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When Worlds Collide

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Lockdown means the spaces of our lives are folded together in new ways. How do we adapt to these digital domestic atmospheres?

Long before all the Zoom memes circulating now—of half-naked partners wandering through the background, of people forgetting to turn off their video in the bathroom—the most famous incident was when two young children marched into the middle of a 2017 [BBC interview](#) with an expert on North Korea. The comedy escalated as the mother frantically slid into the room in an attempt to wrangle the kids on live television, causing yet more hilarious chaos. We laughed at the absurdity of the scene then. To be fair, it's still absurd, but it's also now deeply familiar. We all, at different moments, now play the parts of the father, the mother, and the kids.

With COVID-19 compelling many of us to do everything from home, such visual reminders of the private realities of our homes have become commonplace; all viewed through the gaze of the webcam. Pets jump into laps, children clatter dishes or toys onto the floor, flatmates respond to overheard remarks.

Private, domestic spaces now host the public world of work like never before. But this is not totally new. Mobile phones introduced different norms of privacy as intimate conversations were suddenly shared on streets and public transport. But what is new is how visible these private aspects of our homes have now become. Since many of us now live inside video conferences for much of the day, the activities of domestic life are on show to our colleagues—and students for teachers, clients for counsellors, and so on—who have been invited into our homes. This new intimacy can be interesting as we get a voyeuristic peek into other interiors, or endearing as we build new social bonds. But it also has other, more profound effects, as it drags the home's private corners into public view. Even with the 'virtual backdrop' function of software like Zoom, we still see glimpses of others' domestic spaces

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which they might not always want us to see.

These once-separate realms have folded together in ways that create new domestic atmospheres where old spatial rules no longer apply. We are not in each other's physical homes, but we are nevertheless in each other's spaces. The emotional and sensory atmospheres of the virtual home are as powerful and intimate as their offline dimension. This is characteristic of an era when we can no longer disentangle digital technologies from all aspects of our lives, and everything we do is ["more or less digital."](#) For many of us, the home is now characterised by different kinds of atmospheres than before, which conflate the private and the public. This leads to a new level of ["context collapse,"](#) as Jenny Davis and Nathan Jurgenson call it, that requires new ways of reckoning with its implications.

How do we begin analysing, and adapting to, these new digital domestic atmospheres?

How our homes feel to us, and thus how we inhabit them, is shaped by how we regard the people, animals, spaces, technologies, and objects that constitute their atmospheres. The delightful energy of pets and children, for example, become a form of liability when their own lives clash with our professional spaces. Broadband connections make our domestic spaces feel connected, functioning and calm when they work smoothly, or fractured and tense when they don't.

In response to this, some of us are attempting to redesign aspects of our life/work/social spaces and curate intentional environments so the windows into our homes frame exactly what we want them to display. This means finding new ways to configure our homes' spaces, new ways to live in them, and new tools like virtual backgrounds that retain privacy. But this doesn't really maintain the privacy that used to characterise the home—instead, it often masks the everyday multi-tasking of childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic labour. We try to perform focused attention and maintain professional atmospheres, even though, in actuality, our attention is fractured and atmospheres are multivalent.

COVID-19 has forced us all to adapt. Perhaps we should not reach for a return to pre-corona ways of living and working, when many of us grappled with the impossible bifurcation of 'work' and 'life'. 'Public' and

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'private' have always just been different ways of thinking about the same lives, not different realms perfectly sealed off from each other. Instead, if we recognise the emergence of new digital domestic atmospheres—and how they blur public and private space—we can also see the rise of widespread and creative responses to our homes and what we do in them. We need to embrace the adaptations that have been forced on all of us and embed them in the new normal.

Rather than maintaining the fiction that we can somehow separate 'work' from our domestic spaces—keeping out children, pets, and partners at all costs—we should adopt a more fluid approach. This does not mean that work takes over everything. Instead, if digital domestic atmospheres now characterise our working lives, it means treating ourselves and our colleagues as whole people with priorities and responsibilities that reach far beyond the workplace. These require our attention and care, and our empathy for others, especially when these spaces erupt in hilarious chaos.