

# At the heart of new work practices: A paradoxical approach to silence in a coworking space

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## abstract

The increasingly popular expression ‘collaborative economy’ seems to imply explicit, visible and ultimately ‘noisy’ work practices; collaborating requires expressing things, which is a ‘noisy’ phenomenon in itself. Paradoxically, most contemporary work environments (e.g. open-space oriented or mobile in the context of public spaces) appear to be largely silent and filled with invisible work bubbles. This raises some fundamental questions around the unfolding, emergence and temporality of collaborative practices. In other words, where and when do these expected collaborative practices occur? This research note suggests that new work practices wrap collaboration in silence itself and in alternations of silence. It purports that silence is far from being the mere opposite of noise and offers a critical perspective on silence and noise at work as part of a new managerial practice. We use the case of a French coworking space to illustrate our argument.

## Silence and collaboration: Setting the paradox

Paradoxes are ubiquitous in organizational settings, as suggested by the dense body of research on paradoxes within the management and organization studies literature (see Bloodgood and Chae, 2010; Clegg et al., 2002; Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Smith, 2011). Organizational paradoxes

are encountered at various levels and may take many different forms, such as the tensions between the processes of stability and change (Aroles and Mclean, 2016; Farjoun, 2010), cooperation and competition (Raza-Ullah et al., 2014), exploration and exploitation (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008), profits and purpose (Jay, 2013), or autonomy and control (Taskin and Devos, 2005), just to name but a few. Engaging with paradoxes allows us to navigate through the labyrinthine demands, directionalities and logics guiding organizations and working practices on a daily basis. This research note is concerned with one particular paradox, that of the prevailing place of silence in collaborative workspaces.

More precisely, there is a fascinating paradox around the growing use of silent tools in open silent working environment and the adjacent rise of the so-called collaborative economy. Isn't collaboration supposed to be a noisy undertaking framed by loud conversations and negotiations involving a wide range of actors? Isn't the continuous set of innovations and creative processes behind them also expected to produce noisy and visual collaborations? What are the implications of envisioning collaborative activities as silent? How does silence underlie the performativity of collaborations? These are just some of the questions raised by this paradox. The problem becomes even more complex when we realize that silence is not quite the opposite of noise for that silence is itself a form of noise. Put differently, silence does not correspond to the absence of noise or a situation 'by default' where nothing exists but is a lived event and experience enabling meaningful events and collaborations (see De Vaujany and Aroles, 2019). In that sense, collaboration is not simply silent but made silent and enabled through silence via particular assemblages and work configurations (e.g. body postures, use of headphones, management of phone calls outside workspaces, etc.).

### **Contextualising new work practices**

The time-space of work, alongside our conception of work, have changed drastically over the past 50 years in the light of the emergence of a wide range of information and communication technologies, the popularization

of miscellaneous management mantras and the evolution of the ways in which we conceptualize the relationship between ‘organizations’ and employees (see for instance Aroles et al., 2019; Bosch-Sijtsema et al., 2010; Brocklehurst, 2001). Collaborative entrepreneurship, telework, digital work, digital nomadism, freelancing, individual or collective hybridization of employment and entrepreneurship (alternate entrepreneurs, open innovation, etc.) perfectly epitomize these trends (Laniray et al., 2017). Within that context, various scholars have highlighted the seemingly greater preponderance of flexibility and autonomy in daily work activities (Feldstead et al., 2005; Sewell and Taskin, 2015), the central role played by third spaces in the unfolding of new ways of working (Brown and O’Hara, 2003; Hislop and Axtell, 2009; Kingma, 2016) and the emergence of collaborative spaces (e.g. coworking spaces, makerspaces, hackerspaces, fab labs, incubators, innovation labs, etc.) and activities (Gandini, 2015) in line with the ‘materialization’ of the collaborative economy.

New work environments are depicted as quiet and governed by a logic of silence; working together and close to each other in open spaces implies collective rules of silence and a subsequent process of self-discipline (i.e. one must refrain from making noises in order to respect the silent atmosphere that governs these spaces). The decline of office compartmentalization, the development of silent tools and the digital nature of most tertiary-sector activities and productions have materialized a completely different relation to noises and silence at the workplace. Within the context of collaborative spaces, individuals work in quiet environments, rely on a range of silent tools and produce outcomes that remain immaterial, invisible and silent. In this infrastructure, workers are supposed to remain silent in open spaces, thus materializing the image of being ‘alone together’ (Spinuzzi, 2012). Interestingly, workers seem to remain connected through a shared experience of silence.

Within that context, silence plays a key role in the unfolding of new work practices. Despite the ubiquity of silence in these new work configurations,<sup>1</sup> there is a puzzling dearth of research around the role played by silence in the organization studies literature (Bigo, 2018; Blackman and Sadler-Smith, 2009; Kirrane et al., 2017; Morrison and Milliken, 2003), with a majority of papers on this topic concerned with the coercive dimension of silence (see Brown and Coupland, 2005; Costas and Grey, 2014; Donaghey et al., 2011). There is clearly more to silence than this literature would seem to suggest and in this research note, we see silence as a meaningful and multifaceted phenomenon (rather than a ‘default setting’) pregnant with possibilities (Bigo, 2018). While empirically revolving around a coworking space, this paper sets out to contribute to research on the place of silence in the changing world of work. The following section provides an illustration of the role of silence in a coworking space located in the center of France.

## **Silence in and around Coworkingtoday<sup>2</sup>**

### *Exploring Coworkingtoday*

Coworkingtoday (CwT) is a coworking space located in the center of France. It presents a different logic to that of ‘traditional’ workspaces, in particular corporate open spaces. Both places can be described as open spaces that are not partitioned, equipped with tables and chairs, and in which workers can ‘settle collaboratively’. Two notable differences need to be considered; the first one relates to the users of these spaces and the second to their respective territories. In the context of an open corporate space, offices are assigned and the procedures and practices of the company are known and shared by each employee. Everything is framed around the culture of the company. This space thus appears as a closed and ‘regimented’ place. On the contrary, a coworking space brings together individuals who do not belong to the same structure (company or institution). As such, they are not linked

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1 This is never a complete silence: smartphones, laptops, movements in the place and short conversations always take place inside. In addition, noises from the street are also often present.

2 This is a fictional name.

by the same corporate culture and are not (directly or indirectly) subject to the same hierarchical structure. People sharing the same space are therefore 'default' work colleagues. As a result, the rules of that space, apart from the respect of each other, are not driven by the same collective of workers sharing different activities that are part of an operational chain or even a company.

The account that follows comes from an on-going ethnographic study of CwT that the first author of this note started two years ago. CwT is a non-compartmentalized space where a wealth of activities unfolds and that hosts a vast range of communities. Makers, coworkers, readers and others mingle in the restricted space of CwT. Upon entering the place, people would typically take some time to look at all the possibilities offered by the space before deciding to head to a particular area that would seem to be appropriate for the activity at stake. Much care then would ensue to avoid disturbing others and to maintain the silence that would pervade in that space. This could involve lifting up one's chair when moving it, opening one's bag cautiously, ensuring that one's mobile is on silent mode, refraining oneself from eating, etc. In the coworking space, the 'rules of life' are imposed by the place itself where the 'working together' must be as comfortable as possible for all the professionals who have chosen this place to exercise their activity.

The first author of this note instinctively followed these invisible rituals. Particular practices and codes also surrounded the ways in which coworkers interacted with people entering the space of CwT. On many occasions, people would simply enter quietly, grab a seat and start working on their laptop. Even in a silent environment, the posture of the body was very significant; it sent certain signals regarding one's disposition to others (e.g. does one appear to be willing to engage in a conversation or not?). On other occasions, some coworkers (already present in CwT) would send signals (such as body movements) to acknowledge the arrival of someone into the space and to suggest that they may be willing to engage in a 'chit-chat'. Most of the users of the place knew each other, and it was not uncommon for them to greet each other once they were done with their respective activities.

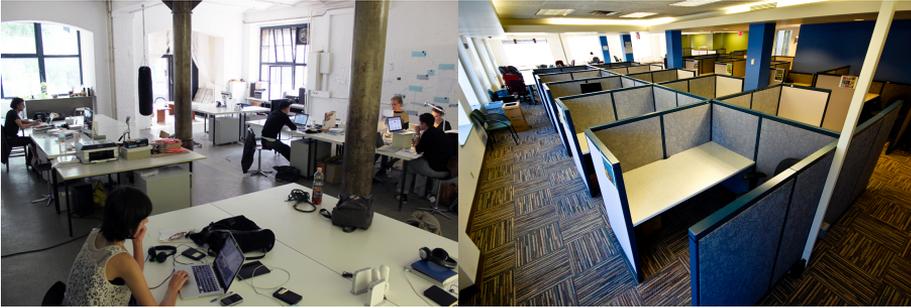


Figure 1. Coworking space in Berlin (license: CC BY-SA 3.0); Cubicle space, Portland, Oregon (license: CC BY-SA 2.0)

When a conversation started, it was nothing more than a mere whisper in order to avoid disrupting the activity of other coworkers. The preponderance and special status of silence in collaborative spaces led us to interrogate the actual motivations behind the imperative to remain silent. In other words, is silence some sort of self-imposed practice (denoting a will to work together) or the result of external pressures, such as the presence of community managers (who would act as ‘silence guarantors’)? What is the value of ‘rules’ or ‘internal charts’? On various occasions, we noticed that this rule of silence was maintained even in the absence of community managers (hence silence was not coerced). More than ever, silence appears as a paradox here. What a strange way to welcome newcomers, in silence... At first sight, this can be assimilated to haughty attitudes, distance and even symbolic violence against those trying to join in the space.

Some of the professional activities of the coworkers actually take place outside the walls of CwT – this could be the case when calling a client or discussing a new collaboration over the phone for instance. As such, the noisy times of collaboration could take place outside, and the coworking space could then be a place for concentration, focus and to disconnect. Thus, we note that there are no barriers that force some activities to be carried out on the premises of CwT. In addition, CwT regularly organizes events and convivial moments in its street or neighborhood. One such occasion is captured in figure 2 with coworkers eating outside the space, on the sidewalk in order to enjoy the first gleams of sun. The noise of the place was thus produced far from its core activities.



Figure 2. Assembly line of a Citroën 10hp (public domain); Interior Photography of The Hub by London Architectural and Interiors photographer, Matt Clayton (license: CC BY-SA 4.0)

Our ethnography of CwT makes visible another paradox. ‘By no means does silence define sound deficiency: it defines the state in which the ear is most alert’<sup>3</sup> (Quignard, 1996: 148). This quote by the French writer Pascal Quignard proved particularly meaningful during the course of our study in the space of CwT. Paul, one of the two community managers, would always speak in a low voice, regardless of whether he would have one or many interlocutors. He knows that the slightest noise can disturb the balance of what happens in the coworking space. As argued by Serres (1980), noise can be perceived as parasitic in a communication system, then transforming meanings in an environment. A noisy environment can be a hindrance to some with regards to the development of their reflection and creativity. Faithful to Paul who introduced them to the coworking space, newcomers would pursue their exploration of the space of CwT with the same commitment to silence, with a greater attentiveness to these innumerable little sonorities that underlie the ways in which this coworking space would operate. By extension, silence is also encountered between two people who collaborate on a same project and who happen to be working alongside (each behind their own screens). Silence is the space where their collaborative activities unfold: in some cases, this took the form of a complex web of glances and gestures.

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3 Authors’ own translation from French.

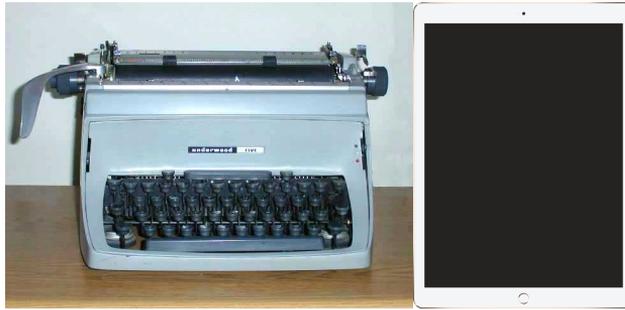


Figure 3. Typewriter Under Underwood Touch-Master 5, early 1960s (public domain); iPad (license: CC BY-SA 4.0)

The semitone silence that prevails in CwT was well perceived and widely accepted by coworkers and other users. It is even helpful when it comes to focus on a particular project, as can be noisy café where the subtle interfering noises are no longer heard and disturbing. This ‘white noise’ seemed to be produced by the many computers in the space. Absolute and prolonged silence does not exist. The form of silence encountered at CwT was simply a silence not disturbed by sonorous, meaningful words or speech. Interestingly, this form of silence was not always appreciated; for instance, in another coworking space in the center of France, the community manager told us that most coworkers cannot stand silence and continuously ask for some musical background in order to create a comfortable and soothing work environment. More precisely, the community manager argued that it thwarts the ‘false silence’, namely that of murmurs, the sound of chairs being moved, or the noise caused by the keystrokes of the keyboard of a computer. Concerned about the wellbeing of the users of the space, he decided to broadcast some carefully-chosen background music so that it would not become an inhospitable element for coworkers. This musical background had become an asset of the place, a distinctive element that was sought after by workers.

In CwT, silence would be only interrupted when an event is organized within the communal area, when the community manager connects two persons, or when a coworker receives a call from a client or collaborator. Most coworkers accepted this form of nuisance because they knew that it was temporary; upon receiving a phone call, a coworker will promptly move to an area where

‘noise’ is authorized (e.g. entrance hall, etc.). Those who are more bothered by these interruptions and accustomed to quieter environments resorted to headphones, took breaks on the sidewalk of CwT or left for another place. Ultimately, a coworking space is shaped according to the rules of life adopted by its community. This may explain why there are not two spaces that are entirely similar.

The community manager of CwT has left a real space for silence, refusing to interfere or impose it, leaving CwT’s community free to tolerate it or not. This clearly varied according to the situation and the people present in the space. When CwT would become noisy, some coworkers would accept it and consider it as a vector of focus. However, this was not the case for the majority of them, as some preferred to leave the place, to return to another time of the day or the following day. This leads us to propose the following taxonomy of silence in coworking spaces:

| Silence as   | Qualifiers               | Observed situations   |
|--------------|--------------------------|---|
| Traumatic    | Disturbing, embarrassing | Some workers cannot stand ‘white silence’ and need noise. That’s why they choose to wear earphones to have a musical background. This musical isolation helps them with their work (as they can isolate themselves)   |
| Functional   | Self-discipline          | CwT’s community determines itself the appropriate level of sound, without the community manager intervening.  |
| Solemn       | Respect                  | This natural regulation attests to mutual respect. When a worker enters the coworking place, they greet other coworkers quietly.  |
| Illuminating | Vector of communication  | Silence can also be used as a tool for empathy. When the community manager discusses with a co-worker, he lets silence settle in their exchanges. This space testifies not only to his listening posture but also to this voluntary choice to let his interlocutor express himself. |

Table 1. Taxonomy of four main values of silence observed at CwT

*The sidewalk: An intermediate space*

Workers in CwT are used to work in a 'fluid' manner, that is to say to organize themselves inside the coworking space, but also outside this space. This was notably the case for some coworkers who preferred to call their customers outside the space of CwT, i.e. on the sidewalk in front of the entrance to CwT. As such, the sidewalk in front of CwT can be seen as a liminal space. It is an introductory space where individuals can restructure and refocus. It might then represent the distance needed at a given moment in time to a person who will be, a few minutes later, in the position of a coworker inside CwT (see Steyaert et al., 2006). It was the same when a conversation between two coworkers was going to be lively and loud; they would leave the building and stand on the sidewalk in front of the door. This space was also associated with recreational and friendly breaks. On the other hand, any new entry into CwT naturally imposed silence and restraint.

*The neighboring bistro*

In the genesis of collaborative spaces, the bistro is widely recognized as an important gathering place, as one of the first spaces when it comes to sharing and conviviality. In the immediate vicinity of CwT, The Coffee is one such bistro that would sometimes welcome coworkers who wanted to exchange ideas about a project in a space noisier and less constraining than that of CwT. This was a complementary and, in many different ways, necessary moment for the activity that they exercised.



Figure 4. Scene of coworkers' life in Coworkingtoday (Source: Authors' own photograph)

Thus, to go further, the bistro (with its own services – sales of beverages and tobacco, etc.) is to be considered here as an extension of CwT at a given moment, which corresponds to a need to benefit from a space that is not shared by all the other users of CwT. It is sometimes beneficial to plunge into an atmosphere that is no longer that of work, as it allows one to develop links that would promote different activities. In this case, the bistro replaces the ‘confidential room’ that can be found in some coworking spaces. It is a complementary space and in a certain way a facilitator and support of the activity, although it offers a very noisy context. As a result, as indicated by its community manager, the bistro develops its turnover with the flow of people who come to CwT.

### **Concluding thoughts: Silence as a lived event**

The place occupied by silence in collaborative spaces is at the same time puzzling and fascinating. It challenges our common perceptions around the predicaments of collaboration itself and draws our attention on the wealth of assemblages, directionalities and paradoxes that underlie contemporary forms of collaboration under the auspices of the collaborative economy. Our focus on silence illustrates one of the many paradoxes that lie at the heart of these new ways of working connected to the rise of the collaborative economy.

Silence is never absolute. It is always partial and constantly oscillates between different poles: it is shared yet not externally imposed (though this might depend on the situation), both individual and collective; it disciplines collaborative spaces yet enables them to flourish, etc. This research note has sought to draw our attention onto the richness and complexity of silence as an organizational event for work practices. Most of the current research on silence revolves around the coercive dimension of silence but fails to engage with the materiality and enabling power of silence. Silence is not simply the absence of noises but itself the result of complex and on-going assemblages drawing together a wide range of actors and forces enacting various temporalities and spatialities.

Interestingly, the practice of silence is a key aspect and stake of contemporary work practices. In the context of mobile work, telework (e.g. involving the unexpected events and noises of home), independent work (more and more 'shared' with other independent workers in coworking spaces, business centers, incubators, accelerators, etc.), digital work (expected to be a silent activity), silence is a key issue. It is a necessary collective rule, an obstacle that needs to be regularly overcome in order to collaborate, something that needs to be wrapped, intertwined and combined with the necessary noise of work practices. Traditional work places (i.e. open offices or closed offices in most large companies today) were phenomenologically bounded in time and space. Today's world of new work practices is much more liquid and continuously re-enacts time and space (see Aroles et al., 2021). Intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013) lies at the heart of this phenomenon, and communities play a key role in the management of the joint liquefaction, fragmentation and individualization of work (Kallinikos, 2003). Beyond these sociomaterial trends, silence may always be a political lever. The General de Gaulle once stated 'Nothing levers more authority than silence, splendor of the strong and shelter of the weak'.<sup>4</sup> Finding one's voice in the new world of work may thus also be a question of silence more than one of speaking loudly. Another paradox?

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4 Original quote: 'Rien ne rehausse l'autorité mieux que le silence, splendeur des forts et refuge des faibles'.

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