

# Online boundary work tactics: an affordance perspective

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*Studies of work/life balance have focussed on offline settings, and even though technology is considered as a boundary-influencing feature, social media have not been the focus. Social technologies challenge the relationship between work and private life in new ways, due to their identified affordances: visibility, persistence, association and editability (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). In this paper, we present the results of a study of social media use (Facebook and Twitter) by employees of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and show how, through their affordances, these technologies influence the relationship and boundaries between work and non-work, increasing visibility and reducing individual privacy. Consequently, we observe boundary work tactics that aim to protect private life from both public and professional scrutiny, in prohibitive, reactive or active ways. Our results call for organisations to develop explicit policies or guidelines for social media use, in both their own interests and those of their employees.*

**Keywords:** affordances, boundary work, social media, public/private, non-governmental organisations.

## Introduction

Social media use is omnipresent and influential in our daily lives. With the internet, everything is happening now, in real time, enabling as well as constraining people at work. We are increasingly frontstage (Goffman, 1959), writing our own play and working on our identity while enacting it. This provides both the individual and the organisation with significant challenges.

Influential studies of work/life balance have focussed on offline settings (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Cohen *et al.*, 2009; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). Boswell and Olson-Buchanan (2007), Butts *et al.* (2015) and Chesley (2005), among others, consider traditional technology as a boundary-influencing feature that can cause conflict between professional and personal life. Successful boundary management in relation to mobile devices depends

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on developing a strategy for managing the device, 'the ability to change one's strategy', and self-control (Duxbury *et al.*, 2014: 570). Fenner and Renn (2010) suggest that perceived usefulness and organisational expectations significantly influence boundary blurring, while Golden and Geisler (2007) suggest that mobile technology is seen as a means to express personal agency and exert control.

In a similar vein, Ladner (2008: 465) suggests that the use of technology alone might render boundaries more permeable but 'it is the underlying social relations of workplaces that affect how individuals negotiate the use of these technologies'. Sayah (2013), focussing on the dimensions and directions of boundary work through information and communication technologies (ICT), and Yeow (2014), focussing on boundary work within the work-sphere, look at the influence of a range of mobile technologies on boundaries and boundary work.

Although Facebook and Twitter are used in numerous workplaces, only a few studies focus on how employees attempt to deal with the increasingly unclear boundaries between work and leisure-related social media use. A use which enables a mix of semi-private and work communication, research has addressed the use of social media for employee coping (Cohen and Richards, 2015) and how frontline workers use social media at work (Mearns *et al.*, 2015).

Research has also addressed how social media have modified workplace relationships (Archer-Brown *et al.*, 2018); the use of personal social media for work, and their potential to reduce autonomy and increase work pressure (van Zoonen and Rice, 2017); and how Twitter can help deal with emotions in service workplaces, such as restaurants (Ticona, 2015). Charoensukmongkol (2014: 340) suggests that 'social media use at work may not necessarily lead to negative job-related outcomes,' but focuses on neither boundaries nor private life.

The work/life balance literature provides us with valuable insights into integration/segmentation models (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000), boundary work tactics (Nippert-Eng, 1996a; Golden and Geisler, 2007; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009), and different boundary characteristics (Cohen *et al.*, 2009). However, few researchers have focused on the particular affordances (Gibson, 1979) of social media when examining the boundary work tactics used by employees to balance their professional and private life.

Employees of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) face significant demands in terms of availability and emotional competence, and they are encouraged to be particularly passionate and to live their passion outwards. Social technologies offer exceptional channels for communicating passion and commitment, which makes such employees an appropriate category to study. However, when the organisation has neither a policy nor guidelines, a vacuum arises, in which engagement and openness become stressful, due to blurred boundaries between work and private life. The aim of our study is to explore the boundary work tactics NGO employees use to balance their work and private lives when using social media.

We have based our approach to social media use on two literature streams, work/private life balance, offering insights into boundary work, and the affordance perspective on technology use, as suggested by Treem and Leonardi (2012). After introducing these literatures, we present the methodology of our study, followed by the findings, which reveal three categories of online boundary work tactics. We then relate our results to previous research on social media use in organised settings, in the article's discussion and conclusion.

## Boundary work

Cohen *et al.* (2009) use metaphors to describe the dynamic nature of work/home interplay, criticising the assumption that work and non-work spheres can be thought of as stable, independent entities. The idea of flexible spheres is echoed by Eikhof *et al.* (2007), who suggest that we need to reconceptualise these spheres. This might also influence how we think about balance or boundaries. We need to consider aspects like visibility and privacy rather than working hours and space.

Kreiner *et al.* (2006) and Clark (2000) define three boundary characteristics as one way of describing actual boundaries. *Permeability*, as described by Kreiner *et al.* (2006), indicates the degree to which one domain can spill over to another. It represents the degree of psychological and behavioural involvement a person can have with one domain while in another. Boundary permeability can also be understood in terms of boundary strength; strong boundaries indicate strict segmentation, whereas weak boundaries allow for more integration. High boundary permeability could lead to more visibility and less privacy. Clark (2000) defines boundary *flexibility* in terms of how far time, space and psychological boundaries can be bent. This encompasses not only where and when people work but also how much they can think about one domain while in another (Clark, 2000: 757). Finally, *blending* represents how far the area around a boundary is exclusive (Clark, 2000: 757). This exclusivity decreases when people engage in half-work, half-private activities, such as going to a museum while discussing work issues. Low boundary area exclusivity potentially reduces privacy and increases visibility. This dynamic goes both ways: the individual becomes more clearly associated with the organisation and vice versa. The aforementioned boundary characteristics result from a person's boundary work.

Boundary work is a fundamental aspect of our relationships with other people, an ongoing process of boundary negotiation, as described by Nippert-Eng (1996a,b) in her study of boundary drawing using physical artefacts such as calendars and keys.

The segmentation/integration dimension (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000) is fundamental to understanding why people might engage in boundary work. Kreiner *et al.* (2006) suggest that the more a person identifies with the organisation, the less they will strive for segmentation. As a result of their boundary work, people might perceive intrusion, distance or balance between different domains (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006: 1326ff.). If a person's boundary work leads to strict separation, the corresponding boundary will be impermeable and possibly inflexible, with little or no blending.

As Nippert-Eng (1996a) pointed out, people will always fall short of either of the two ideals (integrators and separators, Ashforth *et al.*, 2000) as they integrate and segment along different dimensions. This is particularly important when considering the use of personal social technologies in the context of work. These platforms can each be their own dimension, turning boundary work into a nuanced, sophisticated endeavour. Particularly in light of the changing economic demands on people, the conceptualisation by Cohen *et al.* (2009: 230) of the work and home domains as 'socially constructed, politicised, and contested' is significant for understanding people's attempts at managing their boundaries in relation to social technologies.

The importance of negotiating (different) online identity(ies) is taken up by the theoretical framework developed by Ollier-Malaterre *et al.* (2013). They connect boundary management and self-evaluation to suggest four boundary management strategies for future empirical testing. Kreiner *et al.* (2009: 716f.) distinguish between four different kinds of boundary work tactics: behavioural, temporal, physical and communicative, but without any specific discussion of the role of technology. Sayah (2013: 186ff.) offers a classification of ICT-mediated boundary work tactics as 'switching off technological devices,' 'using devices selectively,' 'handling emails', and 'handling incoming calls'. These tactics are implemented using temporal- and activity-based criteria. The results are a straightforward description of people's behaviour regarding mobile phones and emails. The question that arises is how we manage boundary work when social technologies encourage a fundamental disruption of our practices. Social technologies afford new work and communication practices, and consequently a new kind of blurring between professional and private life. The issue is no longer limited to integrating or separating, but includes aspects of visibility and privacy, particularly in the online realm.

## The affordances of social technologies

The affordance perspective, developed by Hutchby (2001), Leonardi and Barley (2008) and Leonardi (2011), has become a significant notion in recent years. Treem and Leonardi (2012) use it to describe changes triggered by internally used social

technologies, whereas Vaast and Kaganer (2013) explore how far social media policies in a variety of industries consider the affordances of technology.

The idea is that objects (and technologies) have constant material properties—a computer has some form of screen, for example—but perceptions of a technology's affordances vary (Treem and Leonardi, 2012).

A meta-analysis of organisation-internal social technologies by Treem and Leonardi (2012), reveals that social technologies consistently rank highly on the affordances of visibility, persistence, association and editability. We focus on the first three, as editability appears less important in the public sphere. This is consistent with Vaast and Kaganer (2013) finding that social media policies rarely consider editability, indicating that this particular affordance is relevant to questions other than that of boundaries.

This has consequences for social technology use in a working context. Our study transfers those affordances from internally used social technologies to public social technologies and non-governmental organisations. Open, public social technologies, such as Twitter and Facebook, reduce the privacy and increase the vulnerability of both organisation and individual. Below, we describe the affordances suggested by Treem and Leonardi (2012).

The affordance of 'visibility' refers to ease of access to information, and to the visibility of a person's social network or social capital (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). High visibility allows the sharing of work-related behaviours and practices, and the acquisition of meta-knowledge about connections. Increased visibility relates to boundary work as it can blur a boundary, making the distinction between spheres less exclusive, blending work and private life.

Treem and Leonardi (2012: 155) define 'persistence' as '[c]ommunication is persistent if it remains accessible in the same form as the original display after the actor has finished his or her presentation'. This affordance needs to be amended, as Facebook has now introduced 'editing'. However, the fundamental idea of persistence is still valid. Information, once online, outlasts a person's working hours and can be re-contextualised at other times. Unfortunately, this also allows information to be taken out of context. Persistence challenges boundary work as it makes boundaries more permeable and flexible. Persistent, visible information on social media transcends boundaries of time and space (and for that matter privacy), and increases the permeability and flexibility of boundaries between spheres.

Finally, 'association' concerns 'establish[ing] connections between individuals, between individuals and content, or between an actor and a presentation' (Treem and Leonardi, 2012: 162). Vaast and Kaganer (2013) add a third form of association to these two, that between the individual and the organisation.

'Association' is particularly significant in public social technologies, which use algorithms based on interests, likes and connections to suggest new connections etc. Social technologies make it more difficult to know how people share information, and how, when, and where they work. 'Association' therefore challenges boundary work as it simultaneously increases permeability and sphere blending. People and information can more easily cross over from one area to another, which directly influences boundary characteristics, and indirectly even boundary flexibility, as through their intrusion people and information can push the boundary in either direction. Persistent association also increases visibility and reduces privacy, as people cannot just 'disappear' from the association with their organisation, colleagues or, in the case of NGO workers, the cause.

Affordances are the result of social expectations as much as a person's experience, and are thereby closely linked to the blurring of work/life boundaries (Mazmanian, 2013).

## Methodology and case information

This is a study of employees working for non-governmental organisations and we argue that, like the priests in Kreiner *et al.* (2009) study on boundaries, they are a special

case. Kreiner *et al.* (2009: 707) argue that extreme cases are 'often tremendously helpful for building or elaborating theory, since their dynamics tend to be highly visible, bringing into sharper focus the processes that can exist in other contexts'. They also make a phenomenon 'transparently observable' (Eisenhardt, 1989: 537). This section is structured as follows: first, we present information about the participants and their working conditions. Second, we address ethical concerns, and third, we outline how we collected the data and analysed the interviews.

### Case study information

NGO employees, like priests, face significant demands in terms of availability and emotional capacity. The emotional demands on each group are significant. Priests are often expected to listen to people's emotional outbursts and hardships. They also regularly deal with death and the grief of parish members. For NGO employees, emotional demands might involve comforting the victims of war or even 'just' witnessing such atrocities or reading reports on human right violations or environmental pollution.

We divided the NGOs participating in this study into operational and advocacy organisations, following the World Bank Guide (Malena, 1995). Our study participants worked in a range of organisations and positions. Operational NGOs focus on action, such as disaster relief, local hardship relief, improving standards of living or working with disadvantaged groups, whereas advocacy NGOs focus on lobbying, usually the defence and promotion of a specific cause (Malena, 1995). Twenty of the participants in this study worked for an advocacy organisation, seven for an operational NGO and six for an NGO engaged in both activities.

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants, their organisation, position and personal situation. The participants hold a range of positions within their organisations and work in seven countries. We included field workers, planners, activist coordinators, and administrative and technical staff. The table includes information on the age and living arrangements of our participants to show that boundary blurring is not just an issue for young, unattached people, and is not, therefore, just a choice. A broad range of employees of different ages, with and without family attachments, uses the boundary work strategies we observed. However, parents did observe that, to a certain extent, they experience natural boundaries when they pick up or engage with their children.

Most participants pointed out, using their personal social media profiles for work was not officially part of their job definition. However, the frequent use of social media by colleagues, managers and peers in other organisations creates an environment where the use of personal social media accounts becomes a *de facto* requirement. The participants in this study are certainly engaged in their organisations and use their personal profiles, but they should not be considered a tiny, tweeting elite of employees who use social media. Their behaviour is common among NGOs employees, particularly those in parts of the organisations that work with the cause.

One organisation had a person responsible for press relations, part of whose role was to observe social media even during off hours. However, this is the exception; their job did not include using their personal profiles but they were supposed to keep track of the organisation's official accounts. Some research has investigated the use of social media for engagement and outreach (Briones *et al.*, 2011; Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012; Nah and Saxton, 2013; Campbell *et al.*, 2014) but without a fine-grained analysis of individual employees' use of social media for their organisation.

All the organisations had an official social media presence (Facebook, Twitter, and sometimes LinkedIn accounts) but none of the organisations had a social media policy covering the use of personal profiles for work. None of the organisations had clear rules about employees getting involved with those official accounts using their personal profiles, or about personal profiles being used to promote the organisation.

Table 1: Participants and their organisations

Organisation	Alias	Job	Year of birth	Living arrangement
Advocacy	Isabel	Campaigner	1984	Living with partner
Advocacy	Matthew	IT Administrator	1965	Living alone
Advocacy	Matteo	Office development	1966	Shared custody of child
Advocacy	Marcus	Campaigner	1968	Living with partner, child
Advocacy	Ida	HR manager	1954	Living alone, adult child
Advocacy	Clara	Web manager		Living alone, partnership
Advocacy	Ebba	Fundraising	ca. 1978	Living with partner
Advocacy	Charlie	Campaigner	ca. 1958	Living with partner
Advocacy	Calvin	HR assistant	ca. 1975	Living with partner, children
Advocacy	Tessa	Controller	ca. 1982	Living alone
Advocacy	Jacob	Advocacy officer	1976	Living with partner, children
Advocacy	Melissa	Lobbying coordinator	1968	Living with partner, no child at the time
Advocacy	Stella	Activist coordinator	1975	Shared custody of children
Advocacy & operational	Sandra	Coordinator	1981	Living with partner
Advocacy	Siri	Outreach manager	ca. 1985	Living alone
Operational	Molly	Key account manager	ca. 1974	Living with partner, children
Advocacy & operational	Marlow	Web manager	1979	Shared custody of child
Operational	Parker	Delegate	1980	Field
Operational	Nelly	Delegate	ca. 1976	Field, Partner
Operational	Aston	Delegate	1980	Field
Operational	Danton	Delegate	1974	Field
Operational	Abby	Coordinator	ca. 1975	Shared custody of child
Advocacy	Arthur	Office manager	1983	Living with partner
Operational	Jill	Communications manager	1979	Shared custody of child
Advocacy	Holly	Director of international affairs	1954	Child
Advocacy & operational	Marilyn	Digital manager	ca. 1974	Living with partner, children
Advocacy	Heli	Environment monitor	1972	Living with partner, children
Advocacy	Frank	Negotiations coordinator	1974	Living with partner

(Continued)

Table 1: Continued

Organisation	Alias	Job	Year of birth	Living arrangement
Advocacy	Adam	Environment monitor	1981	Living with partner
Advocacy	Tanja	Project leader	1977	Living alone
Advocacy & operational	Joshua	Office manager	1988	Living in a community
Advocacy & operational	Kathryn	International programmes director	1978	Living with partner, no child at the time
Advocacy & operational	Rachel	HR manager	1960	Partnership, adult children

Members of almost all organisations described instances where they were encouraged to use their personal profiles for work.

### Ethical considerations

We assessed the ethical dimensions of this study using the ethics guide published by Vetenskapsrådet (2012). We informed participants fully about the study and the topic, obtained their informed consent, and assured them confidentiality. We used no information gathered during the interviews in any other way. Participation was voluntary, and most participants welcomed the opportunity to talk about work, technology and boundaries. We have anonymised the participants' names, organisations, and in some cases nationalities. We sent summaries of the empirical material to our participants to ensure we are not divulging any information with which they would be uncomfortable. However, given that the NGO sector is reasonably small, there is a risk that the participants could be identified by colleagues. By asking our participants to review and point out potentially identifying information, we hope we have minimised this risk as much as possible.

### Data collection and analysis

One of the authors conducted the 33 interviews, which lasted between 45 and 150 minutes. We recruited the participants initially by contacting organisations directly and asking them if they wanted to participate in the study. After we interviewed the first couple of participants, we used the snowballing method to find more avid social media users. We also included two people who used social media to a lesser extent, to increase our understanding of the NGO context.

Most of the interviews took place at the participant's workplace, and six via Skype. We recorded and transcribed all interviews before analysing them using Nvivo software.

The interviews focused on three overarching topics: the participant's use of different technologies, their relationships with other people, and their understanding of work and working for a NGO. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to elaborate, and the interviewer to follow up any surprising answers. We also asked participants to describe 1 day in detail, from waking up to falling asleep, as well as their thoughts regarding connecting/disconnecting from work and technology.

We analysed the data following the Gioia-method (Gioia *et al.*, 2012). We constantly engaged with the empirical material during the collection period. The coding process

was iterative and went through three stages. The first author coded all interviews with first order codes, staying close to the participants own terms and ideas. After the first ten interviews, when the coding base was established, we recoded the first interviews. Then, we compared our codes with the literature. In the second round of coding, we merged or divided our initial codes, and general categories started to evolve. In this phase, the literature on boundary work and affordances helped us focus our coding. In the final round, we checked our internal consistency by re-reading all codes and fine-tuning them where necessary. Finally, we analysed our second order codes with the help of the literature on boundaries and affordances.

## Findings

The affordances of social technologies enable people to connect differently to different aspects of their work: their organisation, their work tasks and responsibilities, and their colleagues. Through the specific affordances of the technology, these connections become more visible and persistent, decreasing the individual's privacy. Often, social expectations are closely linked to how others use the technology. Those expectations can be individual, organisational, or outside the organisation. In our study, expectations were not formalised in social media policies or guidelines. Within some workplaces, certain 'best practices' were shared informally.

In the following, we describe how technology affordances play out with regard to such social expectations. First, we show how they strengthen the association between the employee and the organisation, often mediated by intense interrelations with colleagues. Second, because of increased visibility, the employee becomes more publicly linked to the organisation, and consequently, due to the persistence of social media, cannot escape. Work becomes 24/7. We use the three affordances of association, visibility and persistence to structure our findings. They allow us to show how social media enable and constrain our participants' boundary work.

### Acquiescent association

Social technologies afford a very clear connection between a person and their organisation. The organisation gains a broader audience and a 'human face' while the individual can publicise their network, and become associated with a recognisable brand. Both factors can increase their employability.

Participants in this study associate with their colleagues and their organisation in different ways. Almost all of them include their organisation in their 'about' section on Facebook, the majority 'like' their organisation's page(s), they connect with colleagues, sometimes with all those who asked, sometimes just with those who are close friends. Some participants join work-related Facebook groups, some directly encouraged by and linked to their employer, some more general.

Associations with colleagues and the organisation can be subtle, as mentioned above, but they can also be very public. Jacob and Sandra provide examples on Facebook:

My colleagues are as good as it gets. First, we have [colleague 1]. She is smart, competent and a real judge of character. Additionally, she is one of the bravest people I know. Then we have [colleague 2], who is goal-oriented, strong and an expert at laying out. [Colleague 2] is also just as awesome at board games. Both [colleague 1] and [colleague 2] surprise us in good and bad times with good cake. Last but not least, we have [colleague 3], who is helpful, full of ideas and whose humour is in a class of its own.

(Facebook, Sandra, 2014/01/29)

Jacob points to important benefits of staying in contact with a large number of people, and using this for work.

I mix work and private channels completely. I use one Twitter account for work and private. For me it's a lot easier. I mean, I am the same human being that I am at work when I am at home. [...] Especially when you work with social media, the beginning and end of work is so hard to really define, because you answer [the organisation's] tweets during the evening or nights, or whatever. We have an official Twitter account for the whole organisation as well, but sometimes you want to do it as the person behind it, and of course that is the same account that I use for private reasons.

(Jacob)

People use their personal profiles but the connection is not one-way. Arthur, Aston and Clara defend this blending of identities, and Heli explains that there is 'freedom in the limitlessness – to a certain degree at least.'

Social technologies make it easier to contact people, which is helpful for lobbying and advocacy work, in which many of the NGOs in this study are involved. As Sandra explained, the organisation recommends using one's own profile, which strengthens the association between the person and the organisation. Tanja points to the limitations of Facebook when explaining that 'Facebook is a little tricky, because you cannot really be someone else in the same way,' you cannot hide who you are.

Facebook's sorting algorithm, internally called 'Unicorn', privileges posts by people that post a lot. Therefore, when their employees are very active on social technologies, their posts are more likely to appear in their network's newsfeed, and as attention is the online currency, this is a valuable benefit for the organisation.

Employees have always been ambassadors for their organisations, but through online associations, this ambassadorship has significantly extended its reach. Marcus explains that 'when you are asked if it is personal or private, I mean, you are associated with the organisation as soon as you get your name in some way associated with [organisation], it's there. It's that simple.' For Tessa, being an ambassador is part of her job, and for Clara, Marcus and Marlow, it is unavoidable. In the past, people could hide behind their organisation. Tessa clarifies this point for me when she speaks about her former job at a big consultancy.

Kathryn points to a technological feature increasing the possibility of having to connect with one's colleagues or boss:

I had this discussion with two trainees who had just started here, because for them, becoming admins for our page meant they had to become friends with one of us, so that we could add them.

Sometimes, the organisation's needs might trump a person's desire for non-association. This association with the organisation, their colleagues and the cause explicitly links the employee to work, with no clear way of breaking of that link, even temporarily. The employees agree with the association to the organisation, sometimes wholeheartedly, but often simply because technology affordances and social expectations enable it. The boundary between the individual and work becomes more permeable, as objects from either sphere can pass through more easily, while the area around the boundary also becomes less exclusive, increasing the fusion.

### Varied visibility

When talking about 'visibility' as afforded by social technologies, we look at work and time becoming more visible. Facebook makes everything very visible. We can see when a work-related post is shared at 11 p.m., and when an employee engages in heated discussions about a work-related issue in the comments section of a post at 5 a.m. The time when work happens becomes more visible to a greater audience through time stamps and notifications pushing into people's attention. Stella explains:

What is working time and what is not is very fluid, and if I send out a link about something and people comment, I can sit in my free time and comment, because it's so fast. I don't log in to my

professional email and I don't log into a database, but I respond quickly on Facebook, so it's just so messy.

As many participants, including Stella, observe, emails can be written any time but their delivery can be delayed until working hours. Holly tries to avoid writing to people that do not easily switch off from work and she indicates in the subject line of the email when someone should read/react to the email. Molly uses another more fine-grained strategy, saying that:

I don't email people who don't email me off hours. So I kind of have that thought, I don't want to stress other people, so if I get something from my boss or like people who are constantly online then I can answer their emails and we have a lot of people in the regions with time differences and things like that.

There is no delay possible, making working time blatantly obvious, as Jill explains 'Yes, the problem on Twitter is, you'll find a link, either email it to yourself or email it to who you want to interact with. And that will be after 9-5.' Twitter is particularly challenging, as things are so very fleeting and there is no 'save' function, as recently introduced by Facebook. The same problem occurs with Facebook messages, which immediately indicate to the sender when a message has been read.

On social technologies, the individual is always visible; Facebook and Twitter profiles do not just disappear, take a vacation or go home after work. Clara explains that some organisations have strict rules regarding transparency that do not even give you the option of hiding the fact that you work for them. Theoretically, the person is always accessible online; you cannot 'close the office door'. Marilyn and Jill both point out that social technologies have reduced expected reaction time, and it has become more difficult to wait until Monday morning to react to a critical post. Many participants pointed out that using very strict work profiles does not work. This simply defeats the purpose of public outreach, of accessing previously hidden audiences and of creating an interesting profile that people will follow.

Both ease of access to information and ease of use of social technologies increase boundary flexibility, allowing people to work whenever and wherever they want. It is extremely easy and fast to answer a Tweet, share a link, or reply to a comment. In fact, it is so easy that our participants do not perceive it as work. Kathryn says:

On the contrary, I might not log in and reply to questions or similar when I am not working, but I do things like changing the cover page. I might not see it as work. So there it floats together, there it is no clear boundary between working time and free time.

This blending of different areas of life facilitates friendship and deeper connections, but it also means that areas are less exclusive; it makes a strict separation more difficult. It makes the person and information about their work more visible and accessible. Consequently, we see a reduction in individual privacy. Their behaviour becomes more public, changing the fundamental issues surrounding boundaries. The focus has shifted from work crossing into the personal sphere to work crossing into the public sphere, therewith making the personal more public and reducing the individual's privacy.

### Persistent presence

In the previous two sections, we have shown how social technologies afford a publicly visible association between the person and their organisation, their colleagues and information. We have also shown how personal and professional information has become easier to access and therefore more visible. In this section, we show how our participants experience the persistent availability of the online representation of a person and their personal and professional information. Jill points to an important consequence of persistent online information:

And sometimes you have that policy or the idea that if you cannot say it in the lunch room, you should not say it on FB either. My problem, or if it's not a problem, I could talk about it in the lunch room because I've already told my boss, but I would still not say it on social media because I have some sort of duty there, but I often stand up for what I think and have no problem with it.

We often think about being able to say on social technologies what we would otherwise say at the coffee machine, but that is not necessarily how social media work. Often, we are freer in the lunchroom or during a conversation with our boss than we could ever be on social technologies, partly because the audiences are different, but also because the persistence of online information makes everything we ever write there live forever, with the possibility of being shared with an ever increasing audience. All it takes is one stupid Tweet and one follower quick with the screenshot button, as demonstrated by the case of Justine Sacco, whose career was ruined by an inappropriate Tweet (Ronson, 2015). Jill continues by explaining how our expectations of online and offline representations are linked:

[...] above all, you want the person's profile to hold together, for the person you meet to be the one you see online, and for there to be no discrepancy between them, between what is real and what is online.

With the persistence of online information, we do not enjoy the luxury of reinventing ourselves every week or for every new job we take, we need to be clear about the long-term consequences of our utterances. Holly explains how organisations work towards shared understandings of what is acceptable:

And we talk quite a lot about this in the team. Sometimes you might find that someone else has written something and you react like 'Holy moly, what were you thinking? That was not good.' Then we tell each other, you know, this might not have been that smart.

The above examples relate to macro level persistence, to questions of online identity and information influencing broader aspects of our lives. Persistence of information also exists at a micro level, regarding the actual 24/7 online existence of everything we post and tweet, including our profiles. This persistence enables after hours' engagement with things we might have published during working hours or vice versa, as personal posts and discussions are available during working hours. Frank reasons that following his employer on Facebook sometimes brings work into his home but he does not feel he can just ignore it.

At the same time, sometimes, if I have just signed an agreement, those evenings I have to follow what the reactions are, and when I get to work the following morning, maybe I need to write support material for those who answer the phone and so on. So there are occasions when I need to follow it, but usually it's not my job but someone else's.

Depending on what people are working with, they might find it difficult to distance themselves from their organisation's cause as even information related to those causes is persistently online (these triggers also exist offline, we are simply arguing that there is no escape from the cause, even online). In the case of NGOs, people are constantly confronted with the never-ending injustice in the world, perpetual armed conflicts and the destruction of the environment. Stella succinctly explains the entanglement between the person and the organisation's cause:

It is also the case that just because I am off work, I don't ignore the fact that someone is going to be executed maybe this week or tomorrow because one doesn't do anything now. Even if I don't see myself as an [organisation's] activist. [Organisation] gets information about it, I would NOT spread that even if I were off work and even if I could draw a line under it; it's like, it's ultimately still a person that is at risk of being executed.

At a micro level, the persistence of information and the increasing speed of the internet make timely responses important, as Marlow and Marilyn point out. Some participants felt they had to be available 24/7, either always or at least some of the time, just in case. The purpose is to prevent bigger crises, but of course, it puts the person in a

difficult position. Twenty-seven of our participants have developed ways to limit the boundarylessness of work, but such enforced limits demand effort and an array of conscious decisions every day. We have moved past the stage of locking the office door and leaving work behind. Social technologies ensure that work is always there, making boundaries more flexible across time and space and consequently limiting the individual's privacy.

### Online boundary work tactics

Our study revealed a desire and need to disconnect from work to be able to perform better. Jill needs a break to 'feel well', while Tanja experiences stress when she sees work-related topics in her free time that 'start things off in [her] mind'. Heli explains her relationship to boundaries as:

An ongoing battle you have with yourself – you would prefer not to have it like that, but still my job is like that, and if I want it a different way I should have a different job.

People's responses to the boundary transgressions afforded by social technologies can be sorted into three broad categories with different aims. Table 2 provides an overview of the categories, the tactics and additional examples.

'*Prevention*' is prohibitive, with people creating obstacles and boundaries to prevent work intruding on personal time and/or space. People take preventive steps to protect their private life. If they do not perceive intrusion, it did not happen. We identified three different tactics within this category. The first is 'manipulating technological affordances,' of which Stella offers a prime example when she explains her use of lists:

One [list] that is friends and one that is external people, because I don't want activists to see pictures of me being drunk or of my kids. So I have separated them.

Multiple Twitter accounts, which the site allows, are also typical of such a tactic, while none of the participants had two Facebook accounts. This tactic in particular addresses the need for less visibility and more privacy. The protection of a work-free space helps at least to create the illusion that privacy is not yet dead. The second prevention tactic is 'scheduling technology-free time,' either by engaging in activities that are totally separate from technology, like yoga, reading, skiing, or painting, or by turning off work-related technology. Our participants tried to reduce not necessarily their own visibility but rather the visibility of their work. This is an attempt to tackle the persistent presence of work on line. The third tactic in this category is 'social prevention,' which includes all behaviours that create boundaries for colleagues and bosses on social media. Employees are careful not to connect with their boss, and managers are careful not to send friend requests. Deleting connections is another 'social prevention' method. To protect their own privacy, our participants try to discourage other people from becoming border crossers.

'*Diversion*' is more reactive, as people experience their work as boundaryless, but try to (re)enact boundaries. A boundary transgression has occurred, but people try to avoid reacting; they pretend it did not happen even though their (lack of) reaction clearly indicates that something has happened. We identified three somewhat hierarchical tactics within the diversion tactic category. First, employees 'ignore' boundary transgressions, such as the Facebook notification flag or messages, or 'relocate' the issue to the next day at work or to their professional email address. Employees also use 'deflection' as a means of dealing with important issues on social media. They cannot just ignore it until the next day or after their vacation, so they forward the information to a colleague or superior. Diversion aims to allow the employee to forget about intrusive work by delegating the issue. Relocation targets co-workers and other stakeholders to gently 'educate' them about which medium should be used for which purpose. Diversion tactics address the increase in visibility and association. They do not help to protect individual privacy, as the

Table 2: Online boundary work tactics

Category	Tactic	Example
Prevention	Manipulating technological affordances	<p>'You can differentiate between "friends" and "close friends", and so I actually have put those without any connection to [organisation] in "close friends". This means that if at some point, I think I have an email system that does not work, Lotus Notes, we usually call it Lotus North Korea, so when I need to complain about it loudly, I usually choose my "close friends" list. [...] If I write something bitter about [the organisation's] email system I don't need to tell 60-70 employees and trustees in [organisation] I think.' (Frank)</p> <p>'I kind of like the push function, but I have learnt that since there are so many things that push, I have push with selected mute. I try to mute the things that I don't need to push, so I like to get everything I am actually interested in through push, but I try to do away with as much noise as possible' (Jacob)</p> <p>'So I have three different Twitter accounts.' (Tanja)</p>
	Scheduling technology-free time	<p>'Work does not stop existing; it's just that we are on vacation. War doesn't end, starvation doesn't end, it happens all the time. I eventually understood that to avoid accidentally work during my vacation, I must make sure I do not go on Internet.' (Marilyn)</p> <p>'Yes, so this one I have with me all the time, the white, the [name of organisation she works for in her free time] and the private. This one (orange) I'm shutting off, I only have it between 9 and 5. So, it's my job, so I'll shut that phone off' (Tanja)</p> <p>'When I do yoga once a week.' (Molly)</p>
	Social prevention	<p>'[It is] unfair to get that question [friend request on Facebook] from your boss [...], as it could put people in an awkward position where they might not want to say no, where they don't really manage to do that.' (Frank)</p> <p>'I've deleted all of them [colleagues from my Facebook], because my political opinions became the topic of internal discussions. That is absolutely borderline, and it's none of my employer's business what I do on Facebook.' (Clara)</p>

(Continued)

transgression has already occurred and the boundary is permeable. Our participants try to ignore and deflect the visibility of work.

Finally, '*retaliation*' is an active response, with which the employee attempts to 'fight back' not just against any particular boundary transgression, but against subtle expectations of constant connectivity. They perceive the workplace and/or co-workers as boundaryless and as intruding on their personal sphere, and reprisal is

Table 2: Continued

Category	Tactic	Example
Diversion	Ignoring	<p>'No, I just click on the red button [notifications on FB] and see that someone has commented [project] and then I think I'll check it tomorrow.' (Tanja)</p> <p>'If I get questions on our official account that I'm responsible for, or personally in my professional role via Twitter, then just like getting email outside working hours, I'll wait until the next day to answer it. Unless I see that it is urgent in some way.' (Adam)</p>
	Deflection	<p>'If I start to act on it or interact with it, I am also connecting with work again. It's obvious that emailing my colleague is also work, but I'm getting rid of work. We still need to deal with it, though, as the situation can get so much worse if nothing happens for a week or two.' (Kathryn)</p> <p>'But then we discussed it a lot, what are the expectations this and that, while later the same weekend at [place] I received something about the [organisation] and that there might be some negative leaks to the media on Monday. When I saw that, I could not just sit and think, I did not see this. I sent an email saying "have you seen this", "yes" came the answer. And it was 6 o'clock on Sunday night, 6 or 8. Then I let it go but I can't pretend not to have seen it either, you see.' (Jill)</p>
	Relocation	<p>'So, if I'm Skyping my son, and there's a colleague on Skype and I know I should really clarify something with her the next day or the next week, I would never say "Oh come on, as you're online, tell me, didn't we want to clarify this and that?" Never!' (Ida)</p> <p>'If I get a message on Facebook, now it's mostly Facebook, with a specific "hello can you remove me from the [group database] or something?". I won't respond to it but I will respond from my job email when I work.' (Stella)</p> <p>'It has happened a few times with the messaging function on Facebook, and then I try to steer it to SMS or email, since I do not want to mix them. On the one hand, I think that [...] this should be a free time thing for my co-workers, so I don't want to [...] help to make their FB a work tool either. So I definitely don't want mine to be one, and neither do I want to contribute to making theirs one.' (Frank)</p>

(Continued)

Table 2: Continued

Category	Tactic	Example
Retaliation	Overreacting	'I got an email from one of my colleagues and it was send at 1.30 in the morning, so I replied to him and to the others on email "you shouldn't be working that late," and he replied, "why are you answering this email at 5.15 in the morning?"' [laughs] (Marcus)
	Affirmation of rights/social dissuasion	'But then she said, "if it's important then I'm texting." Yes, I said but then I have to sit with my phone at the weekend and look at it if a text comes, or how will that work? Because if I don't see it, it doesn't matter how important it is because nothing happens. Then we have "on-call-duty" for weekends and evenings waiting for a text message. "No, we can't, you aren't on call." No but how did you think it would work? Your idea doesn't work.' (Jill) 'But sometimes I have to think twice, to make sure I don't post things on Facebook at nine or ten o'clock in the evening, and instead maybe wait until the next day, to show that I have working hours. Because I am of course creating an image of being constantly available, which I am not, but you could choose to be.' (Stella)

a form of last resort, a frontal reaction that follows the other two responses but would rarely be the first response. The ultimate tactic is 'overreacting,' when people take the boundary transgression even further and write messages at 1 a.m. to make a point and provoke a debate. Retaliation can also take the form of an 'affirmation of rights,' towards both organisational members and oneself, when the employee reminds herself that she should not post at 10 p.m. as this sends the signal that she is always available.

Retaliation is a response that addresses the overwhelming combination of transgressions enabled by social media coupled with social expectations. The individual constantly associated with their organisation, and the visibility of the cause, their work and themselves leaves little or no time, space and privacy.

## Discussion

Earlier work/private life balance studies have focused on the separation/integration continuum (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000), arguing that people prefer to either separate or integrate different life spheres. Nippert-Eng (1996a,b) uses the idea of artefacts to understand how people become segmentors or integrators. Our study of social media extends the idea of separation/integration as a primary dimension in boundary work.

Social technologies such as Facebook and Twitter connect people from different spheres. The high degree of visibility that these technologies afford facilitates access to other people's personal and professional information, and communication with a broader audience. We even see indications that work-related use of social technologies may increase when people connect with very active colleagues or bosses (Wattal *et al.*, 2009).

The affordances of social media change the relationship between work and non-work areas of life at three interconnected levels, via an ongoing, and largely visible

process of boundary negotiation (Nippert-Eng, 1996b). First, people explicitly and publicly associate with their employer, their colleagues, and, in the case of NGO employees, their organisation's cause. Some employees are required to put their employer in their Facebook and Twitter profiles, because the organisation has a policy of absolute transparency (e.g. Clara, Isabel). Some employees choose this direct link (e.g. Melissa, Sandra, Jacob, Stella), and a few make the link less explicit by making their profiles hard to find, or by connecting to just a very intimate circle of friends (e.g. Ebba, Adam). Even for these employees, the link to their organisation or at least its cause, if not to their colleagues, is palpable. Whatever they do online can be traced back to their employer. With regard to boundaries, we argue that social media use increases their permeability (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006), and that this palpable connection increases even flexibility and blending (Clark, 2000). Neither side of a boundary is exclusive anymore; aspects related to one area can be imported or seep into the other area of life (Cohen *et al.*, 2009).

Second, this makes all employees (in)voluntary ambassadors for their organisation and its cause. Their online behaviour becomes part of the organisation's outward representation. Whereas in the past people could have a separate identity in their free time and 'be' the organisation during work time, they now represent their organisation all the time. Employees are held personally responsible for the organisation's actions, and their decision to work there is scrutinised. In Nippert-Eng (1996a) study, we see that people use different calendars for work and personal life, that they have at least two sets of keys, and that those who are very concerned about keeping spheres separate often have no personal items or photos at their workplace. This kind of separation has disappeared with the increasing use of social media. Personal life is now always present at work and vice versa, there is an increase in blending around every kind of boundary (Clark, 2000).

Third, this clear link between employees and the organisation and between employees and their work exists 24/7, at both macro and micro level. The macro level corresponds to our identity and online authenticity, while the micro level corresponds to everyday social media occurrences. Thus, the aforementioned increase in permeability, flexibility and blending becomes persistent.

These interconnected levels of changes fundamentally redefine how we need to think about the boundaries between work and non-work. The two-dimensional separation/integration continuum does not adequately capture the challenges of social technologies. Actual and virtual space, as well as time and mental boundaries, become blurred through persistent visibility combined with permanent, public association with the organisation. Work/non-work boundaries become blurred, but ultimately, even boundaries between personal and public life become extremely indistinct. Most people who use social media become integrators simply by association and increased visibility. This fundamentally challenges how work/private life boundaries need to be studied and conceptualised. Previous research on how technology enables work to intrude into the private sphere (e.g. Middleton and Cukier, 2006; Fenner and Renn, 2010) therefore needs further development to consider the public aspects of modern working life. Research and organisational policies regarding the use of social technologies need to consider issues of (in)voluntary visibility and privacy to a much greater extent. As we demonstrate here, social media use helps to blur the separation between employees and their organisation. Consequently, NGO employees develop new, increasingly defensive boundary work tactics.

### Online boundary work tactics

Because of the specific affordances of social media, we identified online boundary work tactics that enhance earlier studies of offline boundary work, as well as the behaviour-based notions of ICT-mediated boundary work presented by Sayah (2013) and Yeow (2014). Earlier studies have focused on boundary characteristics (Clark,

2000; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009) and on the artefacts people use for boundary work (Nippert-Eng, 1996a,b).

We enhance knowledge of boundary work tactics by focussing on social technologies and by proposing a categorisation of online tactics. People use mainly defensive tactics to negotiate the permeability, strength and exclusivity of their work/non-work boundaries. All three tactics influence the boundary characteristics established by Kreiner *et al.* (2009) and Clark (2000). Prevention decreases boundary permeability and increases boundary strength over time by discouraging boundary transgressions. Diversion is an attempt to address boundaries that are too permeable and not exclusive enough. The area around the boundary is not exclusive and people try to remedy that (temporary) state. Finally, retaliation is an attempt to increase boundary strength. The boundary is too permeable and the spheres are mixed but by retaliating people try to increase the strength of their boundaries.

These tactics ('prevention', 'diversion' and 'retaliation') are however, only of limited use. Social media challenge people's understanding of 'work' and consequently blur the boundaries, not just between work and other life spheres, but also between the individual and the organisation, through increased public availability. People's opportunities for privacy are severely limited, particularly in professions that enable a high degree of identification.

The tactics we identify also suggest that we need to pay more attention to perceptions of boundary transgression. Boundary blurring is not always perceived negatively.

According to (Vaast and Kaganer, 2013), current organisational guidelines and policies mainly aim at shaping workplace use of social media in ways that would mitigate organisational risk, even though boundary blurring is a recurrent theme in these policies. The tactics we identified can be understood as a consequence of the lack of clear policies in the organisations we studied. However, the social context cannot be ignored. Even if one organisation introduces wide-ranging policies, if the rest of the industry continues without, exploiting their employees' social capital, group pressure might still prevent the individual from setting clear boundaries and protecting their privacy.

The organisations had no policies at the time of our study. We argue that policies for the use of social media in organisations need to address questions regarding boundaries, but even more importantly, issues concerning privacy and organisational expectations. It is quite possible that employees would be happy to use their personal social capital for the benefit of their organisation, but this issue needs to be addressed in guiding documents to prevent a culture of peer pressure taking over.

Policies also need to consider how far the organisation's demands for social media activity, and for promoting its cause/mission publicly and personally, might influence or even meet formal expectations. How does it account for these activities in terms of performance assessment and salary negotiations? We argue that explicit expectations for social media use and non-use is essential for the visible process through which boundaries are negotiated by individuals (Nippert-Eng, 1996a,b) and will lead to a better relationship between the individual and the organisation.

## Conclusion

This paper contributes to research on work/private life boundaries research by widening the concept of boundary work to include online boundaries, which has become necessary due to the omnipresence of social media. The use of social media has shown to afford changes at three interrelated levels of boundary work among NGO employees: direct and public links to their organisation; a more direct identification with its values; and a 24/7 relation. Consequently, we propose that people use three tactics to negotiate their online boundaries: prevention, diversion and retaliation. These tactics are prohibitive, reactive or active, but mainly defensive, in that they aim to protect

private life from both public scrutiny and work. This also results in a call for explicit policies or guidelines for social media use in the interest of both organisations and their employees.

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