

## ARTICLE

# Fluid objects? An attempt to conceptualise the global rise of “coworking spaces”

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**Abstract**

The paper explores the emergence and proliferation of “coworking spaces”. Driven by empirical observations during the last 10 years, the paper examines the analytical potential of the concept “fluid objects” to explain the global rise of coworking spaces. With remarkable speed, coworking spaces emerged worldwide during the last 15 years and receive enormous attention from researchers, policy-makers, and the public. However, researchers still struggle to define coworking spaces and a closer look into the field reveals the diversity and heterogeneity of these facilities. How is it that such different places are nevertheless recognised as belonging to the same phenomenon? Within Science and Technology Studies (STS), the notion of “fluid objects” has been developed to describe entities obtaining their strength through adaptability and flexibility. The paper argues that fluidity is a useful conceptual foundation to better understand the emergence and proliferation of coworking spaces. The primary conceptual ideas presented in this paper are enhanced with empirical data, collected from different coworking spaces in Berlin, Amsterdam, and North Rhine-Westphalia.

**KEYWORDS**

communities, digital cultures, global movement, new work settings, open work spaces, science and technology studies

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

A buzzword can be defined as a “word or expression from a particular subject area that has become fashionable by being used a lot” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2014). Such a buzzword is *coworking space*, denoting new flexible work settings which emerged in cities across the globe and increasingly also in more peripheral areas. During the last 10 years, the author of this paper observed the rising interest in this topic and conducted fieldwork in different coworking spaces in the context of three research projects between 2011 and 2018, starting in a coworking space in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

No template or central global expansion strategy drove the process when the term *coworking space* first started to appear around 15 years ago. Consequently, these workplaces are quite diverse and heterogeneous. Moreover, at first glance it seems to be nothing new or extraordinary that people work independently in the same office (sharing office space). However, coworking spaces as special (creative) work environments started to attract enormous (public and academic)

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attention. In short, a notion of *similarity* permeated the diversity of coworking spaces. This observation builds the starting point of this paper. How can such diverse places be recognised as *the same* or at least as belonging to the same phenomenon? Exploring this question is primarily of conceptual interest, requiring a search for traces throughout the last 15 years. However, it is also of practical relevance since the coworking space demonstrates the emergence of a powerful construct linked to hopes of the empowerment of freelancers (e.g., Merkel, 2019), creativity and innovation (e.g., Capdevila, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2014), and local economic development (e.g., Jamal, 2018).

Despite being a rather new phenomenon, coworking spaces already received a lot of scientific attention. In geographical journals (e.g., Avdikos & Kalogeresis, 2016; Brown, 2017; Richardson, 2017), in organisation and management studies (e.g., Blagoev et al., 2019; Capdevila, 2015; Garrett et al., 2017), and in sociology (e.g., Merkel, 2015), researchers explore questions such as who uses these facilities and what goes on there (purposes, effects, benefits of usage, etc.).

This paper does not aim to make an empirical contribution but rather to contextualise the emergence and global diffusion of coworking spaces from a conceptual point of view. However, it does so by reflecting on empirical data collected from different projects during the last 10 years. Particularly, interviews collected in Amsterdam and Berlin in 2016 and 2017, field knowledge obtained since 2011, and an ongoing engagement with the rising body of literature on this topic serve as basis for the thoughts presented in this paper. The questions to be addressed are: How can the rise of coworking spaces as a connected global construct be explained, considering the enormous local variance? How can we theorise the recent observation of coworking spaces becoming “mainstream” models of work in knowledge-based economies (Gandini & Cossu, 2021)?

The primary aim of the paper is to test the analytical potential of the notion of “fluid objects” (de Laet & Mol, 2000; Mol & Law, 1994) with regard to the coworking space and its global diffusion. Developed in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), “fluid objects” are conceived as entities attaining their durability through their inherent variability and adaptability. Such a view on coworking spaces contributes to the academic debate which is still driven by the desire to define coworking spaces and the practice of coworking – an extremely difficult endeavour. Maybe it is neither possible nor necessary, or even appropriate, to come up with an ultimate definition but to accept that the inability to confine them is a key characteristic of coworking spaces. The observation of coworking spaces as difficult to grasp entities is not new in the research field. For instance, by drawing on the concept of Star and Griesemer (1989), Schmidt conceives such temporary workplaces as “boundary objects”, “interpreted and utilised differently by various social groups” (2019, p. 9). Despite obvious similarities between boundary and fluid objects, one central difference should be mentioned: the concept of “boundary objects” emphasises different interpretations of an object by diverse social groups, while the concept of “fluid objects” focuses on the changing object itself (Law & Singleton, 2005, p. 334). The two notions are not mutually exclusive but are complementary. The concept of “boundary object” can help to understand how people use a coworking space differently (enabled by, *inter alia*, flexible rental conditions), while the concept of “fluid object” helps to understand the global diffusion of coworking spaces. Moreover, drawing on “fluid object” and the broader theoretical framework in which it is embedded enables to conceptualise substantial shifts in the coworking space field during the last decade that have been observed by many researchers (e.g., de Peuter et al., 2017; Gandini & Cossu, 2021). One argument of the paper is that the shift from grassroots-driven coworking spaces to business-oriented models (including companies providing coworking spaces at different locations) can be theorised as a transformation from “global fluids” to “global networks” (Urry, 2005).

The next section begins with the presentation of the conceptual idea in more detail. Against this background, the rise of coworking spaces and connecting elements (section 3) as well as idiosyncrasies and local variances (section 4) are demonstrated. Finally, the changing character of the field is addressed and conceptualised (section 5).

## 2 | CONCEPTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING GLOBAL PROLIFERATION OF COWORKING SPACES

The geographical consideration of coworking spaces as a global phenomenon inevitably leads to the concept of *relationality*. Unlike the Euclidean understanding of space, a relational perspective emphasises that place and space are constituted through their embeddedness in various relations (e.g., Massey, 1994). From this perspective, places are not purely local. They are rather formed by diverse local and non-local elements (see also Murdoch, 1998).

The notion of “fluid space” (Mol & Law, 1994) has been developed in the context of Science and Technology Studies (STS). While Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is mainly focused on explaining why entities maintain their “shape” even when they move (“immutable mobiles”, coined by Bruno Latour), the central argument of Law and Mol is that some

entities are characterised by enormous variability without, however, losing their identity (“mutable mobiles”) (Law & Mol, 2001, pp. 611–613). They are still identifiable as entities with certain attributes but their configuration is “fluid” (Law & Mol, 2001, p. 614). The classic example is the “Zimbabwe bush pump”, a water pump, the advantage of which lies in its variability and adaptability to local conditions, as de Laet & Mol emphasise: “Because in traveling to ‘unpredictable’ places, an object that isn’t too rigorously bounded, that doesn’t impose itself but tries to serve, that is adaptable, flexible and responsive – in short, a fluid object – may well prove to be stronger than one which is firm” (2001, p. 226).

Inspired by this line of thought, Urry (2005, pp. 245–247) divides products of globalisation into two categories: standardised outcomes of stable “global networks” (e.g., global brands) and “global fluids” spreading rather erratically (e.g., social movements, the internet). According to Urry “[s]uch fluids demonstrate no clear point of departure, just self-organisation and movement at certain speeds and at different levels of viscosity with no necessary end-state or purpose. Fluid systems create over time their own context for action rather than being ‘caused’ by such contexts” (2005, p. 246).

A different approach to explain global proliferation is discussed in the field of the geography of knowledge creation, focusing on emerging social constellations of human beings developing “new cognitive frames” (Capdevila et al., 2018, p. 526). According to this strand, new globally proliferating ideas and concepts emerge from local cells of pioneering activities, which then spread through an emerging and growing trans-local community of people sharing the same understanding of or perspective on a certain topic (Brinks & Ibert, 2015; Cohendet et al., 2014). Relational proximity is central in this approach since *similarity* in terms of shared interests and mind-sets can bridge physical distances (e.g., Brinks & Ibert, 2015). This research line is mainly interested in the interplay of local and non-local conditions for knowledge creation. For instance, by exploring the emergence of a new type of haute cuisine, Capdevila et al. (2018) examine “how epistemic movements that emerge in a given local context may influence the globally connected nature of the local ecosystem” (p. 527). This paper argues that coworking spaces are an example of an early trans-local movement of pioneers inducing new work settings. Hence, attention should be paid to manifold localised practices of individuals at different places and the endogenous process of commencing interconnection and exchange (also Brinks & Ibert, 2015). Individuals at several places perceived deficits in their daily work organisation (such as freelancers without organisational affiliation) and experimented with new work arrangements. Even though these workplace experiments happened locally and created some important local cells of pioneering activities (see next section), the success of the coworking space critically depended on the early global connectivity of its activists as well as the fluid nature of the coworking space. This is also supported by de Peuter et al. (2017) arguing that “coworking’s uptake was spurred by early devotees’ online efforts” (p. 690). With reference to the economic geography of knowledge and learning, the coworking space can best be understood as the result of “the social dynamics of communities” (Amin & Cohendet, 2004, p. 113), the members of which started interacting and discussing new work settings.

Literature on communities and fluid objects provides potential to complement each other. From the literature about communities (particularly the “community of practice” approach), we know that they create artefacts or objects through processes of “reification” (Wenger, 1998), which then stabilise respective practices. “Fluid objects” as conceived by de Laet and Mol (2000, p. 245), in turn, need a “community” using them and attaching a purpose to them. The community keeps the object fluid but in shape due to a mutual understanding, yet quite diverse ways of implementation. The object changes when it moves to other places, but is still recognisable by community members. Importantly, the notion of “community” does not describe a sharply demarcated group. Rather, membership is defined by shared practices (Wenger, 1998).

### 3 | THE “COWORKING SPACE” AS AN EMERGENT PHENOMENON

Just like the water pump captivates through its simplicity enabling its dissemination (de Laet & Mol, 2000, pp. 227–228), coworking spaces lack a restrictive definition which leads to some challenges in observing the empirical field:

The counting of coworking spaces is a fragile procedure, given the fluidity of the term’s definition. There are a number of conflicting accounts which put the number [...] higher or lower, depending on an individual’s understanding of the movement.

(Cashman, 2012, n.p.)

However, the pump is acknowledged for its purposefully designed simplicity that allows variability and gradual transformation (de Laet & Mol, 2000, p. 228). In terms of coworking spaces, we observed an emerging heading subsuming already

existing workplaces as well as stimulating the opening of new workplaces. Here, it was less a specific creation of objects (the material constitution of the place itself) but a “narrative” (Merkel, 2015, p. 131) of the potential assets of shared workspaces that constituted coworking spaces (often highlighted: serendipitous encounters, social atmosphere of work, creativity, community). This narrative flows. It is highly transboundary and a collective product of highly interconnected hosts of coworking spaces (see also Spinuzzi, 2012). For example, in order to understand the empirical field of coworking spaces, the author of this paper was recommended by a coworking space host to join a German-speaking Facebook group in 2011 where providers of different coworking spaces interacted (on that occasion, similar groups with an international scope were joined as well). Sitting in a newly founded and scarcely occupied coworking space in North Rhine-Westphalia, the connectivity with the absent others fundamentally contributed to the framing of the situation. Thus, the main difference between the coworking space and the pump is the participants’ awareness of others doing similar things elsewhere. This awareness was mainly achieved by digital connectivity between coworking space hosts.

Current studies described the rise of coworking spaces as a “highly reflexive global movement” (Merkel, 2015, p. 125) driven by ambitions to perform individual work practices in an appropriate setting. In this way, the coworking space as a “concept” (Brown, 2017, p. 114) emerged without dissolving its fluidity. “It is generally considered that the first coworking space – officially advertised as such – opened in San Francisco in 2005” (Blagoev et al., 2019, p. 3). However, coworking practices had already been performed before 2005 (see also de Peuter et al., 2017). One interviewee, known for his early engagement in the then emerging topic of coworking spaces in Germany, explained the development as a highly gradual process:

I always worked in digital projects and digital projects lead to changing work procedures. [...] It was clear that new [digital] tools change the need for workplaces. You can work more independently from a location and so on and so forth [...] And indeed long, long before someone called it ‘coworking’, we created places in specific project environments where we said: these are places where other people can work as well without signing a contract.

(Interview of former coworking space host Berlin 2017; German in original)

Joint reference points emerged supporting the development of a “sense of belonging” (Wenger, 1998). Such a function, for instance, is fulfilled by the online magazine *deskmag* (the section-introducing quotation stems from this homepage), launched 2009. Particularly, the “global coworking survey” published by *deskmag* is an omnipresent data source, also cited in many academic papers for illustrating the quantitative development of coworking spaces. Additionally, five so-called “coworking values” (community, openness, accessibility, sustainability, collaboration) functioned as further reference points. They were spread through different coworking-related online channels (wikis, blogs, etc.). The origin of these is also part of the coworking story (underlined by contextual information, such as that they have been first formulated in “Citizen Space” in San Francisco; Hillman, 2011).

These points illustrate that digitisation contributed critically to the emergence of coworking spaces, not only because they resulted from specific needs of digital-based workers for flexible workplaces (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac, 2016), but also due to the connectivity of coworking space pioneers enabled by the internet. According to Urry “the internet can be seen as a metaphor for global fluids” (2005, p. 247). Coworking spaces demonstrate that the internet also provides the ground for the formation of further fluid objects.

## 4 | ON THE MOVE: LOCAL VARIANCES OF COWORKING SPACES

Zooming into coworking spaces discloses their multifaceted nature and local variance. Flexible use, an open workspace, and a social work atmosphere can be identified as important elements of coworking spaces. However, the concrete manifestation of, for instance, flexibility is also fluid (in some coworking spaces, one-day tickets are available; in others, users need to buy at least a monthly ticket). The atmosphere is, of course, difficult to grasp since it denotes an “affective quality” (Anderson, 2009, p. 79) which cannot simply be provided but needs to be experienced by coworking space users. As a result of the growing popularity of the coworking space, the atmosphere should also be transferred from one coworking space to another. In its most explicit form, a Berlin-based coworking space served as an aesthetic and atmospheric inspiration for an Amsterdam-based coworking space (expert interview Amsterdam 2016).

Interestingly, despite local heterogeneity of coworking spaces, they promise a familiar setting for new arrivals. For instance, an American entrepreneur interviewed in an Amsterdam coworking space knew such workplaces from the



USA: “I’ve been in San Francisco in the last four years and they [coworking spaces] are everywhere” (interview coworking space user Amsterdam 2016). The connectivity between coworking spaces is obvious here and led to the situation where someone from abroad searched for a coworking space in a foreign city. Similarly, a Canadian who came to Berlin some months ago decided to join a coworking space in search of company while working (interview coworking space user Berlin 2017; German in original).

The diversity of coworking spaces is acknowledged by users, hosts, and researchers exploring the field. Users test different coworking spaces and know about enormous differences and low comparability. Moreover, the above-mentioned coworking values do not unite all coworking spaces. Not every operator or user knows them, adheres to them or is even interested in discussions about coworking on a general level. Researchers often underpin the openness to diverse “interpretation” (Schmidt, 2019) and the “lack of definitional clarity” (Brown, 2017, p. 114) making coworking “a nebulous term” (2017, p. 113). Even a “contradictory nature” (Gandini, 2015, p. 203) of coworking spaces is detected. A growing number of academic studies provide insights into coworking spaces. At the same time, they face the difficulty to explore a phenomenon which is fluid, at least when the aim is to make generalisations about coworking spaces. In the end, fluidity itself can be regarded as a characteristic of coworking spaces.

## 5 | FROM FLUIDS TO NETWORKS?

According to Law and Mol, a fluid object is characterised by the “performance of continuity” (2001, p. 614), meaning that it does not change abruptly and radically, but gradually and therefore remains recognisable as the same object. The field of coworking spaces has changed strongly over the last decade. Three shifts can be identified and are illustrated in the following.

### 5.1 | The gradual replacement of coworking spaces

In 2011, the author of this paper collected data of all coworking spaces in Germany which were listed on three coworking-related online platforms (Brinks, 2012). Only one of these platforms was still online in July 2020. A total of 116 entries have been collected and 46 spaces were classified as coworking spaces, based on the following criteria: flexibility (offering at least week tickets), availability of the workspace on every weekday, coworking as the main offer (e.g., cafés mentioning the opportunity for coworking were excluded). A new online analysis of these 46 spaces revealed that 24 of them still existed in July 2020 and 22 were closed (or assumed to be closed due to online inactivity for years). However, the total number of coworking spaces increased since 2011. For instance, official bodies in Berlin reported the existence of more than 150 coworking spaces in 2020 in the city (Projekt Zukunft Berlin, 2020). Some of these coworking spaces identified in 2011 changed their name and/or moved to other locations, such as the Berlin-based “betahaus”, which moved to a larger building in 2018. However, continuity is emphasised by the hosts: “When you walk into the new building, we want it to feel familiar. We’ll keep the elements that always defined our character like natural wood, reclaimed furniture ...” (betahaus GmbH, 2018). Checking the websites of the 24 coworking spaces discloses their continuing heterogeneity. Coworking spaces are still diverse. Interestingly, the necessity to explain coworking spaces or to situate the own coworking space in an international movement seems to be less relevant today.

### 5.2 | The emergence of companies providing coworking spaces at different locations

During the last years a new category of coworking spaces emerged countering the heterogeneity of coworking spaces by building up a network of similarly designed facilities, operated by single companies. This can be interpreted as a shift from “global fluids” to “global networks” (Urry, 2005). A professionalisation of the field can clearly be observed, which is interpreted by one interviewee as a “logical chain from things that we laboriously started to those things that are running here today. And, of course, it has differentiated in various directions” (interview former coworking space host Berlin 2017). One direction is the establishment of globally operating enterprises offering coworking experiences as a transferable service. Similarly equipped places with a common governance structure directly connect these coworking spaces. These formations grew on the fertile ground of the fluid notion of coworking space. Or, to use the words of de Peuter et al. (2017), “Inside a decade, an innovation from below was drawn out of the economic margins, harnessed by

capital and imprinted with corporate power relations” (p. 692). A similar chronology was recently presented by Gandini and Cossu (2021). The authors additionally identify “resilient” coworking spaces as a new type. We currently observe a diverse landscape of coworking spaces and the co-existence of many different forms.

### 5.3 | The discovery of coworking spaces as an appealing (regional) instrument for economic growth

Pratt et al. (2019) argue that “creative hubs” (coworking spaces are included in the authors’ definition) have reached the status of “a panacea for all economic ills” (p. 1). The flexible use and social work atmosphere in coworking spaces hardly demanded such attention. The idea of knowledge exchange, creativity, synergies, and (user) innovation is central here (Schmidt et al., 2014, 2018). Coworking spaces initiated or supported by public agencies are no longer unusual. Creativity has received an updraft as an “economic value” for quite a long time (Pratt et al., 2019). More recently, creativity has been accompanied by “openness”, which became a buzzword in its own right in the knowledge economy (Lundgren & Westlund, 2017). Coworking spaces seem to be promising organisational structures for generating opportunities for creative re-combinations of knowledge sources.

These findings about the changing landscape of coworking spaces raise an interesting question. Are fluidity and immutability subjected to a specific temporality? When something new emerges, it can be assumed to be fluid at the beginning. Over time, it becomes immutable, disappears, or remains fluid. In the case of coworking spaces, we are currently observing interesting times. The coworking space will not disappear in the foreseeable future. Processes of professionalisation and standardisation have started, however, without fully replacing the still diverse landscape of coworking spaces.

## 6 | CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

What is the value of conceiving coworking spaces as “fluid objects” (de Laet & Mol, 2000; Mol & Law, 1994)? Two main arguments based on the previous sections are particularly relevant here.

First, since the initial studies about coworking spaces were conducted, the research field struggled to define coworking spaces and the practice of coworking. A perspective of coworking spaces as fluid objects provides the opportunity to free oneself from the obligation to come up with an ultimate definition of coworking spaces. At the same time, caution is required when we talk about the effects of coworking spaces, which can be as diverse as the coworking space itself. Deriving general conclusions about coworking spaces based on single case studies is impossible if we conceive coworking spaces as fluid objects (such research can, nevertheless, provide fruitful results about the local function of a coworking space, etc.). Fluid objects need systematic comparison to be identifiable as such. Looking at coworking spaces through the lens of fluid objects allows us to consider the local idiosyncrasies of coworking spaces and the non-local connections that contribute fundamentally to their existence and meaning. The definition of a coworking space lies neither in the local facility nor in the global coworking values or online groups, but in the composition of a fluid object.

Second, due to the inherent variability, coworking spaces have become promising organisational structures in the knowledge economy (Schmidt et al., 2014). An economy that increasingly relies on innovation and flexibility appreciates fluidity. Moreover, coworking spaces are about creating opportunities and enabling experimentation. They raise expectations without providing any guarantee of success. And indeed, coworking spaces are far from being a sure-fire success. Almost half of the coworking spaces identified by the author in Germany in 2011 have closed. It would be valuable to explore in more detail the different trajectories of coworking spaces during the last 15 years in order to better understand factors of success as well as barriers.

Last but not least, coworking spaces are an illustrative example of an entity having “no clear point of departure, just self-organisation and movement” (Urry, 2005, p. 246). Studying the global spread of coworking spaces from the perspective of fluid objects helps to better understand such erratic developments. Even apart from coworking spaces, we can observe the emergence of ideas and artefacts from digital environments, which are partly characterised by remarkable “robustness” (Mol & Law, 1994, p. 662) despite the absence of (formal) coordinative structures. Fuzziness seems to be manageable in constellations of distributed activities in loosely connected “communities of interest” (Brinks & Ibert, 2015, p. 363). More research is needed to better understand how.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Interview data cannot be shared due to anonymisation requirements.

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