The Digital Brain Switch: Managing Rapid Transitions Between Role Identities in a Digital World

Gillian Symon
Royal Holloway University of London

Petros Chamakiotis (Royal Holloway)
Helen Roby & Rebecca Whiting (The Open University)
Jon Whittle & Ming Ki Chong (Lancaster University),
Jim Ang & Umar Rashid (University of Kent)
Interdisciplinary study, funded by EPSRC (Grant No. EP/K025201/1) investigating how we manage work-life boundary transition ("switching") in the digital age

Phase 1: Understanding switching through observation and discussion

Phase 2: Designing and testing interventions to support switching
Background: WLB, Boundaries and Transitions

Informed by empirical and theoretical work on:

- boundary (im)permeability (Clark, 2000) and micro-role transitions (Ashforth et al, 2000);
- boundary management tactics (e.g. Kreiner et al, 2009; Sturges, 2010); specifically as dynamic, contextual and contested (Cohen et al, 2008)
- identity boundary dynamics (Kreiner et al, 2006), specifically on-line (Ollier-Malaterre et al, 2014)

Our focus:

- Micro-transitions and identity management: how do we manage identity boundaries as an ongoing daily practice?
- Digital technologies: what new benefits and challenges do mobile technologies and social media raise for this transition process (switching)?
- Innovative research methods: how do we capture the complexity of this everyday and ongoing transition?
- Interventions: how can switching requirements be supported?
Sample

Sampling from a range of perspectives:

- **Social Entrepreneurs**: particular WLB challenges may include more permeable personal-organizational identity, moral commitment to work goals, and lack of a defined workplace.

- **Students**: a younger demographic sample (18-25) whose WLB challenges may include ill-defined work-life boundaries, extensive use of social media, and role identity permeability.

- **Office-based Employees**: particular WLB challenges may include less control over work processes and use of technologies, and more closely defined role identities.
Methodology

Given our commitment to capturing transitions as they happen and focus on participants’ own interpretation of these:

Video-Elicitation Method:

- Video diaries, capturing moments of transition with/out commentary
- Narrative interviews, incorporating life history, review of videos, reflection
Initial Thematic Analysis: Umbrella Themes (Top-Down)
Within Category Detailed Analysis
(Bottom-up)
Switching and Identity Dynamics: Social Entrepreneurs

- Digital switching of identities
- Digital merging of identities
Digital Switching: Identities as (positive) distraction
Digital Switching:
Identities as mutually enhancing

[Daughter has sent email about work to personal email account]

“there’s probably quite a bit of blurring of boundaries there because both my kids have worked for the organisation as well, so they know it inside out ... so she’s looking and she’s seen something that she thinks I’m interested in. She would send it to my home email account because that’s my personal... that my kids would use, that one, to email me.... we’re probably, as a family, very involved in the work that I do.

I noticed that you then swopped the email to your work email account, because...?

Because I want it to be on... you know, I said I’d use my emails ... also as a to-do list and that was something that I wanted to deal with when I got in to work. And I wouldn’t be looking at my personal account when I got in to work.
“...occasionally I’ll look at emails in the middle of [a] period with the kids, normally on my phone..... I think ‘oh well you know the chips are going to be another five minutes in the oven and [the children] are quite happy ... so I’ll just check the emails, see what’s come in’. And then you get something which is maybe a bit snotty and .. puts you in a bad mood.... do I respond to this? What do I do? And then before you know it, the chips are burning, the kids are shouting because they have detected that you’re not, sort of, in the same space.... So I’m trying to stop doing that but .. it’s very difficult because ...

[I’m] wanting to see if I’ve got a response to something [on the smartphone] .. I think it comes back to being a social entrepreneur.. because the projects that we do .. I really believe in as well.. we’re not just doing it for the money... I’m quite passionate about [it] ..”

Digital Switching: Identities as conflictual and contested
Digital Identity Merging
Servicing the Digital Identity

I tend not to do too many emails [at night] because I think I would have dealt with most of them by then. Because by the time I’ll come down and watch TV, it will be about 10 o’clock, maybe 11 o’clock …. I would view Twitter and Facebook. For my work, as leisure time, I suppose. It doesn’t seem like work to me [....] say I’d watched a film, and it’s 20 past, and then the adverts come on, that’s when I would check [Twitter]

So is this because you don’t, you feel you don’t have enough time during the day, and you need to catch up?

Yes. And also because something like Twitter you’ve got to be on it frequently. Because if you just […] do lots of updates in one go, people that use Twitter, they know, they just see lots of posts by itself, and I don’t think people engage. So I think with Twitter, you’ve got to put something on frequently, not a great deal, and frequently, so that when people log in to Twitter, they can see an update, if you know what I mean.
Building Digital Identity Boundaries

“one of the members [of the cooperative] left and started a really acrimonious campaign against the other people who were left online, blogging all the time, making lots of accusations....... it made me quite sensitive to the fact that I can post something that [might later be painted] in a bad light ... I don’t like the thought of putting out a lot of personal information about my family and what I’m having for tea and everything .. just in case it is used by someone against me at some point in the future”
Disconnecting
Issues Raised

- *Dynamic interpretation*: Many of the issues raised by participants are complex which make it hard to classify practices or technologies as inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad’

- *Identity implications and influence*: SEs’ identity as committed and open to community, combined with digital opportunities, raises specific benefits and challenges.

- *Reflection*: Video diaries helped participants to reflect and understand own practices; and already led to some changes
Two Aspects of Phase 1 to Inform Phase 2

- **General Interpretation of Data**
  - No one-size-fits-all solution; importance of identity context and individual preference
  - Understanding and reflecting on practices is important
  - We need to give users control

- **Specific Features for Implementation**
  - Derived from focus group prioritisation
DBS Research Platform

Life As an Experiment
Improving Life with 3D (Data Driven Decisions)

Learn More
Life-as-an-experiment

- Allow participants to define and run their own experiments
  - Track variables of interest (e.g., email usage, mood levels, calendars)
  - Define interventions (e.g., don’t read email after 5pm)
  - Understand effects through visualizations
- Potential to involve others, share and discuss findings
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Auto-track vs self-report vs social reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 Guilt</td>
<td>Does down-time make me feel guilty?</td>
<td>Down-time vs guilt</td>
<td>Self+Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Switching</td>
<td>Does checking email lead me to situations where I am doing one thing but thinking about another?</td>
<td>Frequency of email checks vs switch measure (Blobo)</td>
<td>Auto+Semi-Auto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Blocking</td>
<td>Should we force physical interactions rather than digital interactions? [e.g., during family situations]</td>
<td>Duration of no-tech periods vs family cohesion</td>
<td>Self+Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Technology/Well-being</td>
<td>Does technology use before bed affect my sleep patterns? (e.g., listening to radio)</td>
<td>Track technology use before bed vs sleep app</td>
<td>Auto+Auto</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example

Tim obsessively checks email at all times of the day – he is becoming tense and anxious.

He wants to know if his mood would improve if he were to ignore emails and only check at certain times of the day.

He is interested in measuring two variables: his self-reported mood level, and number of times he checked emails per day.

In the experiment set-up, he instructs Life to send him a notification at 10pm every day to fill in his mood level and email checking frequency for 1 month.

One month later when the experiment is completed, Life produces a bar chart showing his mood level vs number of times email checked per day over the whole month period.

From this visualisation, he found that he felt very tense when he checked email either more than 10 times a day, or less than 2 times a day.

He records this finding and shares it with his friends using Life’s social features.
Future Activities

Vast amount of data; collection and analysis still in progress.

Future analysis:

- Detailed analysis within codes, including narrative, discourse and visual
- Group comparisons
- Further refinement of research platform (RP)
- Reflection and analysis of findings from use of RP for further iterative development
- Consideration of alternative viewpoints