

At Home with AI: Artificial Intelligence and Friendly Power in the Post-COVID Home Office

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ABSTRACT

The global pandemic saw millions of workers shift to working from home, a situation that has now become the new normal for many. This article examines the way artificial intelligence has filtered into this sphere of labor. AI technologies are now leveraged in writing, emailing, image editing, research, and dozens of other home office tasks. And yet, contrary to depictions of AI power focused on top-down domination, AI's permeation into this domestic space has been quieter and more collaborative. AI technologies promise to adapt to the worker, augmenting her productivity and increasing her professionalism. Drawing on Byung-Chul Han's notion of "friendly power," I show how AI becomes compelling to workers by being convivial, personal, and flexible. This strategy appears successful in integrating AI into new forms of labor and also key to recognize when developing critical approaches to technical power. Any alternative program must be aware of how AI technologies empathetically address the needs of the neoliberal subject.

Keywords: COVID-19; future of work; artificial intelligence; AI; working from home; labor conditions.

RESUMO

A pandemia global viu milhões de trabalhadores mudarem para trabalhar em casa, uma situação que agora se tornou o novo normal para muitos. Este artigo examina a forma como a inteligência artificial se infiltrou nessa esfera de trabalho. As tecnologias de IA agora são aproveitadas para escrever, enviar e-mails, editar imagens, pesquisar e dezenas de outras tarefas de home office. E, no entanto, ao contrário das representações do poder da IA focadas na dominação de cima para baixo, a penetração da IA nesse espaço doméstico tem sido mais silenciosa e colaborativa. As tecnologias de IA prometem se adaptar ao trabalhador, aumentando sua produtividade e aumentando seu profissionalismo. Com base na noção de "poder amigável" de Byung-Chul Han, mostro como a IA se torna atraente para os trabalhadores por ser amigável, pessoal e flexível. Essa estratégia parece bem-sucedida na integração da IA em novas formas de trabalho e também é fundamental para reconhecer ao desenvolver abordagens críticas ao poder técnico. Qualquer programa alternativo deve estar ciente de como as tecnologias de IA abordam com empatia as necessidades do sujeito neoliberal.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19; futuro do trabalho; inteligência artificial; IA; trabalhando em casa; condições de trabalho.

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As work has shifted to the home, AI has followed, with technologies assisting workers in scheduling meetings, writing reports, collaborating with colleagues, and dozens of other tasks. However, rather than the paradigm of top-down domination that was foretold, AI technologies have taken a quieter, more incremental and more collaborative path, identifying pressures on those who work from home and promising to support them. In this article, I draw from an array of gray literature around AI, including marketing copy, technology journalism, and user forum posts, to see how AI technologies present themselves to workers and how workers in turn respond. I demonstrate this friendly and empathetically-attuned approach and argue that it resonates strongly with philosopher Byung Chul-Han's notion of "friendly power." AI technologies align with friendly power in being convivial, personal, and flexible. Understanding these qualities provides insights into the strategies and success of technically-mediated power today. Any program seeking to counter this incursion or develop more radical alternatives must be aware of how AI technologies empathetically address the needs of the neoliberal subject.

There has been considerable research into the impact of the pandemic and its implications for labor (discussed in the next section). The home sometimes enters these analyses tangentially as the site of micro-work, in which workers carry out data cleaning, content moderation, and other tasks for platforms or AI products. Such micro-work is racialized and gendered (Grohman and Araújo 2021; Tubaro et al. 2022) and this hidden labor props up artificial intelligence and allows it to function (Altenried 2020). While such issues certainly matter, in this article I am interested in the end-users of these products, the millions of developers, copywriters, project managers, support staff, and other "professionals" who are now working mainly or exclusively from home. A key assumption here is that the home office has been transformed through data-driven technologies: "working from home" is not simply a change in site but in the modality of work, in how it is conceived and carried out.

This article begins by setting out the post-COVID context and the shift to working from home, abbreviated here as WFH. The second section examines the emergence of AI in this context and stresses worker agency when considering its adoption. The third section surveys a selection of AI technologies, attending closely to the rhetoric used to position and market them to workers. The fourth section discusses this tone, noting its empathy for the neoliberal worker and its framing of technology as a help-mate. The

fifth section thickens these insights by drawing on "friendly power" and showing how these technologies are convivial, personal, and flexible. And the final section sketches out some implications of this strategic form of power, both for critical media studies and the future of labor.

The Pandemic and the Great Shift to Working from Home

The global COVID-19 pandemic saw millions of workers shift to working from home. Studies have empirically documented this massive transformation in labor conditions. In a survey of 10,000 adults in the US, only one-in-five reported working from home prior to the pandemic; now 71% of those workers are doing their job from home all or most of the time (Parker et al. 2020). This shift can also be seen in a global context. An OECD (2021) study examined the rates of teleworking reported by individuals in member countries in 2019 versus 2020: in France, teleworking doubled compared to the year before; in the UK, telework was up 20 percentage points; and in Italy, teleworking rates were four times the level prior to the pandemic. Certainly, not every job can be carried out in a home context. The same study noted that highly digitalized industries had the highest rates of teleworking (OECD 2021). However, even with these caveats, these statistics represent an enormous global population working from home. Based on household survey data, it is estimated that 557 million individuals worked from home during the second quarter of 2020 (Soares et al. 2021).

This global shift to working from home has been accompanied by an equally intense investigation into its effects, as scholars race to explore the impacts of this labor transformation. A number of studies have examined the consequences of working-from-home on happiness and life satisfaction (Dubey and Tripathi 2020; Ipsen et al. 2021; Niebuhr 2022). Others have explored how working from home reshapes the conventional work/life balance (Bellmann and Hübler 2020). For employers, working from home presents new freedoms for their workers and also new anxieties around productivity. For this reason, several studies have tackled issues of multitasking (Xu et al. 2021) and the extent of interruption and distraction (Leroy et al. 2021). Other studies have recognised that these analyses tend to focus heavily on the Global North, and seek instead to explore the impact on workers in the Global South (Islam 2022; Nguyen 2021).

In one sense, the home has long been a key site of labor. In the 18th century, before the birth of indus-

trialization and the rise of the factory, the house was the central workspace, albeit in a very different form—comprising as it did a melange of wage and unwaged labor carried out by all the members of the household together, including women and children (Brocklehurst 1989). As industrialization got underway, the home became a site for piecework, with workers being paid per piece, often within exploitative labor conditions (Marx 2004).

While these conditions continue and are important, “working from home” in mainstream parlance and in this article has a slightly different meaning and genealogy. It certainly includes the conventional “homeworking” of part-time, solitary work historically carried out in the home (e.g. handicrafts, writing, laundering, mending) and by no means diminishes this labor. However it also encompasses a much broader set of occupations and activities, traditionally done in an office or other out-of-home environment, that have begun migrating to the home.

This latter category can be traced back to the late sixties and early seventies, where flexible arrangements allowed a small segment of office workers to carry out their labor at home (van Meel 2011). While still niche, such arrangements became more feasible with the rise of telecommunications networks and computerization. In the 1980s, the futurist Alvin Toffler (1980) predicted a reversal of the industrial trend and a return to the home as a core site of labor, sending the term “electronic cottage” into widespread circulation. And in the 1990s, scholars began to investigate the experience of teleworking trials on individuals, as well as the positives and negatives (Haddon and Lewis 1994). Yet if schemes and trials proliferated in the last two decades, it wasn’t until the COVID-19 pandemic that this labor configuration was trialed en masse on a global scale. While vaccines and other measures have indicated we are now in a post-COVID era, working from home may remain the new normal for many (Williamson et al. 2020; Abdullah et al. 2020).

AI Adoption and Agency

In the last few years, dozens of AI-powered technologies have sprung up, all offering to assist individuals and teams to carry out work from home. Some of these are targeted at long standing forms of home work, such as writing and copy-editing. Alongside these are tasks that have emerged more recently under the umbrella of digital entrepreneurialism (Salomon 2020), such as content creation and social media marketing. But these work streams, while significant, pale in comparison to the raft of

work activities that have shifted to WFH due to the global pandemic. As COVID mandates and lockdowns swept around the world, numerous jobs that were conventionally carried out in a shared office or similar workplace environment were suddenly transferred to a home setting.

AI companies were quick to seize this pivotal moment, offering a selection of tools and technologies. In this sense, AI followed the broader tenet of “disaster capitalism” (Klein 2007; Schuller and Maldonado 2016) in which every crisis is reframed as a potential opportunity for the accumulation of profit alongside increased deregulation and privatization. In the education sector, for example, scholars have observed that the pandemic paves the way for the incursion of technological solutions in online learning, platforms built by major corporations that introduce new forms of algorithmic tracking, auditing, and management (Williamson 2021).

However, while the aim of AI companies slots into well-understood paradigms, I’m interested in *how* AI technologies are adopted and integrated into the everyday lives of WFH workers. I want to examine how these technologies are framed by their respective companies, and how they become compelling to workers.

Key in this analysis is the notion of agency. In much of the popular rhetoric around AI, the agency of individual workers tends to be marginalized or discounted. AI becomes a kind of wave sweeping across the economy and the future of work (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2011), an inexorable force or inevitable revolution that is coming, regardless of how workers respond (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014). These technologies are simply inevitable (Kelly 2017), and to succeed, workers must embrace them.

But workers, particularly contractors, freelancers, and the self-employed, are typically not forced to adopt certain technologies and instead choose to do so. Even in a team situation, where company-wide tools or systems are in place, workers may embrace these technologies or shun them (James 2019). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest workers evaluate technologies across a number of distinct dimensions and alter their stance toward them accordingly (Edwards and Ramirez 2016). In some cases, workers may effectively resist technologies if they anticipate it will impinge on their rights and freedoms (Shulzhenko and Holmgren 2020).

Together, these findings rehabilitate the intelligence, savviness, and agency of workers. Contrary to some of the discourse on AI, workers are not meek or mindless individuals, who simply adopt technologies that are placed in front of them. Technologies must “win

over” workers, communicating the key benefits that they offer the worker and demonstrating this value in practice. In Rogers (2014) widely-cited model of technological adoption, he describes the first three steps being *knowledge* of the product, *persuasion* in which a favorable or unfavorable opinion is formed, and a *decision* that culminates in acceptance or rejection of that technology.

AI in the Home

To understand how AI technologies present themselves to workers, I survey a selection of popular tools used in the WFH context: Otter, Plume, WordAI, and Alexa and similar digital assistants. In recognition of the evaluation and decision-making of workers, I attend closely to the rhetoric used to explain and promote these AI-driven technologies, using verbatim quotes to document the way companies approach potential customers.

Otter AI offers a variety of speech to text tools, allowing workers to transcribe a video-call meeting, for instance, or journalists and researchers to automatically transcribe an interview. It acknowledges the large-scale shift to working from home, while also suggesting that “working remotely is not without its challenges” and asserts that “many workers have had to adapt and develop new habits and strategies for staying on task” (Otter AI 2021). This creates an opportunity, and Otter AI doesn’t hesitate to recommend itself as the solution: “To overcome the challenges and improve your remote work productivity, why not take advantage of the power of AI?” (Otter 2021). The company suggests that its real-time transcription and collaboration features can help workers be “more engaged and productive than ever before” (Otter 2021).

Plume is a home-Wifi provider that provides a suite of AI-driven customization and security tools. The company promises that its HomePass will provide “the best, most consistent WiFi connection that constantly adapts to your needs” as well as “intuitive management of your home network, state-of-the-art security, data visibility and protection, WiFi motion-sensing, and whatever services we roll out next” (Plume 2021). The company’s homepage opens with a video of a man operating a laptop in a home office environment. In an article on its blog, the company identifies with remote workers, suggesting that WiFi issues are a common problem and can be “embarrassing and confusing” (Plume Product Team 2020). The page suggests that its adaptive WiFi can be a “hero for remote workers everywhere,” delivering a surge of connectivity in mid afternoon for the kids, while keeping your

work connection rock solid (Plume Product Team 2020). These phrases empathize with the individual, positioning their product not just as a technical solution, but one that increases the “professionalism” of a worker to her peers while maintaining harmony in the household.

Word AI is a paraphrasing product built on artificial intelligence technologies. The tool is most obviously suited for marketing and search engine optimisation, quickly generating organic-looking pages that link to a desired website. The company promises that its users will “10x your content output with AI” and expands on this claim, stating that its product will allow them to “use artificial intelligence to cut turnaround time, extend your budget, and create more high-quality content that Google and readers will love.” The rhetoric here is about augmenting the labor output of the home worker. By using state-of-the-art technologies, individuals can rapidly generate human-looking content, amplifying their productivity significantly.

Finally, Alexa and other digital assistants are another AI-powered technology that has recently begun targeting home-based workers. A post on the Amazon blog suggests Alexa is a great way of “boosting work from home productivity” (Rao 2020). In a personal style, the writer confesses that his productivity suffered during the unexpected shift to remote working, but he has since discovered that Alexa can help with this problem, using the assistant for joining conference calls, sending emails, scheduling meetings, and other everyday tasks (Rao 2020). These claims from inside Amazon are also echoed outside the company. “Digital assistants can make calls, send emails, take notes, and do so much more” suggests one writer (Anderson 2020), allowing you to “continue to work as you cook, clean, or perform other important household duties.” Such statements sympathize with the home worker and suggest that AI-powered technologies can help them streamline frequent activities and juggle the disparate demands placed on them.

Here to Help

Two points stand out from these websites and their copy. The first is that AI technologies are overwhelmingly framed in the language of efficiency and productivity. They present themselves as tools that can enable workers to perform better and faster. They offer to streamline work, to carry out tasks in a shorter time span than could normally be achieved without them. In this sense, AI rhetoric plumbs one of the deepest imperatives of the capitalist mode of production: carrying out the maximum work in the shortest amount of time, and

thereby accumulating the most profit (Marx 2004).

The second characteristic of this rhetoric is its friendly tone. In reaching out to their potential customers, the products adopt language that is convivial and approachable. They frame themselves as collaborative tools, help-mates that can assist the individual in her labors. They are allies and assistants that can operate alongside the worker and ease some of the strain placed on her. In this sense, these AI technologies demonstrate an awareness of the pressures placed on the neoliberal worker and present their product offerings in an empathetically-attuned way.

This friendly and approachable tone runs counter to the way in which AI technologies are often presented in mainstream discourse. Numerous newspaper stories, magazine articles, and op-eds warn the public about AI domination. Our future will be “dominated by AI” suggests a *Smithsonian* article, quoting a computer-scientist who suggests “AIs will colonize and transform the entire cosmos” (Talty 2018). Popular figures such as Bill Gates have suggested AI technologies are a threat (Rawlinson 2015), while Elon Musk (2014) has said that developing AI is equivalent to “summoning the demon,” unleashing an entity that cannot be controlled. These highly influential visions are paralleled in technology journalism, which paints a picture of a looming revolution, a “great AI takeover” (Upson 2016). Across many of these accounts, AI is framed in the language of command and control, mastery and servitude. In this view, AI is advanced technology and this will grant it authority over its human counterparts. This superiority will lead to a sweeping set of transformations in human work and life, which cannot be halted or resisted.

This totalizing, top-down framing of AI is not limited to popular discourse, but also appears in academic literature. “From mass surveillance to predictive law enforcement to data-driven social interactions,” one scholar warns that “AI has already colonized most aspects of our lives and determines the decisions of companies, financial markets, and governments (Benasayag 2021). Other figures have warned about AI technologies becoming “superintelligent” and gaining control of governance and security systems (Bostrom 2014). These perspectives dovetail with anxieties about the ability of digital platforms and algorithmic power to construct regimes based on surveillance and extraction (Zuboff 2014). In this literature, technology companies tend to be elevated to positions of great power, while consumers are reduced to powerless and misguided subjects, mere “pawns” in a larger game (Bridle 2019).

Instead of this oppressive, overpowering force, AI technologies present themselves as helpful tools

or approachable assistants that can be taken up by the worker. Rather than the typical dystopian image of Big Brother, these technologies position themselves more like Small Sisters (Munn 2019), focused, user-friendly agents that are always ready to assist the user with a task and help them get through the hectic work-day.

Friendly Power

Framed as empathetic collaborators, these technologies exemplify what theorist Byung-Chul Han (2017) has described as “friendly power.” In his slim volume *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Han argues that contemporary power is no longer based on repressive force, on striving to subjugate or discipline. This hard-edged, rational power has reached its limit. “Henceforth, it is experienced as a constraint, an inhibition. Suddenly, it seems rigid and inflexible” (81). Instead of imposing a set of rules or normalizing the subject, power seeks to accentuate the self, to inspire our next project.

Of course, Han is not the only theorist to identify this form of power, nor does he invent it from whole cloth. One recognisable influence is Foucault’s (2008) biopower, a form of positive power concerned with the optimisation and governance of life. Indeed, some theorists have explicitly described this as a form of friendly power (Preciado 2008, 109), something that is responsive rather than coercive and punitive. Foucault, in turn, was inspired by Burroughs’ work on soft power and systems of social control, a more flexible form of power that operated on the thoughts and impressions of workers (Nail 2016, 254). Such conceptualizations share some similarities with Nye’s (1990) soft power in focusing on attraction and influence rather than punishment, but are concerned with individuals rather than nation-states.

Han, then, is not alone in identifying such power. However, Han incisively captures how friendly power manifests in technology and how it shapes the contemporary neoliberal subject. For this reason, his ideas and writing are the primary source drawn on in my analysis. Three characteristics of this friendly power are evident when examining AI technologies in a WFH context: they are convivial, personal, and flexible.

Convivial:

Friendly power is encouraging rather than oppressive, affirming rather than shaming. As Han (37) asserts: “It operates seductively, not repressively.” We have already

discussed how this friendly tone plays out in the rhetoric of AI companies, with language that stresses how approachable and supportive their technologies are for those working from home. This tone echoes Han (35), who notes that friendly power “seeks to please and fulfill, not to repress.” AI technologies aim to be helpful, to accurately identify particular needs and cater to them. Rather than imposing itself on docile workers from the top-down, this mode of power works seemingly from below, adopting a more personal, more positive approach in order to draw out our active participation.

Empathy is one component of this friendliness. As Han (2017, 35) observes, friendly power “carefully protocols desires, needs and wishes instead of ‘depatterning’ them.” The logic is not to discipline the worker, but to understand her and preempt what she wants. In a neoliberal context, the imperative to maximize profitability places intense pressure on the worker (Telford and Briggs 2021). Despite being outside of a conventional work environment, the home-based worker still needs to satisfy the demands of clients, complete existing projects, and win new jobs. As we’ve seen above, AI companies openly discuss these pressures, highlighting the challenges of home-based work and the intense demands it places on the individual. Identifying the struggles of home-based workers and acknowledging them positions them as an ally rather than an authoritarian figure. Friendly power is empathetically attuned.

Empathy is powerful because it enlists workers in technological adoption. If an AI technology can persuade a user and win them over, the worker will take it up and incorporate it into their everyday life and working routines. One engineer listed Otter AI alongside a ring light and fabric backdrop as things that have made remote working life better (paininthejbruh 2022). A Plume user stated that he was “loving the service” as he now had a steady, secure internet connection for working and “I no longer have kids screaming at me when Baby Shark stops playing” (Tarv85 2022). And another worker mentioned that he uses Alexa to set timers and increase his productivity when working from home (TheRedWhale 2017). Far from AI technologies “colonizing” workers’ lives, then, these comments gesture to the ways in which users actively embrace AI technologies and integrate them into their particular home labor context.

Personal:

A key aspect of friendly power is personalization, and this is also one of the core selling points for AI technologies. The promise behind many of these tools is that they are not just generic but personal—tools for schedul-

ing *your* meetings, assisting with *your* writing tasks, and highlighting information that is relevant for *you*. AI rhetoric takes a mathematical process of pattern recognition and linear regression, where a model gradually becomes more accurate at a task, and extends it to a broader and more relational claim: that a technology is learning (Reigeluth and Castelle 2021)—and in this context, learning about you. In registering common words and phrases in your writing, a technology is “learning” your tone and style. In storing and prioritizing your most used contacts, a technology is “learning” about your social world and who is important. It is not particularly important that this learning about the self is partially a projection—a natural byproduct of having access to the mountains of digital data that increasingly registers and mediates our lives. What matters for the user is the perception that the technology is accommodating itself to them, adapting to their work, in tune with the labor they’re attempting to carry out.

Digital assistants are one AI-powered technology that demonstrates this drive to know the user. “The more you talk to Alexa, the more it adapts to your speech patterns, vocabulary, and personal preferences,” promises the product page. And Amazon is planning to burrow further into this interior over time. The Director of Product Management stated the company has a “long road map of personalisation” striving to more thoroughly understand the habits and tastes of its users (Turk 2016). In 2017, Amazon filed a patent application for a voice sniffer algorithm that could be configured to detect so-called trigger words, “a verb indicating some level of desire or interest in a noun” such as “I like skiing” or “I love product X” (Edara 2017). While it is impossible to know whether such patents have been implemented, the imaginary here is clear: by decoding the emotional aspects of a user’s language, a company can gradually construct an intimate profile of their aspirations and motivations (Munn 2020).

The same vision of personalisation can be seen when looking at AI technologies more generally. “Artificial intelligence (AI) in Microsoft 365 is enabling personalized productivity experiences that help you amplify skills, transform collaboration, and find information,” wrote one pundit, “creating experiences that adapt to you, help you, and amplify your abilities” (Brommet 2019). “Never before have digital tools been so responsive to us, nor we to our tools” asserted two technology analysts (Wilson and Daugherty 2018). These statements resonate strongly with Han’s characteristics of adaptation and personalisation in friendly power. “Instead of standing opposed to the subject,” writes Han (2017, 21), this form

of power “meets the subject halfway.” AI technologies aim to understand WFH workers more fully, grasping their behaviors and tendencies to a deeper degree.

Flexible:

Friendly power offers flexibility and freedom. By streamlining tasks and taking over banal routines, AI technologies promise to free up an individual’s time and free up their cognitive capacity. In this sense, they present themselves to those working from home as tools of liberation. This dynamic chimes with Han’s observation that power is no longer authoritarian but permissive. “In its permissivity—indeed, in its friendliness—power is shedding its negativity and presenting itself as freedom” Han (2017, 35) asserts.

One aspect of this freedom is that AI technologies reduce the infrastructure needed to work from home. Machine learning, neural networks, and many of the underlying infrastructures of artificial intelligence require intensive processing and computation (Talib et al. 2021). For the home-based worker, cloud computing allows them to leverage these benefits without having to purchase expensive equipment or energy-intensive servers. For example, freelance writers can leverage massive models such as GPT-3 for writing copy while using a smartphone. Cloud-based AI means that the home-based worker only requires a basic internet connection and a low-end computer.

Cloud-based AI technologies are also attractive for the mobility they offer. Despite the “working from home” label, remote workers, freelancers, and others are likely to move between other non-work locations such as cafes, libraries, vehicles, and other family members’ homes over the course of the working day or week (Stiles and Smart 2021). Yet during these migrations the neoliberal worker is expected to maintain a seamless productivity, to work anywhere and anytime (Fischer et al. 2021). Cloud-based AI technologies allow workers to shift from the desktop in the home office to the laptop in the library and the smartphone in the car.

Of course, critical scholars might object that this freedom is illusory, that a core aim of the precarization of work over the last several decades was to undermine the work/life balance and frame every moment of the day as potentially productive time (see Berardi 2009). As Alberti et al. (2018, 452) suggest, “online technologies can reproduce new forms of dependency, surveillance and subjugation.” But here we are interested in the AI imaginary—in the value proposition made by the prod-

ucts and the perceived usefulness of these tools from the home-worker’s perspective. The vision here is that, by making work more flexible, AI technologies allow workers to tackle tasks anywhere and at any time, helping them successfully perform under high pressure.

Implications and Conclusion

What does friendly power offer us and what are its limitations? It is key to note that friendly power is chiefly concerned with the modality of power rather than its morality. I am not interested in judging this power, but in identifying it and understanding how it operates, how it attains traction and adoption. The danger is that we would always look for power as something hard-edged or punitive, something totalitarian or authoritarian, something overtly harmful or immoral. Such a lens overlooks the smaller and quieter forms of power operating in the cases described above. Such power is not top-down power “disguising” itself or play-acting as something else. Rather, in the rhetoric and positioning of these technologies, we witness a different kind of logic at work, a different kind of modality of power.

These data-driven technologies are predicated on being convivial, personal, and flexible—and in some respects they are. Such products, as the user testimonials suggested, can be genuinely helpful, responding to the specific needs of an individual and assisting them in their daily tasks. Their promises are at least partially made reality via particular features and architectures. And yet these technologies also insert themselves into the everyday fabric of the workday, introducing new forms of tracking, privileging particular kinds of behaviors, and shaping the way labor is carried out. If the argument in this article appears somewhat ambivalent, then, it is because ambivalence is key to this operational logic. Friendly power is helpful but requires a monthly fee; it is sympathetic but carries out its personalisation through surveillance; it is attuned to the desires of workers but also attentive to the dictates of capital.

This ambivalence frustrates the kind of definitive takedown that often drives media theory. Those searching these pages for capital C Critique—the knockout punch that exposes the powers that be—will come up empty. Instead I’ve deferred that impulse, exploring the ambiguous space opened up by this power. Indeed, based on user testimonials, workers too are confronted by this ambiguity. AI technologies in the home are a Faustian pact, a mixed blessing, a series of tradeoffs that workers weigh up and decide to accept. Their adoption, then, is

not due to trickery or naivety. Workers are not dupes and companies are not operating through subterfuge. Instead, we see a degree of mutual recognition, where companies identify and resolve certain pain points and workers, in turn, incorporate these products into their working life.

Of course, friendly power is not totalizing or exclusive; other forms of power continue to exist. Iveson and Maalsen (2018) argue that disciplinary and modulatory modes of control work together on contemporary individuals. For instance, the home-based workers discussed above are not slaves, forced under penalties or punishments to adopt certain routines and software—but neither are they entirely free. Corporate policies may shape the devices used and the software that is available. Business imperatives may induce a certain pace or intensity to work. Compensation may incentivize particular practices. The gaze of authority—manifested as cameras, coworkers, or less specular forms of algorithmic tracking—still persists. And even if home-based workers operate on their “own” time, that time is part of a broader disciplinary power that imposes itself on their lives and practices (Dubal 2020). Workers are situated in a broad field of actors, from the corporation to the state, each with their own demands and mechanisms. And this means that friendly power may be just one band in a broader spectrum of power ranging from soft to hard.

Friendly power, then, may augment other forces or work in tandem with other modalities of power. Arguably, though, those more conventional forms—coercion and enclosure, rules and rewards, disciplines and punishments—are better understood. In refusing to adopt such straightforward mechanisms, friendly power eludes straight analysis. This slipperiness or ambiguity, as has already been discussed, is precisely what makes it interesting and potentially influential. It is power that doesn't look like Power—and its intersection with home-based work, a significant but hidden sphere even as it burgeons in the wake of the pandemic—suggests it requires urgent further research.

Understanding AI technologies through the lens of friendly power provides insights for those grappling with contemporary labor conditions and the future of work. Contrary to some influential viewpoints in mainstream discourse and in academia, AI is not experienced as an oppressive and inexorable force that sweeps across society. Instead, we can witness an approach that is quieter, more incremental, and more empathically-attuned. AI companies identify the high demands on those who work from home and offer to ease some of these pressures by offloading repetitive routines, amplifying an individual's productivity, and supporting them throughout their workday. These

technologies augment and assist, while often disappearing in the background. Drawing on friendly power shows us how they appeal to the neoliberal worker through this convivial, personal, and flexible approach.

These insights suggest that a deep alignment between a worker's needs and technological affordances paves the way for successful adoption. Based on the material discussed above, AI technologies aim not to mold the subject, but to apprehend her, to identify her needs, and to accommodate themselves to those needs. If this can be achieved, then a form of co-participation emerges in which users embrace a technology and integrate it into their working life. As Foucault (1980, 39) observed, such power “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.”

This alignment suggests that, for those working from home, AI can be desired rather than imposed. The neoliberal worker is often a figure placed under enormous pressure—and AI technologies may alleviate some of those pressures, helping an individual to achieve her quotas, meet her deadlines, and convey a broader sense of professionalism. For critical media studies, this insight suggests that simply pointing out the dangers or threats of AI is not enough. Scholars must also acknowledge their benefits to those working from home and address their double-edged nature.

In a similar way, technologists and communities who aim to develop more radical, communal, or egalitarian alternatives to AI technologies must start with identifying the needs and desires of their users. A technology must empathetically address the demands placed on a contemporary worker—even if those demands originate from an inherently unjust and unequal system like capitalism—in order to prove compelling and be taken up. As working from home becomes the new normal for many in our post-COVID context, more equitable and emancipatory alternatives to our current set of AI technologies are certainly required. We need tools for conviviality (Illich 1973) and designs for the pluriverse (Escobar 2018) which recognise our dignity, our diversity, and our place in our fragile ecosystem. But to be successful, any radical program seeking to overhaul these tools should begin by understanding the worker—where she is at and what she needs. By developing this deep understanding, AI technologies could begin to make work more bearable and achievable, supporting what Butler (2015, 127) has called a “livable life.”

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