chapters in this project, followed by a summary of what I believe to be the major implications of my research, of the potential avenues it opens up for future scholars, and, finally, my recommendations for the future of teleworking.
Chapter Reflections

The first chapter is a political economic analysis of telework, focusing on the cost and benefits to workers and employers in an attempt to understand why companies such as Google, Facebook, and Yahoo would resist remote work, unless of course there was a financial downside that we were failing to see. In this chapter, I discovered that employers gain by instituting a telework policy primarily because they have capital invested in overhead, real estate, and employee development, and these are the areas in which telework is most likely to show steady, predictable economic benefits. The analysis also showed that workers in a telework situation may be breaking even at best, financially. This challenges the prevailing mythology that telework is mutually beneficial to workers and employers. In many cases, workers are being put into precarious situations where their employer has no responsibility for workplace safety and mental health; the burdens are going to be borne by workers themselves.

The surprising finding of this chapter is that we may have to reconsider whether flexible work arrangements will be the norm in work environments of the future. Technology companies like Google and Yahoo do not allow it, citing an inability to manage the work process and a loss of spontaneous interaction between coworkers. While it may be possible in the future to have more sophisticated technology for monitoring workers, the unique product of spontaneous human interaction—an undeniably profitable quality—may never be adequately reproduced, which means that telework may forever be limited. The inability of managers to oversee the workflow process, and the distinctive consequence of unstructured workplace collaboration are two
factors that are so integral to the profitability that they may keep telework checked indefinitely.

The second chapter is a discourse analysis of news stories discussing Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer’s February 2013 decision to end telework. This is the first discourse analysis of telework coverage in the popular press. The selection of Marissa Mayer as a focus of this analysis arose from a pragmatic need to narrow my research, but Mayer’s telework ban was much more than a convenient choice for this study. Mayer's ban was current, and it generated a lot of news content, but most importantly it was the major vehicle through which debates about work/life balance, gender, and flexibility took place in the media. The Yahoo ban was unique in that it was really not unique at all, except for in the way in which the event was represented in the popular press, and the degree of attention it generated.

The analysis produced a number of findings. First, Mayer’s defenders in the press focused on the argument that she offered for ending telework, evaluating it and extending it as they saw fit. Her critics focused much more on her role as a woman and a mother, arguing that she had failed to protect the interests of other working families by ending telework. This illuminated a double-bind for Mayer, which applies more widely to women working in demanding careers. Mayer was under pressure to fulfill contradictory roles, rendering any decision she made subject to negative consequences. If she ended telework, she was accused of betraying her gender and being out of touch with the needs of poor, working families. If she failed to end telework, even though she believed it would improve her business, she would be accused of lacking the toughness required to
be a CEO. The media would have depicted her as too maternal, too sensitive, and thus not well suited for business.

I call the above scenario the “Working Mother Double Bind”: ultimately, the interests of capital and the interests of families are at odds, which means that women trying to balance careers and family will be continually subject to conflicting pressures, both of which have negative consequences that characterize them as either too devoted to their careers and insufficiently devoted to families, or too emotionally invested in their maternal responsibilities to be successful at work. What telework ultimately does in this scenario is place the blame on women for being incapable of achieving the correct balance between work and children, and ignore the structural barriers women face in trying to reconcile this imbalance.

The news media is principally responsible for priming citizens to respond to and evaluate political and cultural decisions (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63). It performs an "agenda setting" role: citizens place importance on issues that the media has deemed important (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). By setting the agenda, the media makes certain issues salient, and also instructs audiences as to the standards to be used in evaluating them (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). That Marissa Mayer’s telework ban garnered more media coverage than other similar bans illustrates that the media felt that hers was more significant than the others. When we examine why that might be, it is obvious that the fact that she is a woman is the aspect that sets her apart from the other CEOs who have implemented telework bans. The criteria by which Mayer was judged were different as well. Where other leaders of industry were forgiven for putting profits
ahead of working families, Mayer was not so fortunate. The media used a different standard to evaluate Mayer’s telework ban, a standard that is overtly sexist.

The third chapter is a series of in-depth interviews with a variety of teleworkers, each with unique arrangements and diverse professions. Fourteen teleworkers were interviewed, with occupations ranging from part-time telemarketer to tenure track professor. The questions were broken up into four categories: one devoted to general questions, one to family and leisure activities, one on financial questions, and one on surveillance and evaluation. The interviewees offered insight into their own telework arrangements, including their reasons for teleworking, how their work is evaluated, and what role economics played in their decision to remote work. The results allowed me to develop a broad theory that exposes and explains one of the key drawbacks to telework scenarios: worker isolation.

The insistence by tech company giants like Google that worker interaction is vital to creative labor is supported by the interviews of teleworkers, who contend that the biggest disadvantage to working from home is reduced social interaction with their coworkers. Several interviewees said they deliberately limit their telework hours because the social connection to coworkers is so important to them professionally, socially, and psychologically. This illuminates a contradiction: workers view this spontaneous social interaction as a byproduct of being at work, and some employers it would seem view this as an integral component of the work itself. Theorists working in the tradition known as ‘autonomist Marxism’ are well-known for advocating that working class resistance “precedes and prefigures the transformations of the capitalist modes of production” (Read, 2003, p. 13; Weeks, 2011, p. 93-94). I contend that employers are resistant to
telework because they see an opportunity to capture the value that is created when workers are engaging in social activities on work time. In other words, it is not capital’s creativity that drives innovation in methods for capturing value, but rather the resourcefulness of working class resistance to capital that forces capital’s response. The improved mental health that comes from workers being around each other, even if they are not working at the time, not only benefits the workers themselves, but is converted into a valuable asset to the companies.

**The Struggle over Moments: Common Threads Between the Chapters**

The thread that ties all three of these chapters together is that while telework is often seen as an unqualifiedly positive arrangement for workers, my research exposes the problems with this assumption. Failure to interrogate flexible work has caused academics to overlook the disadvantages that telework actually presents for workers in the post-Fordist labor environment. For example, the widely held belief that because a job is technologically suited for telework, employees can expect the freedom to telework they desire, is incorrect. The abrupt telework ban at Yahoo, the limited telework options at a growing number of companies, as well as the general difficulties that many teleworkers experience while attempting to secure flexible arrangements, suggest that we would do well not to assume telework is going to be an option in future jobs. This is particularly troublesome for young women, who may be under the impression that if they ever decide to have children, they can balance careers and family by instituting a telework option. We should not take it for granted that telework will be a tool to alleviate the stress of work. And even if it is widely available, there is a possibility, even a likelihood, it will create
more problems for workers than it solves; increased isolation, reduced employer responsibility for workplace safety, net-zero cost savings, loss of social interaction, and professional stagnation, are real concerns.

Juliet Schor’s classic book *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (1991), details how leisure under modern capitalism has diminished rather than grown, even though productivity has largely increased. Her conclusions are helpful in understanding the problem with telework, and how all the diverse chapters of this project fit together. Schor includes a quote from an English nineteenth century factory inspector named Leonard Horner, who said, “Moments are the elements of profit” (Schor, 1991, p. 49). In my research on telework, I still found this still to be true; the value of telework for employees and employers alike is in the struggle over moments. Putting in a load of laundry, taking a personal phone call, walking the dog, going for a jog, playing a few minutes with the kids, or avoiding a commute, all became major victories for teleworkers, even though they constituted short moments in the day. They gave workers a sense of control. Even if they spent more of their day working, they felt as they had more moments of leisure.

And they do spend more of their day working, which is part of the appeal of telework for companies. Schor explained how in the old factory system, wages were paid on a daily system rather than an hourly one, which meant that a fixed wage was given for a day’s work, and people earned “neither more nor less as the working day expanded or contracted.” This led employers to extend working hours by any means they could find, and that meant identifying moments where the day could be lengthened (Schor, 1991, p. 54). Teleworkers describe working extra hours in the evening, on weekends, or whenever
they have free time. They can weave work into their leisure routine easily with telecommunications devices. They attend to domestic chores, childcare, and personal appointments whenever they can step away from work, and then return to their job just as seamlessly. The eight-hour workday in the office or factory has given way to a day filled with working moments that often adds up to be far longer in the long run.

As I discovered in examining Marissa Mayer’s telework ban, but also in the political economic analysis and worker interview chapters, the ability to collect and capitalize on small worker moments of interaction in a located workplace is a valuable commodity for employers and an important factor in human mental well-being. When employees are working together, they talk and discuss issues, they brainstorm, and they complain and commiserate in a series of moments. Mayer argued that these moments were the key to innovation and success in the tech industry, an argument that was verified in the political economic analysis. Although the workers interviewed for this project did not share Mayer’s enthusiasm for innovation, they confirmed that workplace interaction was a crucial component of any successful workplace because of important social moments. Telework, or workplace flexibility, is a domain of class micro-struggle over leisure time and work time, which is being waged in the minutia over small, interconnected, alternating moments of work and non-work.

**Marxist Feminisms and Telework**

The implications of this research project can be felt in various different arenas, one of those being the field of studies on domestic labor. The uneven distribution of domestic labor is well documented in the literature on gender and work more broadly. Arlie Russell Hochschild focuses her analysis on the lives of women who juggle the labor
of reproduction and market wage labor. In the Second Shift (1990), Hochschild argues that when both men and women in a domestic partnership are employed full-time, there exists roughly a month’s worth of extra labor per year that must be done around the home, and that the majority of this labor disproportionately falls onto the shoulders of women. Whether it is cleaning the house, cooking meals, or caring for sick children in the middle of the night, it is likely that the working mother will be responsible for ensuring this work is completed.

In More than a Labour of Love (1980), Meg Luxton addresses the gendered division of labor by focusing on the way fluctuations and changes in waged labor organizes the way in which work is done in the home. For example, she argues that the weekday/weekend rhythm of the wage labor system means that workers and children are only available for social reproduction on weekends. This puts pressure on the homeworker to condense domestic chores into the weekdays so that the weekends and evenings are free for care work (Luxton 1980, p. 119). We have seen that telework holds conflicting attractions for people with children, namely that remote work can allow them more time with their children, even though they acknowledge that they cannot really concentrate on work when their kids are around.

Again, the theorists of what is known as 'autonomist Marxism'--who emphasize working class agency and struggle, and who study the wider scope of social labour-- can help us better understand how telework and domestic labor are linked. As has been argued by many of the autonomist scholars, capital does not pay for the labor of social reproduction, which includes domestic labor; it gets if for free. Telework allows for the weaving of reproductive tasks into the regular waged workday, which makes it easier for
capital to benefit from the free labor people do. Capital requires healthy citizens, for example, but a rigid work schedule can make it inconvenient for people to see a doctor, or exercise regularly. Flexible work schedules mean that people are free to do these things during the day, and so may be more likely to do these tasks (Hilbrect et al, 2008). Telework then makes it much easier for people, especially women, to attend to the free labor that capital requires.

Scholars from the autonomist Marxist tradition have made compelling arguments for the reconceptualization of domestic labor as producing value under capitalism, and thus integral to capital’s viability. Leopoldina Fortunati argues that the true secret of social reproduction under capital, the "arcana" as she calls it, is that domestic labor is productive labor but appears as a natural force. Fortunati argues, “Thus the real difference between production and reproduction is not that of value/non-value, but that while production both is and appears as the creation of value, reproduction is the creation of value but appears otherwise” (Fortunati 1989, p. 8). Fortunati claims that the labor of reproduction is in fact waged work; the female’s wage for domestic and emotional labor is contained within the wage paid to her male partner by the capitalist for his labor. The wage owner purchases labor power from his wife in order to reproduce his own labor power. “Capital settles two credit debts when it pays the wage,” she says (Fortunati 1989, p. 42). Selma James and Maria Rosa Dalla Costa argue that the homeworker produces a commodity like any other, but one that is unequivocally the most important to capital: the “living human being” (James and Dalla Costa 1972). The homeworker maintains the dynamic relations between members of the working family in such a way that the ruling classes can continue to extract profits from them. James and Dalla Costa posit that the
nuclear family itself is a creation of capital, as it reflects the most productive organization for the mass exploitation of labor. At the center of this dynamic is the subordination of women to men. “Capital established the family as the nuclear family and subordinated within it the woman to the man, as the person who, not directly participating in social production, does not present herself independently on the labor market” (James and Dalla Costa 1972).

According to Fortunati, labeling domestic and emotional labor as non-productive because it is non-waged is a mere technicality that perpetuates the unrestrained extraction of value from reproduction. Silvia Federici suggests that the structure of the global economy perpetuates systemic inequalities in the world by concealing the struggles of desperately poor women in developing countries from women working in the west. Overworked middle-class mothers in the developed world rely on the labor of third world poor women in order to make their own lives easier in the form of domestic labor, child care, or food services (Federici, 1999, p. 63).

Marilyn Waring makes a similar argument about the productivity of gendered labor, maintaining that the work of reproducing the human species is only without worth within an economic model built to recognize only certain types of labor. She identifies a critical point of contention in debates around the productivity of immaterial labor: work produces value whether it is waged or not. It all depends on how one decides to measure value. Growing food that is consumed by one’s own family is conventionally classified non-productive labor, but if one sells that food, then it is productive labor. “Cooking, according to economists, is ‘active labor’ when cooked food is sold and ‘economically inactive labor’ when it is not. Housework is ‘productive’ when performed by a paid
domestic servant and ‘nonproductive’ when no payment is involved” (Waring, 1990, p. 30-1).

I argue that telework is evidence of the productivity of domestic labor, and of the general importance to capital of social reproductive labor like walking the dog or going to the doctor. That these tasks can now be done during the regular workday without causing a loss in productivity from one’s job, means that capital benefits twice from telework arrangements. Not only do workers engage in activities that capital requires, but telework ensures that workers do it on their own time, and not on capital’s. Work/life balance is really just a more popular term that describes the human struggle to attend to all of the labor, both domestic and waged, essential to modern capitalism. After all, when workers attend to “life” in the work/life balance, they are attending to reproductive labor, reproducing themselves as working subjects.

A contradiction emerges in my research though, relative to the canon of Autonomist theory. Telework is primed to benefit capital in the way described above, however, as I discovered, capital simultaneously loses the ability to extract surplus value from the social interactions of collocated workers, which are also quite valuable. Only in light of the recent telework bans are we able to hypothesize just how valuable worker interaction is to the interests of corporations. Nonetheless, capital is forced to weigh the value of flexible workers against the value of their social labor, and at least under the post-Fordist labor regime, located workplaces are going to be around for some time.

Because domestic labor is unpaid and informal workplace collaboration is un-codified and unmeasured, it is very difficult to identify their value—which explains the fluctuations in popularity for telework. Working class struggle is the engine that moves
capital, as the latter is simply a mechanism that attempts to capture the radical energy of the working class and mold it into forms that are productive of surplus value, which is then extracted by the ruling class (Tronti, 1966). The working class teleworker is resistant to the rigidity of the traditional labor schedule and routine, but is also battling against isolation, alienation, and chronic overwork that comes along with telecommuting. Capital can either, allow for telework and take advantage of the domestic labor people do on their own time, or prohibit telework and own the benefits of located social labor. The working class is unsatisfied in either of these scenarios, which suggests two things: that the problem of worker contentment under modern capitalism cannot be solved through flexibility, and that the workplace is going to evolve beyond telework in order to capture the radical energy percolating within the working class at this juncture.

Avenues for Future Research

This project opened up avenues for new research. For example, the Yahoo telework ban was covered in the press as the ban unfolded, so it will be possible in the future to conduct a follow-up study that expands the timeline and medium of inquiry. Two years have passed since the ban at Yahoo. How has the coverage of the Yahoo telework ban changed since then, and is it even being discussed any longer? Likewise, conducting interviews with former Yahoo teleworkers, now either forced into the office or forced to leave and work elsewhere, could yield exceptionally rich insight into the culture of telework at Yahoo before the ban, as well as shed light on how Mayer’s predictions about located working have played out.

Telework is very much in flux at the moment: it is hard to know what the future holds. I believe my study has given us some sense of direction. The assumption that we
have been on an inevitable march towards more flexible workplaces is misguided, as is the assumption that it would benefit workers to have large-scale telework operations at our workplaces. The reality is that telework depends far more on the needs of capital than on the needs of families. Since workers’ needs are, under current arrangements, secondary to the needs of capital, we have to remain vigilant about how and when we are allowed to telework, as it is in all likelihood a sign that we are not benefitting in the ways we believe we are.

In closing, I offer three recommendations for future telework policies and practices, especially for managers of teleworkers, and advocates of telework. First, flexibility for workers really means permeability, the interspersing of work throughout our day, and so I contend that we should be cautious and skeptical about any arrangement that seeks to further blur the boundaries between work and leisure time, especially if it originates from, or is managed by, employers. The answer to the problems with work/life balance under capitalism is not “flex time,” it is “less time.” Telework should be resisted because it further erodes the line between work and leisure, and produces a situation where we feel as though we are constantly at work. In Germany, labor ministry officials are considering an outright ban on all after-hours work email, citing indisputable evidence of a “connection between permanent availability and psychological diseases” (Eckhardt, 2014). If what we seek is more leisure time, more family time, more personal time, and thus better balance between work and leisure, then the answer is a wholesale reduction in time spent at work.

That leads to the second recommendation, which is that if employers truly care about maintaining work/life balance for their workers, then they must accept a reduction
in the amount of work in hours for a full-time position, without also reducing the benefits and workplace protections associated with full-time work. In other words, a full-time job should be cut from approximately forty hours, which it is now in most of the industrial world, to somewhere between ten and twenty hours a week, without making those workers more precarious by cutting wages, pensions, health insurance, etc., which has been the norm. The reason that we even need to discuss work/life balance as a topic, the reason that it is a problem, is because work has encroached too far into our lives. Rather than assuming that this problem is an inevitability, that we need to fit in leisure time around work, we should consider taking the opposite approach and structure work around our leisure time.

The third recommendation then is that we should strive to carry out work in employer provided workplaces, which can be either central offices or coworking facilities. Employers should also be encouraged to provide teleworking employees with a subsidy to pay for space in a worker owned or privately owned coworking facility, where remote worker's social and professional needs can be met. If our work time is overall reduced, then the time spent in a workspace has the potential to be a deeply fulfilling experience, both socially and economically, and would help protect a healthy boundary between work and leisure time.
Bibliography


Allenby, Brad, and Deanna J. Richards. (1999)"Applying the triple bottom line: Telework and the environment." Environmental Quality Management 8, no. 4: 3-10.


Cassidy, Suzanne. (March 31, 2013). “Homespun work: While some big companies turn away from telecommuting, 20 million to 30 million Americans still work from home at least one day a week.” *Sunday News* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania).


Cook, Jon. (March 15, 2013). “Can a ‘Hard Reset’ Give Yahoo a Boost? CEO Marissa Mayer has been Subjected to a lot of criticism for killing telework and instituting more elitist hiring policies.” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada).


Gemignani, J. (2000). “There’s no place like home... for today’s teleworkers.” *Business and Health* 18, no. 5: 30–36.


Grubb, Ben. (February 19, 2013). “Do as we say, not as we do: Googlers Don’t Telecommute.” *Sydney Morning Herald*.


Resources Perspective. Unpublished paper, Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of Illinois.


Lister, Kate and Tom Harnish. (2011). ‘WORKshift Canada: The Bottom Line on Telework.’ Published by the Telework Research Network.


McRae, Hamish. (February 26, 2013). “When even Yahoo!’s Marissa Mayer wants workers in the office, is the homeworking revolution over?” The Independent.


Miller, Claire Cain and Nicole Perlroth. (March 7, 2013). “Closing the Virtual Office to Lift Morale.” The International Herald Tribune.


Onstad, Katrina. (March 1, 2013). “Yahoo for you, boss. What about progress?: CEO Marissa Mayer’s move to take away work flexibility from her staff undermines the whole point of her tech company.” The Globe and Mail (Canada).


San Jose Mercury News Editorial Board. (February 26, 2013). “Mercury News Editorial: Yahoo’s Need for Personal Contact is Reassuring.” *San Jose Mercury News*.


Slaughter, Anne-Marie. (February 23, 2013). “Marissa Mayer’s Job is to be CEO, not to Make Life Easier for Working Moms.” *The Atlantic*.

Smith, Kevin. (March 6, 2013). “Google Employees reveal Their Favorite Perks Working for the Company.” *Business Insider*.


Weise, Margaret. (February 26, 2013). “Telecommuters to Yahoo!: Boo.: Ban on Working at Home Goes Against Trend.” USA Today


Yost, Cali Williams. (February 2014). “It’s 10 a.m. Do You Know Where and How Your Employees Are Working? Shattering Telework Myths and Solving Open Office Struggles.” Published by the Flex+Strategy Group.

Yost, Cali Williams. (May 2014). “Ambivalence is Not a Strategy: Employees Sense Waning Commitment to Work/Life Flexibility.” Published by the Flex+Strategy Group.

Appendices

Recruitment Advertisement

I am a graduate student researcher from the University of Western Ontario doing a dissertation project on telework. I am looking for volunteers willing to be interviewed about their experience working both in traditional office settings and in telework arrangements. The interviews will take place via telephone or video conferencing software (Facetime, Google Hangouts, Skype), and will take about an hour.

If you would like to tell your story, please contact with me your details at the email address below. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me as well. Also, if you have friends, family, or co-workers who may be willing to be interviewed, please pass along my contact information.
Western’s Research Ethics Board Approval
Letter of Information and Consent Form

**Project Title:** The Failure of Flexibility: Telework and Capitalist Crisis

**Principal Investigator:**
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario

**Letter of Information and Consent**

You are being invited to participate in a research project because you are currently a teleworker, or have teleworked in the past. This study is being conducted by a graduate student from the University of Western Ontario, affiliated with the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, as part of his Ph.D. dissertation work. The purpose of this interview is to help us understand why some companies limit telework options for their employees, despite a number of clear financial benefits. We hope that interviewees can help us understand more about how certain work tasks are completed in telework scenarios. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to make an informed decision regarding participation in this research.

I am looking for participants who have worked under both a telework scenario, and a traditional office scenario, preferably doing the same general types of work under both arrangements. I’m looking for equal numbers of male and female participants, and equal numbers of people with and without children. I will only exclude people if I have a one-sided sample (e.g. too many men, not enough parents).

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to schedule an interview with me at your convenience. The interviews are expected to take approximately an hour and a half, and can be broken up over two or more sessions if desired. They will take place via telephone or video-conferencing software (such as Facetime, Google Hangout, or Skype, whichever is preferred by the participant). Only the audio will be recorded. I will ask open-ended questions that revolve around four broad categories. The first category is general questions, meant to ascertain how long you teleworked, how many days a week you work from home or somewhere else, where you have worked, and what type of work you do. The second category will revolve around family/leisure commitments and the
impact teleworking has had on them. The third category will focus on how your work was managed while teleworking, how you motivated yourself to work, and if you felt you were more or less productive while teleworking. The fourth and final set of questions is related to how you collaborate and interact with coworkers and managers in both teleworking and non-teleworking scenarios.

There is a slight possibility that participation in this project may put you at risk for retribution or discrimination from your employer. You may not directly benefit from participating in this study but information obtained could be used to improve the work/life balance of working families. You will not be compensated for your participation in this research. Participation in this project is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions, or withdraw from the study at any time. If at any time you wish to withdraw your participation in this research project, simply let me know and I will remove you from the list of contacts and destroy any data that you have provided.

Every attempt will be made to provide anonymity with this research - your personal information will be removed from your answers and pseudonyms will be used for you or any other people’s names, cities of residence, and other identifiable information if your answers are discussed in either a published paper or presentation of the findings. All identifiable information will be kept in password-protected folders on a personal computer, flash drive, and university network drive, all of which are encrypted and password-protected, and only accessible by the student researcher. The only identifiable marker that will not be anonymous is your current and former places of employment. All recorded interviews will be destroyed after they have been transcribed and analyzed. Western University protocol dictates that research records are to be kept for 5 years, after which they will be destroyed. Ensuring the accuracy of your statements is vital, so recording the interviews is strongly encouraged. However, if you wish to participate without having your voice recorded, please let me know and we can work to find an acceptable accommodation.

You indicate your voluntary agreement to participate in this study at the time you schedule an interview, at which point I will ask you to verbally confirm that you have read this statement and voluntarily agree to participate. Responding to interview
questions is consent to participate, and it is also consent to have your interview recorded. Representatives of Western University’s Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may contact you or require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. I sincerely thank you again for your participation; please feel free to contact me at any time if you have any questions or concerns.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Research Ethics (519) 661-3036, email: ethics@uwo.ca.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.
Interview Questions

Section 1: General Questions

1. Where do you work?

2. What type of work do you do?

3. How long did you telework?

4. How many days per week did you telework?

5. Do you work closely with a team?

6. What other companies have you worked for in this industry?

Section 2: Family Questions

1. Do you feel that teleworking has allowed you more leisure time than you had under traditional work organizations?

2. What is the most significant drawback to teleworking? What is the largest advantage to teleworking?

3. Some authors say that the telework can increase the number of work/family transition periods, which are moments in the day where one is exiting leisure or personal time for work, or vice versa. Have you experienced a problem with increased work/family transitions?

4. Do you set strict time boundaries between work time and leisure?
5. Do you have children? If so, what do they think of you teleworking?

6. How often do you take breaks from work? How do you take a break?

Section 3: Self-management Questions

1. Did you find it easy to avoid doing work while teleworking?
2. Did you feel you worked more or less while teleworking?
3. How did you motivate yourself to do work while teleworking?
4. How was your work evaluated while teleworking?

5. Have there been any recent changes in your company’s telework policies or practices?

6. Has there been any additional monitoring of your work while in the office?

Section 4: Collaboration Questions

1. Did you feel more or less isolated while teleworking?

2. Did you work on team projects while teleworking? If so, how did you collaborate?

3. What technology/software do you use for teleworking? (Skype, Facetime, Hangouts, other?)

4. Did you find it easy to collaborate while teleworking?
5. Did you generally perform work tasks and personal tasks at the same time while teleworking? More or less than while working in an office?

6. Were you required to work a certain number of hours while teleworking, or was it project based?
Curriculum Vitae

Eric Lohman

Education

Ph.D., Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, 2015.

M.A., Media Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2010, 3.9 Cumulative GPA.


Research Assistantships

Research assistant to Dr. Paul Brewer and Dr. Barbara Ley on untitled research project, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, spring 2010:

- Duties included searching archives for relevant historical material, contacting archivists for assistance, examining and presenting found material for review by advisor.

“Survey of Job Openings in the Milwaukee Metropolitan Area: Week of May 25, 2009.” Research assistant to Dr. Lois Quinn, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee: Employment and Training Institute, summer 2009:

- Duties included collecting data through telephone surveys and internet searches, followed by the organization and coding of the found data.
“Purging Dissent: Women Writers and the Broadcast Blacklist.” Research assistant to Dr. Carol Stabile, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, spring 2008:

- Duties included searching archives for relevant historical material, contacting archivists for assistance, examining and presenting found material for review by advisor.

Publications


“Where is the Love?’: Gender in De Beers Diamond Advertising,” M.A. Thesis.

Conference Presentations


**Teaching**

Lecturer, *Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, Fall 2013, Fall 2014.

Lecturer, *Gender, Race, and Class in Wedding Media*, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, Fall 2012, Winter 2014.

Head Teaching Assistant, *Political Economy of the Mass Media*; responsible for administrative work on behalf of 10 teaching assistants, including some marking and assisting Professor Jonathan Burston with lecture preparation. Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, Winter 2012, Winter 2013.

Teaching Assistant, *Mapping Media and Cultural Theory*; responsible for instruction of approximately 30 students in single discussion sections. Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, Fall 2011.

Teaching Assistant, *Information and the Public Sphere*; responsible for assisting students with group projects, and marking exams. Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, Winter 2011, Winter 2015.
Teaching Assistant, *Political Economy of the Mass Media*; responsible for instruction of approximately 30 students in single discussion sections. Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, Fall 2010.


**Invited Presentations and Guest Lectures**


“Where is the Love?: Feminism and De Beers Diamond Advertising.” Presented at *Forum: Faculty of Information and Media Studies Professor Lecture Series*, sponsored by the Faculty of Information and Media Studies Student Council: University of Western Ontario, March 2013.

“Running Mother Ragged: Women and Labour in the Age of Telework.” Presented at Mediations Student Speaker Series, sponsored by the Faculty of Information and Media Studies Subcommittee for Intellectual Life: University of Western Ontario, September 2012.


Awards and Recognition

Louise J. Kordus Memorial Scholarship Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee: Spring 2009

Magna cum Laude, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, May 2008

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Dean’s Honor List six semesters

Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee: Spring 2008

Academic Services

Communications Chair for the Public Service Alliance of Canada Local 610 Teaching Assistant Union at the University of Western Ontario: May 2013- April 2014.

Vice President of External Affairs and Communication, Society of Graduate Students at the University of Western Ontario: May 2012-April 2013.

Society of Graduate Students councilor: elected position representing the Faculty of Information and Media Studies doctoral students, Summer 2011-Spring 2012.

Graduate Teaching Assistant’s Union Steward: elected position representing the Faculty of Information and Media Studies doctoral students, Fall 2011-Spring 2012.

Board Memberships

Member of the Advocates for Informed Choice Board of Directors, August 2015-present.

Member of the Canadian Federation of Students Ontario Executive Board, May 2012-April 2013