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The beep of the phone.. thudding heart, fingers clicking away.

“Is everything okay?”

Yes, you say. “I just had to reply to this one email. All done now!”

You set it aside, eyes flickering in the direction of the screen just a little.

Several studies that argue for a correlation between increased anxiety, mood disorders, and screen use show the need to develop habits for self-improvement and suggest the need to find ways in which we must wilfully disengage from our technological aids (Elhai et al. 2017, Bedrosian and Nelson 2017, Wood et al. 2013). Circadian disruptions and their long-lasting effects on mental health have been an increasing source of concern (Navara 2007). However, what we need are new studies on the collapsing wall between work and rest that might turn out to be a long-lasting effect of Covid-19. In this short reflection, I attempt to think through some tangled issues with placing responsibility on individuals to take care of their screen time, or be accountable to themselves for creating the binary between work and rest. Specifically, there are complex issues with assuming a division between work and rest without acknowledging the deep-set attitudes to productivity and structural or institutional imbalances in power.

Most of us have probably sent that late-night email that felt like it just could not wait. Or, we replied to one which seemed urgent, but also not so time-consuming that it must be put off till the

next morning. However innocuous these choices may seem to be, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the collapse of home and the world, making the one-off untimely email or weekend meeting requests a routine aspect of the new normal. By extension, time consists of fewer divisions between work and rest, or demarcations such as 9am – 5pm workdays, or norms that frown upon emailing people on weekends. Several of us, especially in the university setting, collectively inhabit an in-between space between remote and in-person work, navigating varied sets of constantly evolving work ethics.

The recent law passed by Portugal in November 2021 directing employers from emailing or contacting their employees after regular work hours seems like a step that recognizes the collapse of any reasonable work-life balance during Covid-19. This law recognizes the urgent need to strengthen the boundaries between work and personal time, as leaving it up to employees to “turn off” fails to recognize the power difference in situations where workers have to restate their boundaries and express reasons for not responding (Mendes). Parliamentary leader of the Portuguese social party, Ana Catarina Mendes, argues for the need to establish better and clearer boundaries between working and personal time while explaining the rationale for the recent law.

The Portugal law articulates a symptom of the current mixed model of work, by inviting scrutiny to the new modes in which productivity demands attention at all times, the ways in which emails and work-related communication constantly interrupt any ability to “tune off”, as we collectively grapple with reconfiguring our boundaries in the new normal. We are at risk of accepting these interruptions as normative and acceptable, rather than occasional deviations from the expected.

Placing the onus on employees to re-emphasize boundaries, keep track of hours, report overtime etc. freely poses additional burdens on their time and demands more labor from workers while failing to recognize the complex circulation of power in contexts of work or study. Particularly in settings where student life and work are integrated as they are in graduate school, it is unacceptable that stricter measures are not imposed by institutional sanctions on better boundaries between work and rest. A valorization of productivity and going “above and beyond the expected” can lead to burnout in these settings.

As promising as the law passed by Portugal seems to be, it is hard to determine if this will herald similar moves by global labor unions and governments. Further, institutional sanctions are a big step in this direction, but along with this, we might have to think of other ways in which we can protect vulnerable employees from having to emphasize their autonomy and need for rest. The first step in this direction would recognize that being able to express dissatisfaction or discontent is not the radical act of freedom that it is purported to be, but a precarious path to seeking support for most workers straddling multiple professional roles.

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