

# Disconnection or hyperconnectivity?

*Remote work and the case of Italian south working*

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## ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis, and the ensuing diffusion of remote work, revived the debate about work meaningfulness, leading many workers to question their hyperconnected worklives. In Italy, this discussion has been animated by the “south working” proposition, which promotes moving towards the south of the country to work remotely and enjoy a slower pace of life and lower costs of living, while contributing to the revitalisation of rural and nonmetropolitan areas. Through digital ethnographic research that employs a variety of data sources, in this chapter I reconstruct the debate around south working across Italian mainstream and social media. I critically discuss the role that hyperconnectivity, disconnection, and digital work lifestyles play in this conversation, reflecting on the significance of the south working proposition in context of new aspirations for a “good life” that are distinctive of the post-pandemic scenario.

**KEYWORDS:** disconnection, Italy, meaningful work, remote work, south working

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis, and the ensuing diffusion of remote work practices on a global scale, contributed to reviving the debate about work meaningfulness in Western societies. Calls for a “disconnection from work” have multiplied in recent years; phenomena such as the so-called Great Resignation generated lively discussions, especially – albeit not exclusively, as we will see – in the US (Gittleman, 2022). Online, the *r/antiwork* subreddit – a lively discussion forum that hosts conversations about working conditions and job quality – has grown exponentially in numbers between 2020 and 2021, signalling an increase of interest in the topic. In the same timeframe, the hashtag *#quietquitting* has gone viral on TikTok, promoting minimal engagement with work beyond one’s immediate duties (Scheyett, 2023). This comprehensive set of instances points to the development of a broad conversation about work and its meaning as a by-product of the pandemic crisis, which places disconnection – from high-paced worklives in high-cost cities, towards a better work–life balance – at the centre of the discussion.

An interesting context to observe in relation to this issue is Italy. At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the shift to remote work was accompanied by the popularisation of the “south working” proposition. South working is a self-declared movement that advocates moving to the southern regions of Italy to work remotely, supported by digital technologies, with the goal of recuperating a healthier and more balanced lifestyle. Developed in its legal status as a registered trademark and a same-name association, founded in March 2020, it represents a spin to the term “smart working”, which acquired an all-encompassing meaning and relevance in the Italian context during the pandemic to broadly indicate all kinds of remote work practices (Gandini, 2021).

Through digital ethnographic research that employs a variety of data sources, in this chapter I reconstruct the mainstream and social media debate around the south working proposition. Materials presented in the text include the following: 1) web pages of the South Working association, which comprise of a set of “stories of south working” by workers who decided to embrace the lifestyle promoted by the movement and a selection of press articles covering the initiative; and 2) a set of posts obtained from YouTube and Facebook by means of qualitative digital methods (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017) for the purposes of inquiring about the framing, reception, and wider discussion of this proposition across a variety of media sources, as well as by users themselves. In particular, I investigate the role that technology played in this conversation, aiming to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1.** In which ways have the themes of disconnection and hyperconnectivity been discussed and situated within the south working debate?

**RQ2.** To what extent did the framing and reception of the south working proposition engage with – or depart from – other disconnection-related issues, such as digital detox?

In seeking the answers to these questions, I adopt a wider conception of disconnection than what research in digital disconnection studies typically does. Here, disconnection is not understood as being solely from digital media per se, but rather (also) from what digital media serve as a means of access to – in this case, to work.

Findings highlight that the issues of disconnection, hyperconnectivity, and digital work lifestyles were largely peripheral to the discussion that followed the launch of the south working initiative. This resulted in a debate where the economic, technological, and social regeneration of rural, deprived, and deindustrialised areas took a primary position, leaving in the background the actual questioning of work meaningfulness, practices, and routines that is ultimately at the core of the south working proposition. By illustrating this case, I aim to establish a more solid link between disconnection and digital work research (see also Fast, 2021; Bagger, Chapter 6 in this volume; Scott Hansen, Chapter 10 in this volume), suggesting that the south working debate is evidence of the extenuating difficulty to reconcile, on the one hand, the growing endeavour for disconnection from hyperconnected worklives by many workers, and on the other, the difficulty in imagining an alternative to the fixed time–space structure and work organisation models of the twentieth-century workplace.

In the remainder of the chapter, I first discuss the growing relevance of work disconnection debates and then present the south working proposition in this light, outlining its popularisation in the Italian context. Then, I illustrate the main aspects that characterised the south working debate at the start of the pandemic, building on the different data sources introduced earlier. In the concluding section, I reflect on the broader significance of the south working proposition in relation to the academic debate, digital work lifestyles, and aspirations of the “good life” in the post-pandemic scenario.

## **Disconnecting from work: A post-pandemic trending topic**

Quit my job last night, it was nice to be home to make the kids breakfast and take them to school today! Off to hunt for a new opportunity, wish me luck :) (Hestolemymile, 2021)

This is the most upvoted post appearing at the time of writing on the *r/antiwork* subreddit, a forum hosted on the Reddit platform that discusses working conditions and job quality – and that, in so doing, actively encourages people to, in short, “disconnect from work”. Published in October

2021, this post is exemplary of the popularisation of a discussion on work disconnection that is a significant by-product of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis across Western countries. The US has been a (somewhat unexpected) centre-piece of this lively conversation: In addition to the “anti-work” subreddit, which has obtained large mainstream media coverage in the past few years (see also Rogers, 2022), the Great Resignation phenomenon – which grasps the unprecedented number of workers who quit their job in the aftermath of the pandemic outbreak in search for new opportunities and, particularly, a better work–life balance (Gittleman, 2022) – has been an object of wide discussion and contention. The actual significance of the Great Resignation is still disputed from a statistical perspective (Gittleman, 2022); yet, together with another popular Internet trend – TikTok’s #quietquitting, which promotes minimal engagement in work beyond one’s immediate duties – it is evidence that a growing amount of workers in different parts of the Western world have begun questioning their relationship with, and the meaning of, their work, following the pandemic crisis.

Not coincidentally, many of these workers are employed in the so-called knowledge economy, which represents the backbone of present-day postindustrial societies in the West. Within this context, the advancement of digital technology contributed to revolutionising the pace and scale of work. On the one hand, the datafication and monitoring of work has qualitatively intensified (Moore, 2017); on the other hand, a delinking between the execution of work and its time–space organisation has occurred because of the diffusion of the Internet, which has also exacerbated the perception of a growing generational divide in work cultures (Gandini, 2020). Comprehensively, it may be said that the pandemic crisis has made more visible to workers the contradiction between the “mythology” of work as a self-fulfilling activity (Fleming, 2015) and the growing perception of pointlessness that accompanies many jobs in the corporate economy (Graeber, 2018), leading to the development of a conversation on work meaningfulness from a more systemic – and somewhat less individualised – perspective.

Prior to the pandemic outbreak, the academic debate had recorded a growing tension between hyperconnected work practices and the proliferation of self-help activities (e.g., “digital detox” programmes) that call for a more mindful use of digital technology – also beyond work and more broadly in one’s everyday life (Fast, 2021). Yet, as also argued by Fast (2021) and Bagger (Chapter 6 in this volume), there continues to be a lack of work-oriented disconnection studies as well as of disconnectivity-based work research, which demands further expansion. In the same article, Fast (2021) distinguished between three modes through which to read the relationship between work and disconnection: 1) disconnection “for work”, that is, calls to slow one’s pace of work in order to work better and more productively; 2) disconnection “at work”, that is, the study of those practices that entail disconnection during

work or while working; and 3) disconnection work outside the wage relation, that is, domestic work. The case of south working, which is explored in this chapter, represents an interesting example to peruse these tensions and expand our understanding of the evolving relationship between disconnection and work in the post-pandemic setting.

## **South working: An introduction**

Following the imposition of localised restrictions in the Lombardy region, on 8 March 2020, Italy entered a nationwide lockdown that would last until 4 May. Contextually, the Italian government mandates the recourse to “smart working” for all companies and public services, except for health-related occupations and a small number of other “essential” jobs. It is on this occasion that most of the Italian public gets acquainted, somewhat for the first time, with remote work practices (Gandini & Garavaglia, 2023). Within this context, the term “smart working” becomes a household topic of discussion, being used to indicate all kinds of practices in relation to remote work and working from home, without any distinction among specific arrangements (Gandini, 2021).

The sudden and unplanned, large-scale diffusion of remote work practices imposed by the pandemic crisis brought to the fore a lively debate in the Italian public opinion concerning work cultures and work–life balance. A survey promoted by a national online news media network in July 2020 (Today.it, 2020) showed that 20 per cent of respondents answered the question, “How has the experience of lockdown changed your way of approaching life?” by stating that they “want to change their life, doing fewer things but more meaningfully”, while 14 per cent declared that they “were giving too much importance to work”, and 6 per cent expressed the desire to “move house, outside the city or to the countryside”. This trend of disengagement from work “as it used to be” has continued beyond the heightened phase of the pandemic, as a significant number of voluntary resignations from employment has been recorded, making Italy a peculiar example of Great Resignation outside the US (Coin, 2023).

Thus, it is no surprise that the so-called south working proposition found nationwide resonance within this context. South working is a self-described movement and a same-name association founded in March 2020 by Elena Militello, a 27-year-old Sicilian researcher and activist who relocated from Luxembourg to Sicily during the lockdown period, and Mario Mirabile, an urban policy consultant. As the official website ([www.southworking.org](http://www.southworking.org)) outlines, south working calls for an engagement into “new ways of working, starting from the territories and enabling a new balance between personal and professional life”. In so doing, it aims at “bridging the economic, social and territorial gap between North and South, between industrialised and marginalised areas of the country, through a process of reactivation of traditionally peripheral territories”. This promotes 1) the creation of advanced digital

infrastructure across the country, so as to allow workers to choose where they want to work from; 2) the improvement of mobility infrastructures, so that workers can be no more than one hour away from a high-speed rail or airport connection; and 3) the development of social infrastructures and local community services, such as coworking spaces and other public and private spaces of collaboration and care, to support workers in their personal and social needs. Interestingly, the goal of the association is not merely to advance the diffusion of remote work, but to enable a systemic process of social change, fostering more balanced work practices and the revitalisation of previously deprived or abandoned areas of the country – including, as said, building new digital infrastructure and thus expanding the connective potential of the south. This is also reflected in the “charter” of south working, which outlines the values and principles that define its activity and to which adherents must abide by. Among these are found, in particular, the voluntariness of south working, which maintains that this must not consist in delocalisation or outsourcing of staff imposed by companies as a cost-effective strategy, but should originate from the free will of workers themselves.

South working gained significant mainstream media attention throughout the early phase of the pandemic. This is also owed to the fact that it touched upon an open nerve of the Italian labour market, which is characterised by a “dual nature” across the north–south divide and a significant south-to-north migration flow of workers motivated by economic reasons (Biagioli et al., 2004). This is exemplified by the city of Milan, which attracts large numbers of (especially young and knowledge-based) workers from the south who decide (or, as we will see, are somewhat forced) to move to an urban area that offers more professional opportunities, but where costs of living are considerably higher than the rest of the country and comparable to those of other major European cities (Bonomi, 2008). Within this setting, south working successfully appeals to the ideal of striking a better work–life balance without leaving one’s place of birth, aiming at changing the narrative around economic migration in Italy precisely at a time when many workers experienced a temporary break from their usual work routines, and were therefore more sensitive to the idea of considering significant lifestyle changes. It is estimated that around 45,000 workers in Italy relocated back to their home towns to work remotely during the early phase of the pandemic, some temporarily, some permanently, many of them to the southern regions (Svimez, 2020).

## **“Stories of south working”: The workers’ voices**

At the time of writing, the South Working website hosts a set of 19 “Stories of South Working” recounted by workers themselves, whereby they describe their experiences and perceptions of working remotely following the pandemic outbreak. These testimonies span between April 2020 and March 2022 and

feature eight male workers, nine female workers, and two couples, for a total of nine men and twelve women. The vast majority of those are workers who relocated to the south of Italy to live and work following the pandemic outbreak, with the intention of making this a permanent move. In addition, there is a story of temporary south working by a female project manager in her 30s who lives and works in London, but who spent part of the pandemic period in Sicily; the story of a 28-year-old engineer who was living and working in Spain prior to the pandemic, and relocated to a small “borgo” near Verona, in the north-east of Italy; and a story of “nomad work” (Ehn et al., 2022; Thompson, 2019) more generally intended – that of Davide, who engaged in a journey of 2,500 kilometres by foot across Italy, looking for places along the way to work remotely. These last two are the most recent stories in chronological terms and signal an evolution in the scope of the association, towards a proposition that focuses chiefly on nomad work as a lifestyle choice that seeks a better work–life balance, while nonetheless conditioned on the presence of high-speed digital connectivity.

The various testimonies largely mirror one another and share a common format, as workers recount their south working experience, highlighting pros and cons of their lifestyle choice. Among the advantages, many underline the possibility to “come back home” and live closer to their family and friends. Many also stress the possibility of enjoying more of the “small things” that the south of Italy can offer, such as the colours of the landscapes, the proximity to the sea, or the good weather. Some maintain that south working enabled them to live more flexible and efficient lives, giving them the chance to cultivate more closely their personal interests and to save time – particularly on commuting – and money. It may be said that, for many of these south workers, the main driver has been the aspiration of a new kind of “good life”, which finally reconciles with their (oftentimes forced) decision to leave the south in search for work when they were young adults. See how Claudia, a sales advisor, described it:

It would be ideal to no longer have to choose between work and family. South working represents the right solution to pursue and achieve one’s professional goals, without renouncing to live in the places of one’s heart.

The negative aspects of south working also largely tended to repeat themselves across the south workers’ stories. Many underscored that south working can be socially isolating and lamented the lack of face-to-face meetings with colleagues, as well as the reduction in sociality compared with office life. Yet, these narrations tell of a successful disconnection from high-paced routines, as these downsides are a somewhat necessary price to pay in exchange for the upsides of living in the south – which mirrors trends in disconnection studies concerning abstention from social media (Jorge, 2019). Some contradictions, however, were also present: An issue encountered by many south workers, for instance, is the difficulty to “interrupt work” at the end of the workday, and

to efficiently separate their professional and private lives as a result of working from home. Paola, a graphic designer from Basilicata, underlined that “often it becomes late in front of the computer without realising it”. This reveals the existence of an extenuating tension between the call to disconnect from high-paced, city-based worklives that animates the south working proposition on the one hand, and one’s actual work–life balance while working remotely on the other, as many workers still engage in hyperconnected work routines while actively practicing a form of disconnection from work.

Although these stories are also a promotional tool for the association, they do not obfuscate the potential shortcomings of the south working proposition. Some workers noted that they miss the vibrant cultural offer of the city – of Milan in particular; others underscored the necessity to be “better organised” at work in order to actually succeed in south working. Some of these stories also include practical suggestions about how to make their south working decision a successful one. Many emphasised the necessity of accessing quality broadband, again highlighting a tension between disconnection and (hyper) connection that seems to be at the heart of this lifestyle choice. Others expressed the desire for greater availability of local coworking spaces, so as to access a physical workplace regularly and have contact with other south workers. Alice, a Germany-based project manager who relocated to Sicily, maintained the following:

South working is certainly feasible, but upon certain conditions – first of all the structures. In Palermo there are few coworking spaces. I tried to look for some and the ones I found did not meet my needs, or were too far from the area where I live, also considering that taking public transport in Palermo is an adventure!

Comprehensively, these “stories of south working” aim at presenting the south working proposition as the enabler of a process of positive social change that would improve the quality of work and life and revitalise the south of Italy. Antonio, a Sicilian engineer who moved back to Palermo after years living in Turin, outlined quite explicitly that he “had always thought that the job he aspired to did not exist in Palermo”, while now he is “proud to represent the change towards a work model that fosters delocalisation”. Yet, arguably the appeal of the south working proposition rests primarily upon an affective dimension rather than a practical one, as it builds on the promise of reconciling the proximity to one’s family with one’s career ambitions. As Maria, a Sicilian project manager, recounted:

Our parents have been telling us for years to leave because there are no opportunities here, and every time we leave, we leave our hearts here to obey the mind and pursue our career options. If I could no longer choose between heart and mind, and if job opportunities could be separated from [where] the company headquarters [are located], it would be ideal.

## Mainstream media coverage of south working

Since the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, a variety of media outlets have taken great interest in the south working proposition. At the time of writing, the South Working association's website lists 61 media appearances on local, national, and international outlets spanning between June 2020 and February 2022. These include national outlets such as *La Repubblica* (8 articles), *Corriere della Sera*, and *Sky News Italy* (2 articles each), as well as magazines and newspapers from different cultural standpoints and areas. Also noteworthy is the number of articles published by local outlets across the south, particularly from Sicily (17 in total), as well as the presence of five articles from international media sources. Among these entries is an open letter penned by the South Working founders, addressed to the (at the time) Minister for the South and Territorial Inclusion, Mara Carfagna, which summarised the main claims raised by the association regarding the revitalisation of the south of Italy.

Many of these articles are centred on one of the founders, Elena Militello, who frequently appeared as a guest on television shows or in press interviews in the early phase of the pandemic. Others discussed south working more generally as part of the diffusion of remote work practices following the pandemic outbreak, reflecting on their long-term prospects. Some feature other “stories of south working” beyond those published on the association's website, presenting the workers' experiences and discussing advantages and disadvantages. To investigate in greater depth the media coverage of south working beyond the selection of press articles listed on the association's website, a set of 1,516 Facebook posts by pages and verified profiles, based on the search term “south working” (in Italian language) and published between March 2020 and September 2021, was retrieved via Facebook's research data collection platform CrowdTangle. Of the top-ten articles retrieved and ordered by the “Total Interaction Rate” metric, which accounts for the total amount of interactions (likes and other reactions), four are from newspapers of national relevance (*La Repubblica*, *Huffington Post Italy*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, and *Il Sole 24 Ore*); one is from a multi-media national news outlet (*TGCOM24*); one is from a popular, online-only, national news media (*Will Media*); and the remaining four are local media from the south. Overall, these sources attest to a largely positive media framing, which nonetheless entails a more doubtful nuance. The article with more interactions in this sample (which also appears on the South Working press list) is from *La Repubblica* (Smorto, 2020), published on 6 November 2020, which presents a variety of “stories of south working” recounted by workers themselves. The overall tone of this entry is hopeful: It presents south working as the opportunity to enjoy working remotely from one's place of origin, and places it in the context of a narration that highlights how some workers would have never thought it possible to relocate to their place of birth before retirement. A similar, hopeful

tone also characterises some of the other articles in this list, particularly that by *TGCOM24* (2020), which goes as far as stating that “for some it [south working] is a dream come true”. Among the somewhat doubtful ones, instead, we can find the second article by interaction count, by *Huffington Post Italy* (Moncalero, 2020). This presents a selection of stories of workers who left Milan during the pandemic to relocate to the south, while continuing to work remotely for companies located in the north. These testimonies are presented in the context of a discussion that flags working from the south of Italy for employers that are actually based in the north of the country. The narration is heavily stereotyped, as it emphasises the pleasure to bathe in the sea after work, or to conduct meetings from the pinewood, implicitly signalling the risk of the emergence of a new kind of socioeconomic cleavage. Interestingly, two other posts in the sample focus on the downsides of the south working proposition for big cities. One (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 2020a) is a video debate that discusses the prospects of the city of Milan following the pandemic and the diffusion of remote work, questioning whether it will ultimately lose its attractive allure. Another (*RomaToday*, 2020) questions the impact of remote and south working practices upon the costs of renting in the city of Rome.

Overall, this analysis suggests that the south working proposition has enjoyed a largely positive media framing; yet, this is enmeshed in stereotypical depictions of remote work while leaving the issue of work disconnection in a largely peripheral position of the debate, while the primary focus remains the question of the north–south divide in the Italian labour market. In turn, this is also exemplary of the continuing tension around the role of digital media in work–life boundary management, between (hyper)connectivity on the one hand, and social connection, belonging, and the social isolation deriving from remote work on the other, which raises further questions about the kind and depth of (re)connection that digital media actually facilitate (Bagger & Lomborg, 2021). Furthermore, technology is largely portrayed throughout these articles as a neutral aid to support remote work practices; a more comprehensive discussion of digital lifestyles and how they fit with south working practices is markedly lacking.

## **The social media conversation about south working**

Starting from the Facebook posts about south working previously collected and analysed, a digital ethnographic exploration of the comments posted by users alongside these articles has been conducted to investigate the users’ reception of south working. For the most part, these mirror the tone of the articles discussed: Most of the comments primarily revolve around the north–south divide and discuss what kind of impact the south working proposition, as well as the diffusion of remote work more broadly, might have in Italy beyond the pandemic. Yet, interestingly, some diverse viewpoints also emerge.

Many users highlight the risk that employers might find south working to be an occasion to reduce salary costs, and they fear that working remotely from the south of Italy could be the harbinger of a broader process of delocalisation and outsourcing of work, which will ultimately end up being detrimental for workers. Some underline that companies might impose a difference in salaries between workers who reside in places where there are notably different costs of living. Others maintain that workers in the south should be working for companies in the south, not for companies in the north. Some also underscore the necessity to create an entrepreneurial class in the south, in order to make sure this area of the country flourishes. Many wish the south working proposition to succeed in fostering social change and improving the quality of life and work in the south of Italy, rendering rural and peripheral areas more appealing and thus restraining economic migration flows from the south to the north. Some remain doubtful as to whether south working will continue to be a feasible proposition after the pandemic but are open to the possibility of a permanent change of habits. Yet, many underline the necessity to increase the digitalisation of the south for the south working proposition to be feasible, since many areas still suffer a significant technological divide. Again, it is noteworthy that the issue of healthy digital work lifestyles remains largely in the background of these conversations; yet, hyperconnectivity seems to be featuring more frequently in this discussion.

To further expand this analysis, using the YouTube Data Tools suite (Rieder, 2015), a list of 500 videos based on the search term “south working” was retrieved in September 2021. Among the top-ten videos ordered by comment count that contain the term south working in the video title, three videos are from mainstream media outlets: the first one (top of the ranking) is a feature by LA7 (2020), a national private television broadcaster, that showcases the story of Ludovica, a graphic designer from Naples who relocated to her hometown on occasion of the pandemic outbreak. Her story is very similar to those enlisted on the association’s website. On the one hand, she stated that, thanks to south working, she was able to enjoy the possibility of spending more time with her family. Yet, on the other hand, she also highlighted that she found it difficult to separate her work time from her private life, as remote work schedules prove more hectic than imagined. The tone remained positive overall, as she maintained that south working allows her to live closer to her family, and the practical issues of distance work are a bearable burden vis-à-vis the possibility to see her loved ones more often. The second one (third in the overall ranking) is a news video from RAI, the Italian public service broadcaster, which showcases an interview with Elena Militello, one of the South Working founders (RAI, 2020). Then, at position nine, is a video by *Il Sole 24 Ore* (2020b), the leading Italian economics newspaper, which features a set of interviews with workers who decided to relocate to Calabria following the pandemic outbreak. This is framed in the

context of a romanticised view of south working, which suggests that the pandemic has seen an “inversion trend” in south-to-north migration flows powered by digital technologies and remote work.

The other videos in the sample are more varied: These include a TEDx Talk (2020) by South Working founder Elena Militello, as well as videos from “native” YouTube channels that discuss economic development, project management, and the south in general, which mention the south working proposition. The only video in this list with relatively numerous comments (30) is the first one – Ludovica’s interview at LA7 (LA7, 2020). Looking at these comments, we can observe the presence of a conversation that is largely similar to the discussions encountered on Facebook, whereby users primarily focus on the north–south divide in the Italian context and warn against the risks of delocalisation and outsourcing of work that the south working proposition might trigger. See how this user (interestingly, a self-declared supporter of Lega, the main right-wing populist party at the time) highlights that south working should be about ensuring that the wealth created in the southern regions may be reinvested in the same areas, without getting “lost” to the north:

The big cities of the south are unfortunately a little in degradation, but the hinterland of the south has much potential and advantages, meanwhile there is less crime, a healthier and economically more convenient environment than in northern Italy. We need to think about relaunching our regions because they are our home, and not go to enrich the northern regions, and I say this as a convinced Lega supporter. Now we often hear in the news that the north suffers from Smart Working and for university lessons from home (a sacrosanct and obligatory thing for 2020!), But think for a moment that the money that we southerners do not spend in the north are spent here in our regions creating wealth in our home! (LA7, 2020)

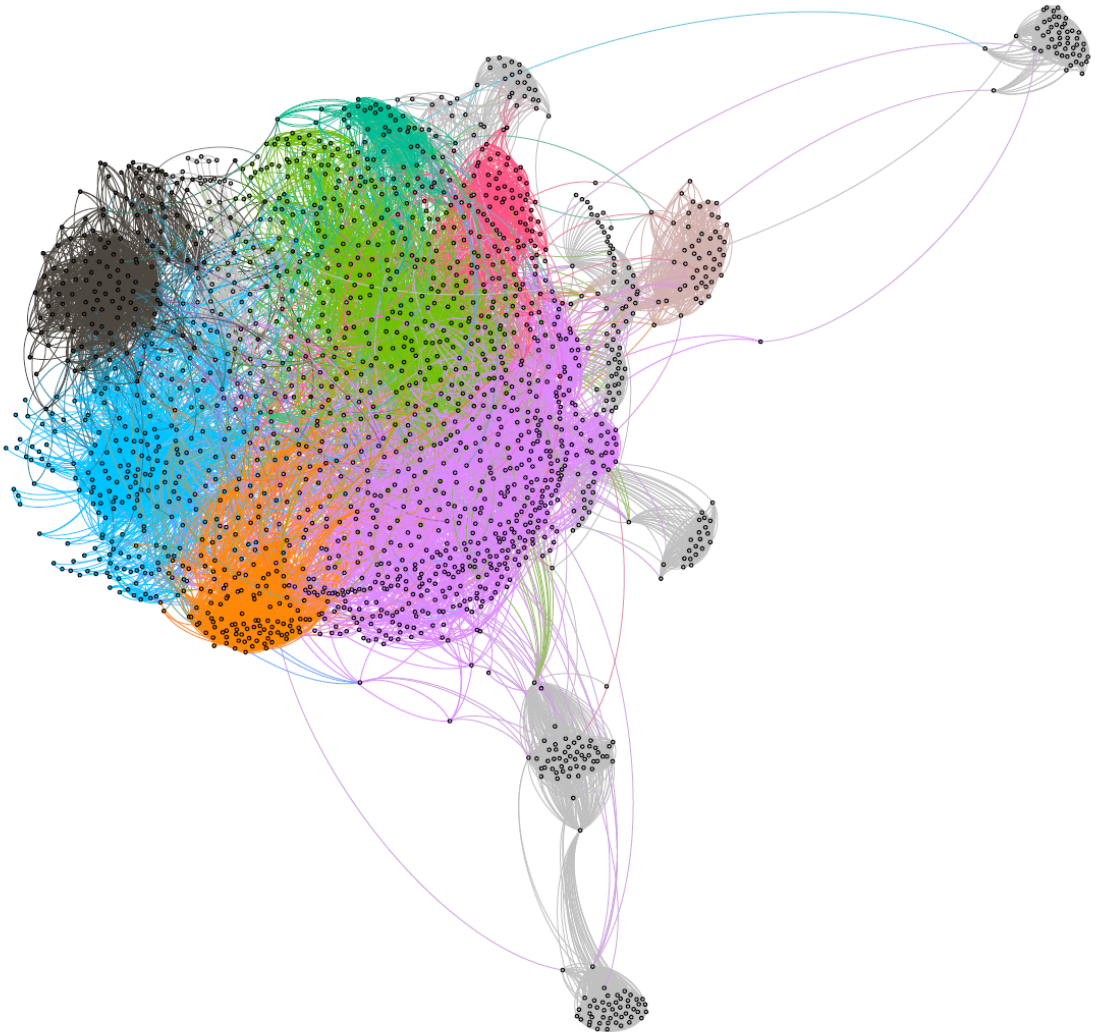
Comments tend to focus on remote work practices more generally: Some note that these can be very detrimental in particular for food businesses in densely populated office areas, while others underline that the isolation of working remotely does not constitute an increase in the quality of life. As an example, see the comment below:

But we are all smart working and in the meantime the bars are starving, all closed, [and we are] at home without contact with colleagues. Horrible! “The quality of life increases” .... beautiful slogan! “The possibility of choice” 😊 (LA7, 2020)

To further probe these trends, and locate this conversation in a broader context, a set of “related” videos starting from the most-commented video in the sample (labelled here as “seed 1”) was also collected via the YouTube Data Tools suite (crawl = 1, iterations = 5). This allowed the exploration of a broader set of connections among videos that are cognate to the south

working discussion on YouTube, and which most frequently appear on users' pages when searching for this topic. From this data collection, a total of 1,952 videos connected by 18,296 edges was retrieved and visualised in a network graph (see Figure 11.1) elaborated through the software Gephi.

**FIGURE 11.1** Video network from “seed 1”



*Comments:* The network shows the clustering of videos in groups, based on their “relatedness”, calculated through the “modularity” measure on Gephi. Each colour represents a group of similar (“related”) videos.

Taking inspiration from existing research on algorithmic cultures on YouTube (Airoldi et al., 2017), the videos included in this data collection were grouped on the basis of their “modularity” score, which reflects the “relatedness” of the content observed. Figure 11.1 visualises this elaboration, by way of

differently-coloured clusters (for a methodological discussion of this approach, see also Caliendo & Gandini, 2017). This allows the exploration of the relative positioning of content about south working on the YouTube platform vis-à-vis other types of content, and thus the investigation in greater depth of the broader cultural imaginary within which the south working proposition appears on this platform. Out of this analysis, six main clusters emerge. The qualitative inspection of the videos included in these clusters enables the following categorisation:

- Purple cluster (19.9% of the overall sample): this contains a set of videos about Italian people and wealth, with a generically populist tone
- Green cluster (14.5% of the overall sample): this is a set of videos from news media and personal blogs, mostly about work and smart- or south working
- Blue cluster (10.6% of the overall sample): this contains how-to videos, mostly of a medical or professional nature
- Black cluster (9.2% of the overall sample): videos included in this cluster showcase excerpts of television programmes, mostly about politics
- Orange cluster (7.4% of the overall sample): this cluster includes a diverse set of videos about politics and the pandemic
- Pink cluster (7% of the overall sample): videos included in this cluster concern work, generally intended
- Dark green cluster (4.3% of the overall sample): this cluster contains videos about finance and economics

This suggests that videos related to south working on YouTube are part of a wide set of content on work and politics, which intersects with the discussion about the pandemic (as evidenced by the blue cluster). Interestingly, the biggest cluster of these related videos (purple) consists of videos about Italians and wealth, and which bears a largely populist tone. What is *not* present, again, is content about work disconnection and digital work lifestyles. In consideration of the different elements of evidence presented here, it may be argued that disconnection does not hold a central position in the debate around the south working proposition; topics such as disconnection, hyperconnectivity, and healthy digital work lifestyles are largely in the background of this conversation. This is indeed quite striking, as the tension between hyper- and disconnection in relation to remote work that emerges from the individual stories of south workers remains unproblematised across the mainstream and social media conversation, while at the same time, the south working movement actively focuses on the promotion of a healthier work–life balance and a more meaningful work life. In the next, concluding section, I discuss these insights more in depth, questioning how south working may be a useful example to expand our understanding of the role of disconnection in the context of the debate on work meaningfulness that followed the pandemic.

## Concluding discussion

Through the case of south working in Italy, in this chapter I have probed the role of disconnection and digital work lifestyles in the debate around work meaningfulness that unfolded as a by-product of the pandemic crisis. Aiming to put the issues of work–life balance and work meaningfulness at the top of the political agenda, and thus fostering practices of systemic cultural change around work, the south working proposition might be considered exemplary, elaborating upon Fast’s (2021) terminology of a fourth potential facet in the relationship between disconnection and digital work research: “disconnection *from* work”. As seen, south working posits an example of disconnection from what digital media serve as a means of access to – in this case, to work – which adds to the existing dimensions that substantiate this relationship. Yet, tension exists between disconnecting from work as an existential practice and the necessity of connection to continue to practice work as a means for making a living. Alongside the examples of “anti-work” and “quiet quitting” previously discussed, the south working debate is ultimately evidence of the extenuating difficulty to reconcile, on the one hand, the growing endeavour for disconnection from hyperconnected worklives that appeals to many workers, especially in the knowledge economy, and, on the other hand, the difficulty in imagining an alternative to the fixed time–space structure and work organisation models of the twentieth-century workplace. Issues such as disconnection and digital work lifestyles ultimately appear little in the mainstream and social media discussion of south working, being obfuscated by the broader contextual circumstances of the Italian labour market.

Contextually, and relatedly, as an example of an emergent nomad work practice in a context characterised by a labour market with peculiar features, south working embodies an aspiration to a new kind of “good life” that delinks from the prioritisation of work as an existential practice. The emphasis posed on this aspect – both in the stories of south working as well as in the mainstream and social media narration about it – signals that south working has touched an open nerve in the Italian debate about work, as it has been perceived as a movement that seeks to subvert the mainstream narrative around work and turn a crisis into an opportunity for social change. Yet, this aspiration is largely perceived to be difficult to translate in practice. In the mainstream and social media debate that followed its popularisation, the south working proposition has ended up being framed in a somewhat patronising discourse around work, whereby the south of Italy is taken as a place that urban, knowledge-based, middle-class workers would improve by way of their counter-migration process. Nonetheless, the south working proposition and debate are also evidence that matters of (dis)connection are a pivotal component of the discourse around work and the “good life” that has been affirmed in the post-pandemic scenario, together with a renewed tension between urban and rural cultures and the

contradictions that concern the movement of workers with different lifestyles from one place to another – and back.

Existing research on nomad work practices (Ehn et al., 2022; Thompson, 2019) maintains that digital technology represents a key support to the quest for a lifestyle that prioritises leisure as opposed to being centred primarily on work. Yet, this position harbours a contradictory relationship with technology, as striving for a closer relationship with nature oftentimes comes together with the (perhaps implicit) promotion of a hyperconnected lifestyle and large-scale digitisation of rural areas. While animated by positive intentions, south working may be seen as an example of this contradiction – which inevitably reflects in the mainstream and social media debate around it. Seen from this perspective, the south working proposition arguably shares some similarities with – and therefore some of the same critiques of – the processes of “rural gentrification” that characterise the inflow of middle-class income workers in nonmetropolitan areas (Nelson et al., 2010). Critical views of these processes emphasise the risk of inter-class conflict and the frequent nature of capital investment that these forms of relocation entail (Phillips, 1993). Some of these issues also apply to the south working proposition: Many south workers emphasise the possibility to spend less on accommodation and thus valorise their (family-owned, most commonly) real estate possessions. The same goes for technological divide: The huge difference in lifestyle that separates urban-based, usually young knowledge workers may also be a legitimate concern, especially in cases where the relocation towards the south does not entail a reconciliation with family ties. In such cases, south working practices might be the driver of positive social change – such as through the wider availability of community services, shared workspaces, and the like – as much as they can widen the existing tension between the worldviews of urban middle classes and rural or non-metropolitan inhabitants, which is reflected in significantly different electoral choices (Gandini, 2020). Nonetheless, the south working movement has arguably had the great merit of fostering a broad conversation around work meaningfulness and social change in the Italian public opinion that, until its appearance, was completely absent, while at the same time trying to put the issue of “disconnecting” from the high-intensity worklives of urban knowledge professionals under the spotlight.

In terms of how interesting the south working example may prove to be, the contribution of this chapter remains limited to a specific case and a peculiar cultural and geographic context. A different set of data, for instance, coming from interviews with south workers beyond the association’s website testimonies, or from similar cases in other parts of the world, would significantly expand the discussion of the extent to which disconnection and healthy digital work lifestyles are engaged with in the south working proposition. The persistent tensions around work cultures that the pandemic crisis has accelerated and brought to light also demand further attention and

monitoring in the years to come. Ultimately, the issues of work–life balance and job quality today cannot be fully addressed without taking into account a healthier, more balanced and wiser use of digital technology in (and in the access to) work, escaping the paradoxical dimension of striving to disconnect (in search for a better work–life balance) while at the same time producing new kinds of hyper-digitalised worklives.

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