

Is It Smart Working? An Analysis of the Public Discourse about Teleworking in Italy during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced lockdowns in several countries, and many organisations had to introduce teleworking for their employees. While remote working is not a new thing, and was already permitted by laws, the extent to which enterprises had to redefine their process is unprecedented. Therefore, teleworking was widely discussed in national media. Newspapers are a relevant outlet for the diffusion and legitimation of schemata of interpretation, and we explored of teleworking was framed in the Italian discursive space during the first two months of the pandemic. We analysed seven national newspapers, and adopted a semi-automatic text analysis, which we performed through topic modelling. In this paper, we describe the topics that are used by newspapers to frame teleworking, the different use of these topics performed by different newspapers, the trend of topics over time, and we discuss the institutionalisation of the issue of teleworking.

1. Introduction

The concept of teleworking dates back to the seventies (Nilles, 1975), and over the last years its implications were widely discussed in organisational literature (i.e., Jackson, 1999) in reference to the individual consequences of teleworking (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007), to the work-life balance (i.e., Bloom and Van Reenen, 2006), to stress (Korac-Kakabades *et al.*, 2017), to demotivation and counterproductive behaviour (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016) and more in general to the employees' well-being (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010).

But what was one of the possible ways of working suddenly became a forced choice in Europe at the beginning of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Italy, starting at the beginning of March, a new law made it easier for employers and employees to put in place teleworking. Working from home soon became an issue debate in newspapers, in the discursive space (Hardy and Maguire, 2008). Debate over the contested issue of teleworking (Hoffmann, 1999) characterised discursive confrontation leading to the institutionalisation of a legitimate understanding (Meyer and Höllerer, 2010) of the issue of teleworking. Institutionalisation is relevant, as it determines what is legitimate to say or not to say regarding the contested issue (Bourdieu, 1991): it defines what is legitimately sayable in the Italian discursive space, has an impact on the laws regarding the contested issue (Hagelund, 2020), and paves the way for determining what of such a transformation can remain after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we ask *how was teleworking framed by Italian newspapers during the COVID-19 pandemic? And how were these frames institutionalised?*

We analyse newspapers, as they are a fundamental locus for the struggles over meanings described by neo-institutionalist (Meyer and Höllerer, 2010). More specifically, we analysed all the sections of seven national newspapers: *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *La Stampa*, *Il Manifesto*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Libero*, and *Il Giornale*. We focused on the first two months on the pandemic in Italy: from February 18th, two days before the first case was discovered in Codogno, to April 17th. We searched for all the paragraphs mentioning 'teleworking' or a synonym, and we analysed the resulting 1,238 paragraphs through Topic Modelling (Blei, 2003; DiMaggio 2013), which is a semi-automated technique for extracting meaning from texts. Through our analysis, we are able to analyse the labels used for referring to teleworking in the discursive space created around newspapers, describe the framing of teleworking and its evolution and institutionalisation. Also, we describe how different newspapers deal differently with these themes.

The paper is structured as follows: in the next section, we detail our theoretical background, then we present our method. Findings follow. Discussion and conclusion end the paper.

2. Theoretical background

The concept of teleworking, which dates back to the seventies (Nilles, 1975), was recently termed by a joint report of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) as 'telework/ICT-mobile work' (T/ICTM), and defined as 'the use of information and communications technologies (ICT), such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and/or desktop computers, for work that is performed outside the employer's premises' (2017:3). The implications of teleworking were widely discussed by organisational literature (i.e., Huws et al., 1990; Nilles, 1998; Jackson and Van der Wielen, 1998; Jackson, 1999), which tackled the concept of teleworking, together with the ones of trust and employee empowerment in the wider concept of New Ways to Work (Peters *et al.*, 2014). This literature emphasised how New Ways to Work can have an impact at organisational level, workforce level, and individual level (Sparrow and Daniels, 1999; Daniels *et al.*, 2000; Peters *et al.*, 2014). This framework gained increasing relevance within organisation studies, as several scholars used it in reference to the individual consequences of teleworking (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007), to the work-life balance (Bloom and Van Reenen, 2006; Golden *et al.*, 2006; Kelliher and Anderson, 2008), to stress (Korac-Kakabades *et al.*, 2017), demotivation and counterproductive behaviour (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016) and more in general to the employees' well-being (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). Also, the ethics issues of teleworking were analysed (Moon and Stanworth, 2007), while published literature focuses on the different implementation of teleworking in the different European States (i.e., Peters *et al.*, 2009; Aguilera *et al.*, 2016).

In 2020, telework suddenly became a forced choice for several enterprises and employees due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Italy, in example, the first case of coronavirus was officially identified on the 20th February, 2020. In the following days, fears over the spreading of the disease lead the government to take several decisions aimed at reducing people's movements. Schools were closed starting on the 23rd of February, and the soon approved DPCM¹ 1st March 2020 made it easier for employer and employee to put in place teleworking: article 4, in

¹ Prime Ministerial Decree, a decree issue directly by the Prime Minister.

example, says that ‘agile work² (defined by article 18 to 23 of the law 81, 22nd May 2017) can be applied by employers for the whole duration of the state of emergency [...] to all subordinated work relationship, also without previous individual agreements³’.

In this context, understandably, teleworking became a debated issue also within the Italian discursive space (Hardy and Maguire, 2008), which is to say in traditional and social media. Based on the theoretical lens provided by neo-institutional theory, we consider the COVID-19 pandemic as an exogenous shock, which triggered processes at the discursive and political level (Mollona and Pareschi, 2020) that lead to the emergence of a new institutional field. Specifically, the concept of teleworking can be deemed as a contested issue (Hoffmann, 1999) around which institutional actors with competing interests (Striker, 2000) competed over its interpretation (Meyer and Höllerer, 2010). The outcome of such an interpretation has a normative effect, as the law approved by policymakers are impacted by the power struggles within the field (Hagelund, 2020), and also because the space of maneuver of the actors involved depends on the result of this struggle over meanings (Meyer and Höllerer, 2010; Mollona and Pareschi, 2020). As Lawrence (2008) points out, indeed, these collective decisions regarding a specific issue are the outcome of the symbolic struggles taking place in issue centered arenas, where individual (Cornelissen, 2013) or collective (Perdersen and Dobbin, 1997) actors shape the evolution of a field. This confrontation over meanings leads to the legitimation of specific institutional arrangements, which is the *passé-partout* for designing a legitimate idea of the social world (Bourdieu, 1991). In our case, the outcome of the struggle consist of a legitimate idea of what ‘teleworking’ is or legitimately can be defined, as organisational solutions become taken-for granted and legitimised, and normatively approved in the institutional environment as an outcome of the struggle. The analysis of the discourse around teleworking, thus, is relevant for organisation studies, as it paves the way for what of such a transformation of how work is done can remain after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In particular, we analyse newspapers, as they ‘simultaneously act as a stage and a key player’ (Meyer & Höllerer, 2010: 1245) for institutional struggles. Newspapers’ coverage signals the attention of institutional actors and political figures toward certain issues (Molotch and Lester, 1974), and the outcome of the discursive struggle is able to influence the ideas and perceptions of those who read newspapers (DiMaggio *et al.*, 2013). More specifically, news reported by media can reinforce previous existing schemata of interpretation (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987), or trigger the development of new ones (Price and Tewksbury, 1997), which can also be integrated within wider cultural and political ideologies (Feldman, 2003). News reported by the press can also be told and re-told by readers, thus influencing their diffusion (Bird, 2011). More in general, the evolution of the public debate in newspapers is able to describe the

² The labels used by Italian Government and within the public debate to refer to teleworking are an issue in itself, and we will return on this point later on.

³ Our translation from the original Italian: “la modalità di lavoro agile disciplinata dagli articoli da 18 a 23 della legge 22 maggio 2017, n. 81, può essere applicata, per la durata dello stato di emergenza di cui alla deliberazione del Consiglio dei ministri 31 gennaio 2020, dai datori di lavoro a ogni rapporto di lavoro subordinato, nel rispetto dei principi dettati dalle menzionate disposizioni, anche in assenza degli accordi individuali ivi previsti”. All the DPCM and legislatives decrees issued by Italian government and parliament regarding teleworking can be found here: <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/strumenti-e-servizi/smart-working/Pagine/default.aspx>.

evolution of the discursive opportunity structure, which describes what actors are legitimately able to say, or not to say, during discursive struggles (Mollona and Pareschi, 2020).

3. Method and data

We adopted an inductive approach to allow unexpected results among our findings (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Specifically, we focused on seven national Italian newspapers: *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *La Stampa*, *Il Manifesto*, *Libero*, *Il Giornale*, and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. We collected as PDF all the national editions published between 18th February 2020, and 17th April 2020. We choose the first date as the first Italian case of COVID-19 was detected in Codogno (LO), on the 20th of February. Then, we collected data for two months. Overall, in 59 days, we collected 396 pdf files⁴.

After collecting these sources of data, our research design went through several steps. First of all, to detect only the texts dealing with teleworking, we used the software *Nvivo* to automatically extract all the paragraphs including one (or more) of the following keywords, which are words used either in organisational literature, or in the national debate, to refer to teleworking: 'smart working', 'smartworking', 'telelavoro', 'remote working', 'lavoro agile', 'lavoro da casa', 'lavoro telematico', 'lavoro a distanza', 'teleworking' and 'flexible working'. In this phase we moved back and forth from data to excerpts extracted from articles to read texts and perform a snowball addition of new labels. We used a built-in tool of *Nvivo* to automatically extract the paragraphs surrounding one of the previous keywords: overall, we retained 1.238 paragraphs from 290 editions of the newspapers. On the whole, our corpus was composed of 92.559 words, with the longest paragraph accounting for 571 words.

To analyse the excerpts we used Topic Modelling (Blei *et al.*, 2003), a technique which is more and more used within management and organisational research to detect frames (Fligstein *et al.*, 2017), deal with classification systems (Ferri *et al.*, 2020), detect the emergence of novelties, deal with on-line content and analyse cultural dynamics (Hannigan *et al.*, 2019). Within organisational studies, in example, Topic Modelling was used to analyse organisational culture (Schmiedel *et al.*, 2019) or to link different discourses at individual level with issues at organisational level (Pareschi and Lusiani, 2020). Topic Modelling proceeds automatically from a corpus of texts and creates 'topics' as containers of meaningful words the often co-occur together (Mohr and Bogdanov, 2013). Topics are distributions of words over a dictionary, and the original texts are understood as probability distribution of topics (Schmiedel *et al.*, 2019): therefore, each text of the corpus is composed by all the topics in different percentage. In the following phase the researcher must induce the meaning of each topic based on the most relevant words constituting it and based on the texts which are mainly composed by that topic. Through Topic Modelling it is possible to deal with big corpora of texts, while at the same avoiding the impositions of a-priori categories: the interpretation remains inductive. Also, a nice feature of Topic Modelling is that the algorithm on which it is based – which is called latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) – is able to discriminate the meaning of the same word in different contexts (DiMaggio *et al.*, 2013)

⁴ *Il Manifesto* publishes the newspaper 6 times a week, and some other editions were missing from our database, but on average we collected 6.7 files per day.

Before analysing our excerpts, we pre-processed them by removing all the words that are not meaningful (i.e., pronouns, adverbs, and the like) through a stop-word list (Hannigan *et al.*, 2019). After this procedure, our corpus was composed by 61.571 words, and the longest excerpt was composed by 388 words. At this stage, the researcher must decide the number of topics that the algorithm will generate. This is a very sensitive decision, and clear guidelines on how to decide the ‘correct’ number of topics are still missing (and probably will always be missing), as scholars do not agree on how to define it (Hannigan *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, some researchers rely on quantitative measures, such as perplexity score (Fligstein *et al.*, 2017), coherence and exclusivity (Schmiedel *et al.*, 2019), which are supposed to point at the right number of topics. Yet, these techniques usually do not agree on the ‘right’ number, and research points out how models that are better according to quantitative criteria can be less meaningful for human experts (Chang *et al.*, 2009). Also, we perform Topic Modelling to assist our interpretation, and in this case ‘there is no statistical test for the optimal number of topics’ (DiMaggio *et al.*, 2013:582). Therefore, we preferred to value interpretability of the model (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013, p. 20) and, following a standard procedure (Ferri *et al.*, 2020), we elicited models with 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24 and 26 topics and qualitatively analysed them. We ended up selecting the 14 topics solutions. Indeed, models with more topics presented duplicated topics, while models with a lower number had cluster of words hard to interpret. For performing Topic Modelling we relied on the software Mallet (McCallum, 2002), which is a state-of-the art solution (Hannigan *et al.*, 2019).

4. Findings

Before moving to the description of topics, we shall discuss the keywords that we used for selecting paragraphs, and the use which is made of these words in the public debate. The following Figure 4.1 reports the relative frequency of each keywords in the newspapers, and consequently in our sample. The most important label is ‘smart working’, which can also be found as ‘smartworking’, and which accounts for 62.9% of the 1.397 occurrences⁵. During the pandemic, in Italy, this term became the more legitimate label for designing the new working-from-home arrangement, often with office hours, which simply substituted the previous going-to-the-office. It is interesting to note that smart-working is actually a pseudo-anglicism, which is a word, in a language other than English that has an English appearance, but is not English itself. In English, indeed, labels used for designing the act of working from home are ‘teleworking’, working from home, ‘telecommuting’, ‘flexible working’, or ‘remote working’, all of which are practically absent in our sample. ‘Smart working’ is not even defined in any Italian law: the Law n.81, 22nd May 2017 defines *lavoro agile* as the proper Italian translation of ‘agile working’, which is to say a work that is performed ‘without a fixed time schedule or workplace, with the possible use of technological devices. The work is realised partly within the premises of the enterprise, and partly outside, without any fixed workspace’⁶. Nonetheless,

⁵ We have 1.397 occurrences and only 1238 excerpts because some excerpts include more than one keyword.

⁶ Our own translation. Original is ‘forme di organizzazione per fasi, cicli e obiettivi e senza precisi vincoli di orario o di luogo di lavoro, con il possibile utilizzo di strumenti tecnologici per lo svolgimento dell’attività lavorativa. La prestazione lavorativa viene eseguita, in parte all’interno di locali aziendali e in parte all’esterno senza una postazione fissa’ (Art 18., retrieved from <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2017-05-22;81!vig=>).

in the communication towards the citizens, Ministers and Governmental web pages refer to labels that are not used by the legislator itself. In example, the official page of the Ministry of labour and Social Policy uses the label ‘smart working’ to refer to the law that we quoted, and that uses the label ‘lavoro agile’: ‘the definition of smart working in the law 81/2017 emphasises the organisational flexibility, the willingness of the actors involved, and the use of technological devices to perform the work (i.e., PC, tablet, and smartphone)⁷.

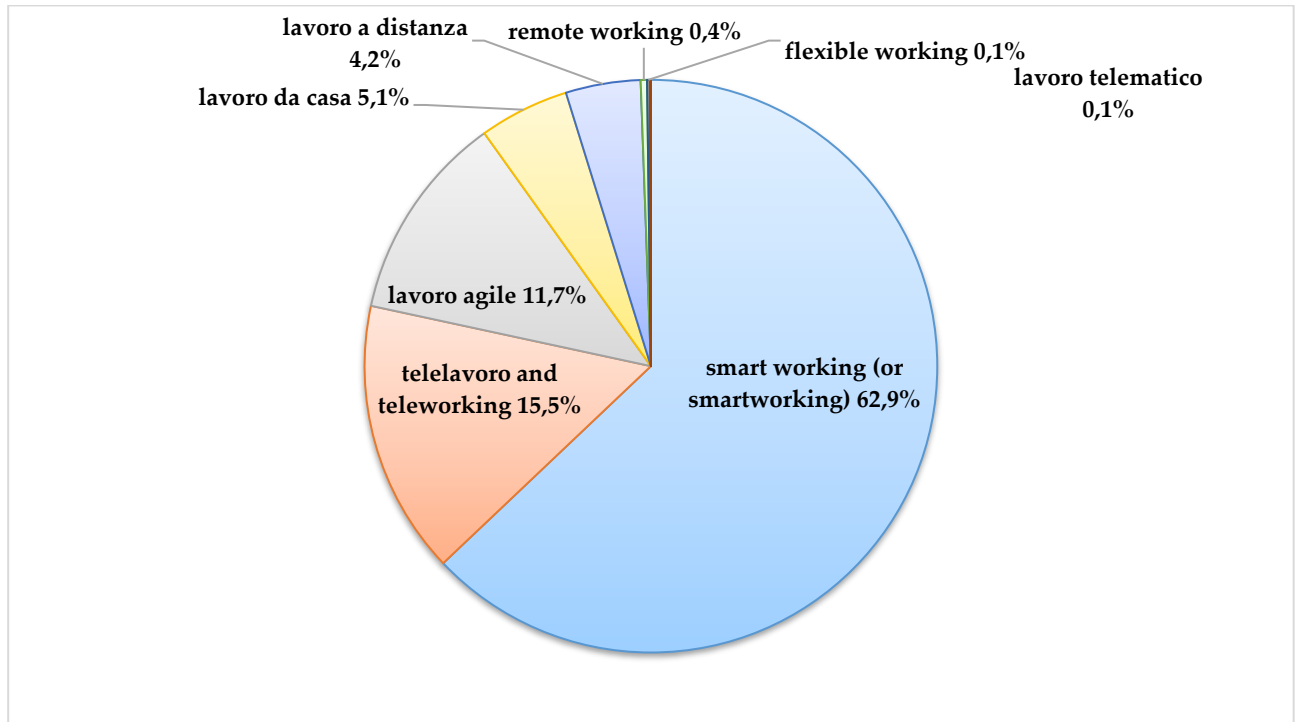


Figure 4.1. Relative frequency of keywords.

The most diffused word for designing the work from home is thus a pseudo-anglicism, while the real English labels almost do not make it to the newspapers. Other labels that are actually used in the Italian debate are (i) the Italian translations for teleworking, which is ‘telelavoro’: taken together these two labels account for 15.5% of our sample, but telelavoro only adds 0.1% to the 15.4% of ‘teleworking’; (ii) for agile work, which is ‘lavoro agile’ and accounts for 11.7% of the keywords; (iii) for working-from-home, which is ‘lavoro da casa’, and which accounts for 5.1%; and finally (iv) for remote working, which is ‘lavoro a distanza’ and which accounts for 4.2% of the keywords in our sample.

We now move to topics’ interpretation, which we performed based on the three main output of topic modelling (Ferri *et al.*, 2018; 2020):

⁷ Our translation. the original is ‘La definizione di smart working, contenuta nella Legge n. 81/2017, pone l’accento sulla flessibilità organizzativa, sulla volontarietà delle parti che sottoscrivono l’accordo individuale e sull’utilizzo di strumentazioni che consentano di lavorare da remoto (come ad esempio: pc portatili, tablet e smartphone)’. Retrived from <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/strumenti-e-servizi/smart-working/Pagine/default.aspx> on 31/7/2020. More details on these labels can be found here: <http://blog.terminologiaetc.it/2020/03/09/significato-smartworking/>.

- 1) a list defining the most important words per topic, ranked in order of their adjusted prevalence. In Table 4.1, we report the 30 most important words for each topic.
- 2) a matrix detailing the topic composition of each paragraph in our sample. This matrix describes the idea that texts are a distribution over topics, and was used to select and read (at least) the five most important texts for each topic.
- 3) a list providing the actual coding of each word analysed, which was used when necessary to make sense of topics.

The result of this inductive phase are to be found in a label for each topic (see Table 4.1) and in the short description, which is provided below. As explained, we interpreted each topic based on the excerpts mostly composed by that topic, and on the list of most important words.

Topic 1 - smart working and how to conduct the activities in different industries is used in paragraphs describing how schools, hospitals, transports, public services, enterprises and economic actors in general will or will not be able to keep opened (or re-open activities). In this context, the reference to smart working is used to explain how it can be used by business organisation and public administration to keep performing core activities. Some words exemplify this issue: *attività*⁸ (economic activity), *aziende* and *imprese* (enterprises), *uffici* (offices), *servizi pubblici* (public services), *settori* (industries). Also some specific industries are mentioned, as *banca* (bank), together with words referring to opening, closures, and laws: *decreto*, *obbligo*, *aperto*, *aperte*, *maggio*.

Topic 2 – every cloud has silver lining: the perks of teleworking is used by paragraphs emphasising how the forced introduction of teleworking can have positive effects on productivity, personal well-being and work-life balance. In example, one of the paragraphs emphasises the time gained to work out at home, as commuting is no more necessary. Another one emphasises the productivity gain intrinsic to remote working. Another one emphasises the freedom gained by managing one's own time. Indeed among the most important words we find *casa* (home), *tempo* (time), *ufficio* (office) *lavoro* and *lavorare* (work), *restare* (remain), *tornare* (go back), and *società* (society).

Topic 3 – someone likes it at home is a topic used for emphasising how both employers and employees prefer teleworking. Compared to the previous topic, which was explaining the advantages of the new situations, this topic is used to report survey or interviews where someone is actually supporting teleworking. Among the most important words we find *dipendenti* (employees), *aziende* (enterprises), *lavoro* and *lavorare* (to work), *casa* (home), and a reference to tools and procedures to make teleworking possible: *remoto*, *possibile*, *strumenti*, *modalità*, and *formazione*.

Topic 4 – lockdown and teleworking is used in articles reporting how different regions (*regione*, *lombardia*), districts (*zona*, *rossa*, *nord*) and cities (i.e., *milano*) are forced to close everything (*scuole*, *ristoranti*, *bar*, *quarantena*) due to the pandemic (*epidemia*, *coronavirus*) and the increasing number of infestions (*contagio*, *casi*, *contagi*)

Topic 5 - national and regional laws to support incomes and enterprises is used in contexts where teleworking is discussed in reference to laws and decrees that are supporting enterprises and employees. We find here references to money (*milioni*, *miliardi*), enterprises (*imprese*),

⁸ We use *italic* for Italian words in Table 4.1.

employees (*lavoratori, dipendenti, dipendente*), legislative activity (*governo*), and supports to actors involved (*sostegno, reddito, sospensione, ammortizzatori, inps*).

Topic 6 - technologies for distant learning and working is used in paragraphs discussing the technologies available and needed to effectively working remotely or for offering a valid alternative to traditional classes within schools and universities. There is an emphasis on how universities need education for their professors for distance teaching. Some words that highlight this description are *distanza* (distance), *telelavoro* (teleworking), *tecnologia* (technology). Several words refer to school and universities: *lezioni, lezione* (classes), *scuola* (school), *grado* (stage), *pubblica* (public), *studenti* (students). Other words refer to technology: *online, connessione, video, internet, computer, web*.

Topic 7 – Italian digital infrastructure and providers is used in paragraphs discussing the infrastructural weaknesses which might prevent citizens to work from home and students to enjoy distance learning. Also, the situation of different internet service providers and tlc enterprises and organisations is mentioned, as highlighted by words as *rete* and *reti* (web), *dati* (data), *italia* and *paese* (Italy), *digitale* (digital), *traffico* (traffic), *ultimi* (last), *sistema* (system).

Topic 8 – newspapers’ coverage of the emergency is used to describe the reportages and special editions published by newspapers, to describe the emergency (*emergenza*), the measures approved by the government (*presidente, governo, misure, gruppo*), and the evolution of the pandemic (*coronavirus*).

Topic 9 – technicalities regarding agile work is used in articles describing technicalities described in laws and decrees (*legge, ministero, dpcm, prevede, circolare*), procedures for employee to select agile working (*dipendenti, lavoratore, distanza, presenza*), and procedures for employees to define and communicate which workers are working from home (*datore, accordo, forme*). Also, the issue of holiday (*ferie*) is discussed. It is interesting to note that such a technical topic uses the *technical* label ‘agile work’ (*lavoro agile*).

Topic 10 – practising ‘smart working’ reports positive and negative experiences of working from home. It is used, in example, to emphasise how some entrepreneurs decided to let all employees work from home to protect their safety, but also to report negative experiences of working in a work place that was not designed for such an endeavour. Also, this topic is used to report how some organisations (i.e., *call center*) are easier than other to convert to teleworking. Compared to topic 11 and 13 (see below) that deals with safety measures also in the workplace, this topic focuses on working-from-home only.

Topic 11 – safety measures within workplaces describes agreements between unions (*sindacati*) and entrepreneurs, often represented by Confindustria, and procedures defined by organisations to enforce safety measures (*misure*) within workplaces. Such measures include teleworking whenever possible (*possibile*), the use of face masks (*mascherine, dispositivi, protezione*), a different schedule of shifts (*turni*), social distancing (*metro*), *sanification* (*sanificazione*).

Topic 12 – children, elderly and family is used to discuss the new work-life balance during the lockdown, when teleworking was combined with distance learning and parents had to work (from home), teach kids and safeguard grandparents. Words that highlight this theme are related to lockdown (*quarantena*), youngster (*figli, bambini, figlio*), family (*famiglia, genitori*), elderly (*nonni*) and the fear (*paura*) to pass them virus (*virus*).

Topic 13 – organisations applying ‘smart working’ and safeguarding employees is used in paragraphs reporting interviews to employers, entrepreneurs and managers that described

measures (*misure, soluzioni*) put in place to have a safe workplace and to avoid the spread of the virus (*contagio*). Words refer to employees (*dipendenti, personale, collaboratori*), health (*salute*), safety (*sicurezza*), accountability (*responsabilità*). If compared to the previous topic 11, this topic focuses on a different level of analysis: while topic 11 reported the outcome of negotiations between representatives of workers and employers, here the focus is on actual practices, regardless of the path that lead to their adoption.

Topic 14 – epic of the crisis is used in paragraphs that go beyond the daily narration of the emergency (*emergenza*) and reflect on the coronavirus crisis (*crisis*) as connected to other crisis and to historic changes. The pandemic is indeed linked with the economic (*economico, economica*) crisis and with the climate change crisis, as well as the teleworking is discussed as a phenomenon able to change the way we live. Also, major societal (*sociale*) changes (i.e., new forms of local tourism) are discussed.

Topic 1 - smart working and how to conduct the activities in different industries	Topic 2 - every cloud has a silver lining: the perks of teleworking	Topic 3 - someone likes it at home	Topic 4 - lockdown and teleworking	Topic 5 - national and regional laws to support incomes and enterprises	Topic 6 - technologies for distant learning and working	Topic 7 - Italian digital infrastructure and providers
working	casa	smart	telelavoro	working	distanza	coronavirus
smart	lavoro	working	lombardia	smart	telelavoro	rete
attività	telelavoro	lavoro	scuole	euro	smartworking	emergenza
aziende	tempo	dipendenti	città	lavoro	tecnologia	dati
uffici	ufficio	aziende	governo	milioni	lezioni	italia
servizi	coronavirus	lavorare	misure	giorni	online	milioni
pubblici	molti	milano	covid	imprese	didattica	digitale
possono	mondo	grandi	regione	lavoratori	scuola	anni
riproduzione	lavorare	casa	contagio	sostegno	connessione	traffico
imprese	farlo	giorni	casi	sociali	video	mercato
banca	tornare	remoto	casa	aprile	grado	smartworking
pubblico	restare	emergenza	milano	dipendenti	scuole	nuovi
riservata	ormai	organizzazione	chiusura	reddito	social	paese
essenziali	spazi	persone	ristoranti	studi	pubblica	ultimi
maggio	società	nuova	ministro	mesi	grande	media
aperti	dobbiamo	lavoratori	chiusi	miliardi	uso	tempi
decreto	mezzo	comunicazione	bar	governo	internet	diffusione
obbligo	smartworking	possibile	pubblici	sede	lavori	sistema
settori	dato	strumenti	nazionale	mese	computer	crisi
clienti	mezzi	società	contagi	potrebbe	vedere	poco
banche	spazio	italia	zona	sospensione	studenti	quota

Topic 1 - smart working and how to conduct the activities in different industries	Topic 2 - every cloud has a silver lining: the perks of teleworking	Topic 3 - someone likes it at home	Topic 4 - lockdown and teleworking	Topic 5 - national and regional laws to support incomes and enterprises	Topic 6 - technologies for distant learning and working	Topic 7 - Italian digital infrastructure and providers
settore	persino	imprese	coronavirus	settimane	comunità	popolazione
aperte	propria	azienda	locali	ammortizzatori	modello	reti
domanda	italiana	team	rossa	dipendente	pagina	italiano
digitalizzazione	moda	modalità	epidemia	dovrebbe	opportunità	accesso
presidente	avanti	aziendale	rischio	corso	tempi	effetti
test	spesa	produttività	chiuse	mentre	formazione	paesi
agenzia	decine	formazione	nord	inps	programmi	causa
privati	uscire	gestire	contro	piano	sud	settimane
trasporti	reale	manager	quarantena	professionisti	web	pandemia

Topic 8 - newspapers' coverage on the emergency	Topic 9 - technicalities regarding agile work	Topic 10 - practising 'smart working'	Topic 11 - safety measures within workplaces	Topic 12 - children, elderly and family	Topic 13 - organisations applying 'smart working' and safeguarding employees	Topic 14 - epic of the crisis
emergenza	lavoro	smart	lavoratori	casa	smart	tempo
italia	agile	working	persone	giorno	working	emergenza
marzo	attività	giorni	possibile	figli	attività	crisi
presidente	modalità	caso	sicurezza	anni	servizi	momento
casa	dipendenti	numero	sindacati	smart	servizio	fronte
coronavirus	ferie	punto	mascherine	stare	misure	importante
periodo	possibilità	spiega	azienda	working	dipendenti	paese
governo	legge	deciso	produzione	nessuno	contagio	situazione
misure	marzo	chiesto	protezione	genitori	momento	potrebbe
guida	distanza	primi	evitare	niente	covid	virus
gruppo	lavoratore	problema	ricorso	quarantena	sicurezza	necessità
sole	presenza	contatto	turni	paura	personale	riservata
giorno	base	data	comuni	virus	salute	forte
lavoro	lavorativa	center	aziende	bambini	propri	conto
settimana	possono	lavorano	lavorare	medici	collaboratori	sociale
cento	datore	roma	uso	nonni	sedi	problemi
generale	pubblica	collegli	misure	bisogno	garantire	grande
inizio	personale	richieste	dispositivi	serie	soluzioni	senso
prime	ministero	lavora	livello	lasciare	emergenza	persone
inoltre	dpcm	call	rischio	famiglia	massimo	fase
ferie	prevede	racconta	addetti	parlare	tutela	riproduzione

Topic 8 - newspapers' coverage on the emergency	Topic 9 - technicalities regarding agile work	Topic 10 - practising 'smart working'	Topic 11 - safety measures within workplaces	Topic 12 - children, elderly and family	Topic 13 - organisations applying 'smart working' and safeguarding employees	Topic 14 - epic of the crisis
famiglie	accordo	gruppo	personale	interno	lavoro	sistema
attenzione	lavoratori	mettere	metro	tavolo	condizioni	devono
febbraio	amministrazioni	possiamo	salute	normale	responsabilità	economico
totale	azienda	difficoltà	mezzi	figlio	sistemi	dovrebbero
decisione	nazionale	chiuso	uffici	amore	operatività	tenere
distanza	forme	direttore	necessario	costretto	gestione	economia
italiani	svolgere	territorio	mentre	mascherina	remoto	capacità
nonostante	circolare	dovranno	sanificazione	sera	disposizione	alcune
cassa	strumenti	chiedere	prevenzione	fortuna	contatti	bisogna

Table 4.1. 30 most important words per topic.

We can now analyse how different newspapers used the 14 topics during the months under analysis to deal with teleworking: Figure 4.2 reports the differential usage of each topic by the seven outlets. Among them, we have a business paper, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, two national quality newspapers, *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*, a left-wing newspaper, *Il Manifesto*, a populist newspaper, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, and two right-wing populist newspapers, *Libero* and *Il Giornale*.

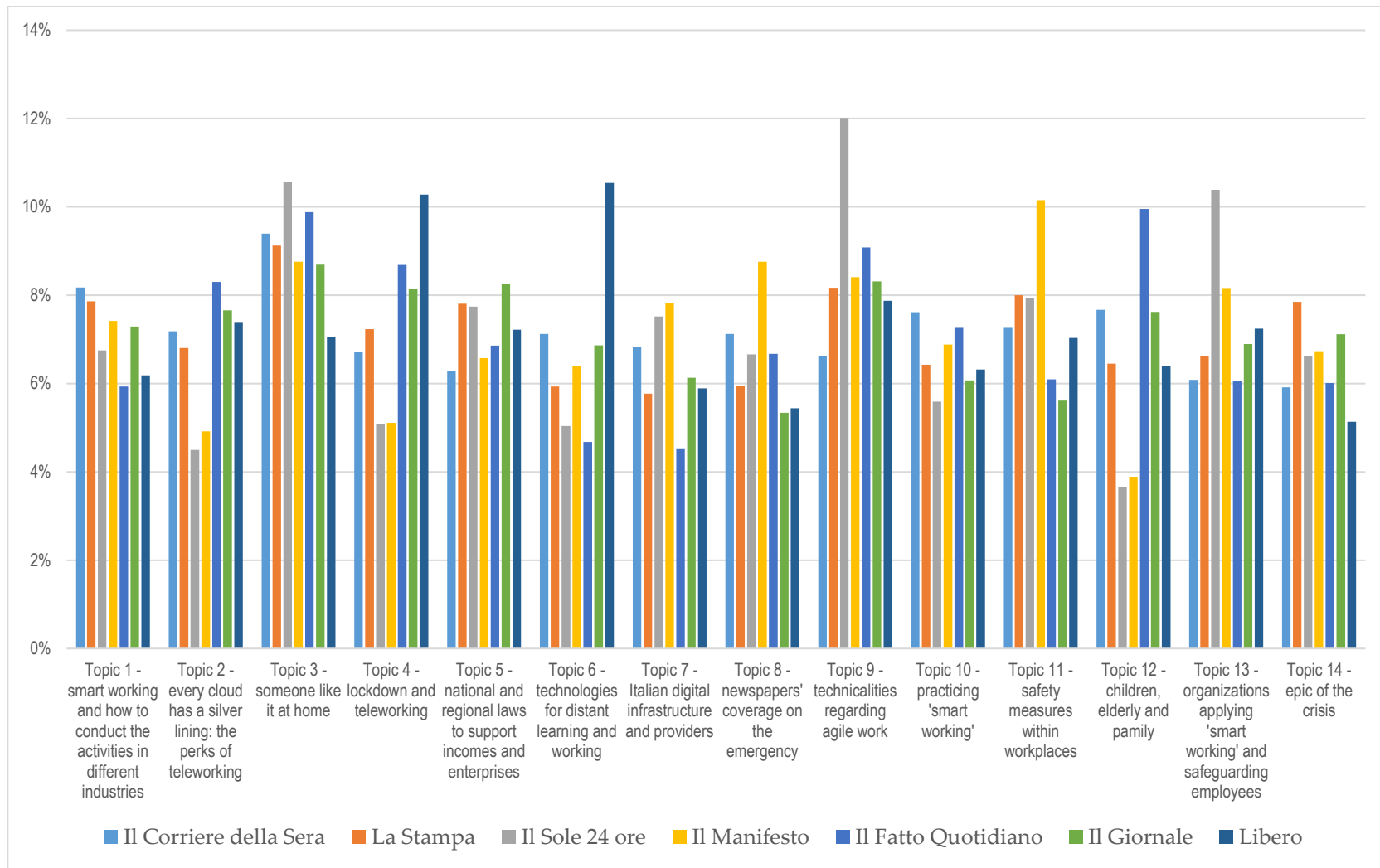


Figure 4.2. Differential usage of topics by different newspapers.

The three populist newspapers are the ones that use most Topic 2, about the positive effects of coronavirus. One article published by *Libero*, in example, emphasises and values that is supposedly gained by parents, as now they can teach kids what they want, selecting (at least to a certain extent) the books that they prefer. Also, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Il Giornale*, and *Libero* are the outlets that use most Topic 4, lockdown and teleworking, which is used mostly to report what happens in the most affected areas. Paragraphs that are composed by this topic are likely to provoke strong emotional reactions. Newspapers least using Topic 4 are *Il Sole 24 Ore*, and *Il Manifesto*. The same pattern regards the usage of Topic 12, children, elderly and the family. *Il Fatto Quotidiano* is the one using more this topic to report struggles within families, but also the other journals exploit this topic. The only exceptions are, once again, *Il Sole 24 Ore* and *Il Manifesto*. The newspaper *Libero* is also heavily relying on Topic 6, technologies for distant learning and working.

The business newspaper in our sample is unsurprisingly the outlet that most relies on topics 9 and 13. The former reports technicalities to apply 'agile working' and, as we noted, can be described as a technical topic. The latter is used by enterprises to deal with safety within plants and offices, and often reports the entrepreneurial point of view in dealing with 'smart working'. Conversely, it is reassuring to note that the connected topic 11, which tackles safety on workplaces and measure to prevent the spread of the virus as debated between unions and entrepreneurs is mainly used by the left-wing newspapers *Il Manifesto*. This newspaper is also the one that used more Topic 8, that reflects on newspapers' coverage of the emergency.

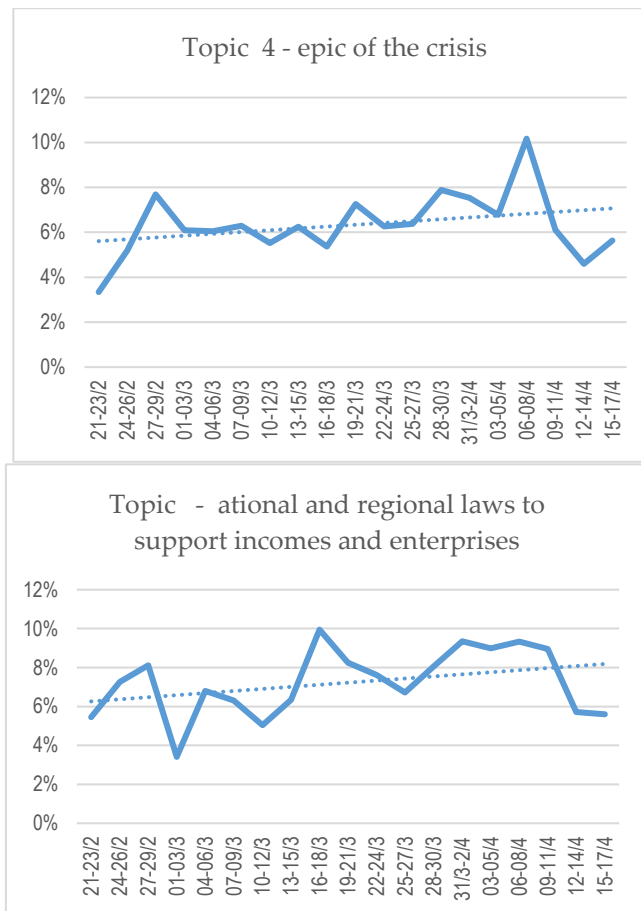
The quality newspapers present a more balanced use of all topics. *Il Corriere della Sera* is the most important user only of Topic 1, smart working and how to conduct the activities in different industries, and Topic 10, practising 'smart working'. These topics are quite neutral ones, related to news section. *La Stampa* is the most important user of Topic 14, epic of the crisis.

The remaining topic 7, Italian digital infrastructure and providers, is used especially by *Il Sole 24 Ore* and *Il Manifesto*, which often use the same topics. Topic 3, someone likes it at home, is used by all newspapers (and especially *Il Sole*), with the exception of *Libero*. Finally, Topic 5, national and regional laws to support incomes and enterprises, is used in a balanced way by all newspapers.

The following Figure 4.3, Figure 4.4 and Figure 4.5 report the trends over time for the usage of all topics. In particular, in Figure 4.3, we see the graphs for the topics, which trend increases over time; then, in Figure 4.4, we have the graphs for topics, which usage has several peaks, but a trend cannot be understood. Finally, in Figure 4.5, we see the graphs for all those topics which average usage by newspapers decreases over time. For each graph, the horizontal axis reports the dates in group of three days: we did not calculate the daily average use to avoid random peaks. The vertical axis reports the average usage of the topic. Also, a line depicting the trend was added.

Five topics were increasingly used during the two months under analysis: as reported in Figure 4.3, these topics are topics number 14, 5, 1, 11, and 7. Topic 14 refers to the epic of the crisis, and presents reflections which content goes beyond the daily chronicle. In the case of this topic, teleworking is referred to in reference to wider societal changes, and the increasing use of this topics can be explained by considering that the more the pandemic became the new

normal, the broader considerations are needed to take the place of the daily narration regarding death and the spread of the coronavirus. Topic 5 presents some peaks corresponding to the moments when new laws or decrees were discussed or issued. This topic is used especially in the second half of March: the initial stage of the pandemic was over, the first safety measures were already taken (lockdown, closures), and it was necessary to draft legislations regarding teleworking. In April, the use of this topic decreases, as teleworking is already in place. Topics 1 and 11, which deal with how to keep industries running and how to apply safety measures within workplaces have a similar trend: Both are very relevant during the first days of pandemic, when the discussion was about the possible need to close plants and offices, and the spread of the virus. Then, after the first closures, they have a peak around the 10th of March, when an agreement between Unions and the government was signed, to define safety measures for the offices and plants. Both topics, then, become more relevant in April, when the situation was improving, and it was possible to deal with work and teleworking looking at the future. Topic 7, which is about Italian digital infrastructure and providers, clearly increases its usage over time: data backbone were not designed for bearing the increased usage due to this pandemic, and the new need to consider teleworking as a (possible) normality for several months unsurprisingly increased the public debate around infrastructures.



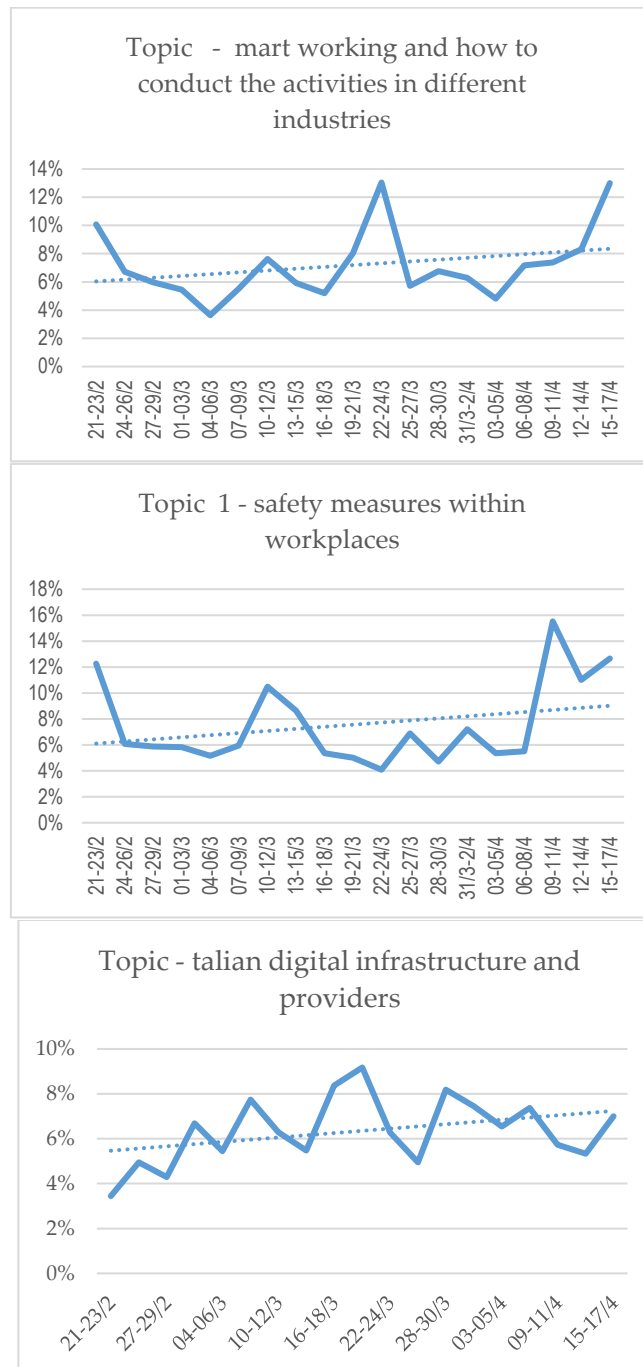
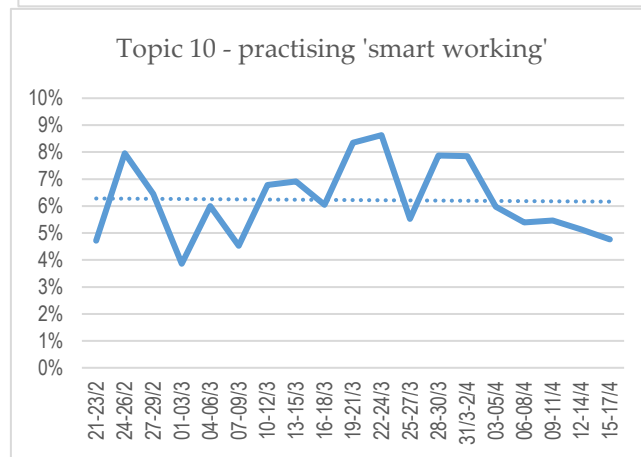
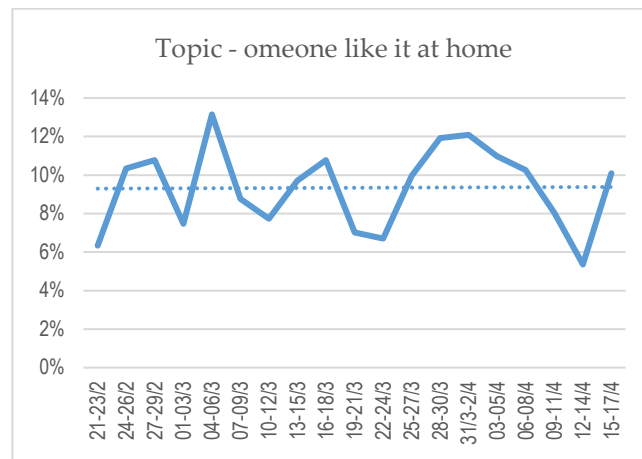


Figure 4.3. Trend over times for topics with increasing usage.

Figure 4.4 reports the graph of four topics with no clear pattern over time. Topic 3, someone likes it at home, and topic 10, practising ‘smart working’, report experiences of teleworking, from the point of view of the employee, or of the employers. We can imagine that these two topics were used to fill up newspapers’ pages when no other more relevant news needed space, as articles composed by these topics are not related to any specific event during the lockdown. For a similar reason, Topic 8, newspapers’ coverage of the emergency, has an horizontal trend. the case of Topic 13 is more interesting, as this topic experiences a clear peak

during 12-14th of April. Indeed, several categories of shops were allowed to open again on April 14th (two days after Easter): bookshops, small shops selling several products, hypermarkets, and so on. When these shops were allowed to re-open, a heated debate was raised both regarding safety measures both for clients and for employees, In this context, teleworking was mentioned to reflect on the differences between those that were allowed to work safely from home, and those who had to work and meet other people, thus being in a dangerous position.



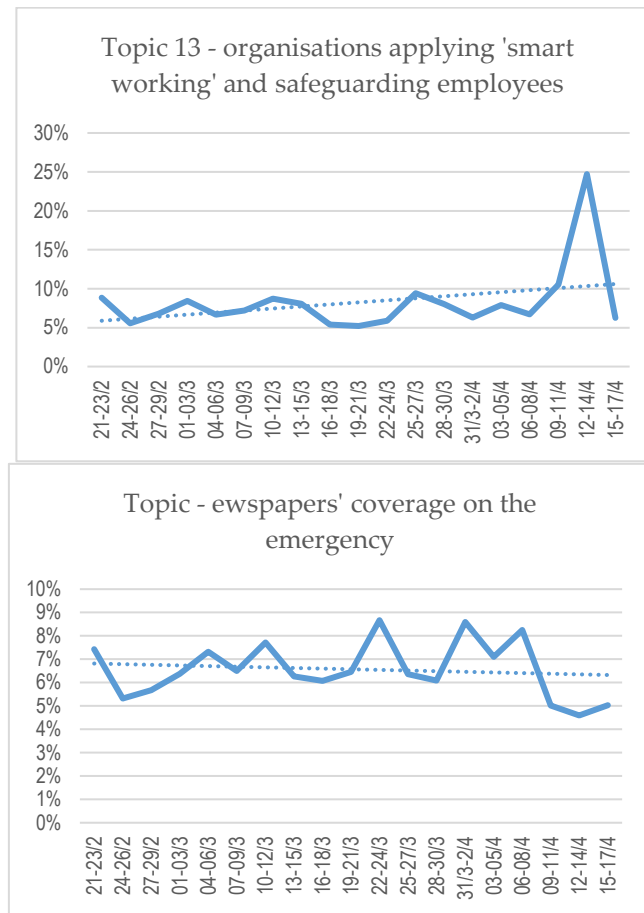
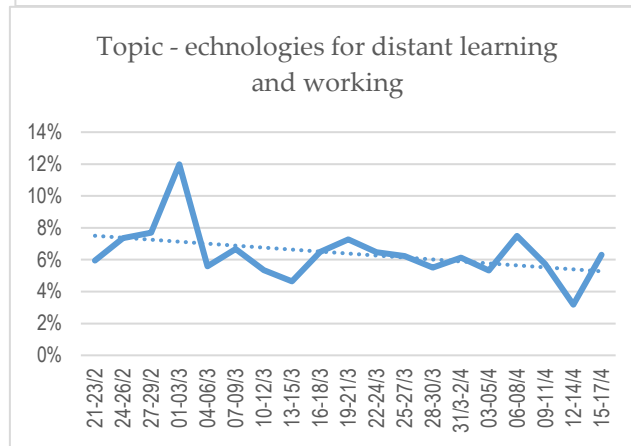
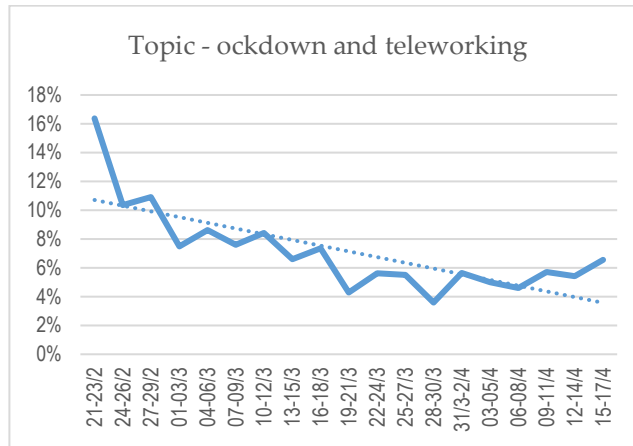


Figure 4.4. Usage over times for topics with no clear trend.

Figure 4.5 reports the trends for the topics which usage decreased over time. Topic 4 is a very relevant case, as it was used to deal with chronicles from the most affected zones. Luckily, it was used less and less over time. Topic 6 was used to discuss technologies for teleworking and for distance teaching: this topic was truly relevant at the beginning of the pandemic. Then technical solutions were chosen, and they were institutionalised, therefore the debate became less heated. A similar reason can explain the trend of topic 2: at the beginning of the pandemic, the idea of highlighting the positive sides of the situation was maybe sensationalist, but at the same time had a positive optimistic aim. Nonetheless, during the pandemic, it became probably less important to convince people of the perks of their situation: if they were experiencing the positive sides, it was meaningless. If they were not experiencing them, it was counterproductive. Topic 9, technicalities regarding agile working, has a peak in correspondence with the issue of a new law or decree, but overall tends to decrease its importance, as the teleworking became institutionalised. Finally, topic 12 deals with teleworking in reference to children, elderly, and family. The school and the kids were never at the centre of the Italian public debate, during this pandemic, and this topic shows that the debate on how teleworking impacts families makes no exception, sadly.



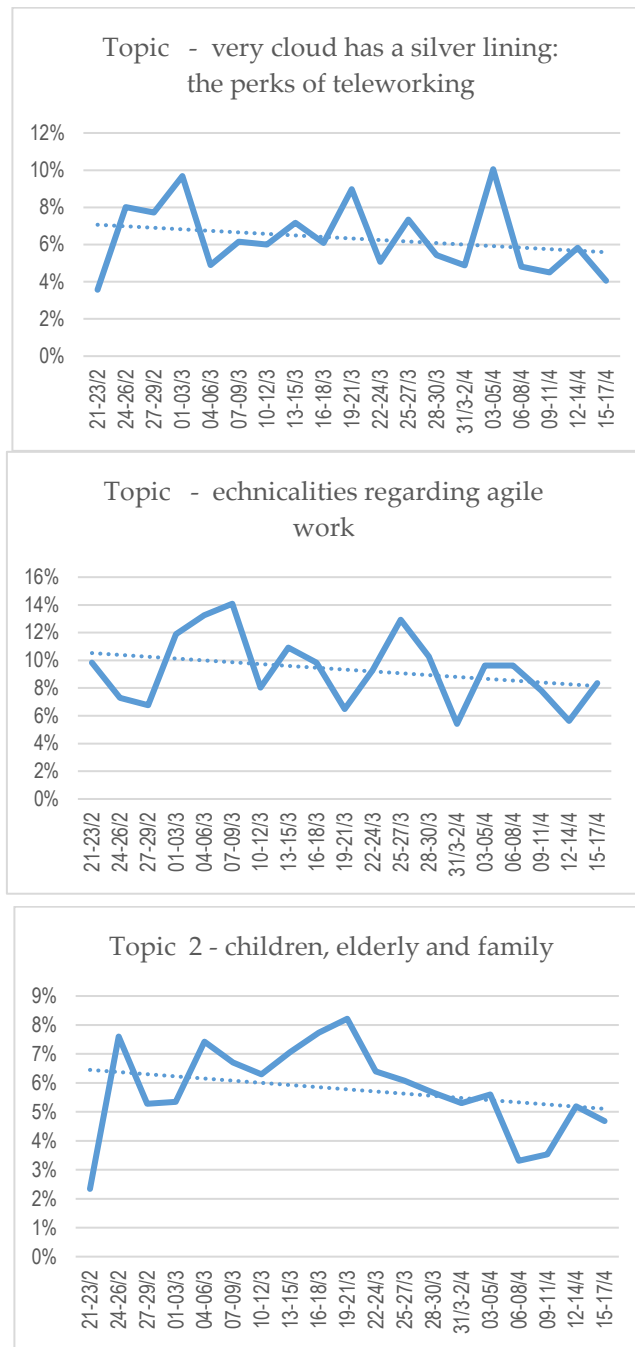


Figure 4.5. Trend over times for topics with decreasing usage.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we analysed Italian newspapers published during the first two months of the COVID-19 pandemic to inquiry how teleworking was framed (Goffmann, 1974) in the discursive space (Maguire and Hardy, 2008) composed by Italian newspapers. We used Topic Modelling (Blei, 2003; DiMaggio *et al.*, 2013) and we identified 14 topics representing discourses around teleworking. Topic 2 and Topic 3 describe the advantages of teleworking,

in terms of perceived improvements in productivity and in the work-life balance, thus providing employees with more time and flexibility. By doing so, these topics connect to the organisational debate connecting teleworking and subsequent quality of life (Kelliher and Anderson, 2008). Topic 10 positions itself in the same area of meaning, yet it emphasises also the negative outcomes of working from home, such as not having a place to work, and the negative interaction of work-related stress and family-related stress. Finally, topic 12 reports the extreme pressures on households that had to balance work and the care for kids and elderly people: the former apparently safer from the disease, but in a continuous need of care, as schools were closed; the latter as the social class which is more in danger for coronavirus. In terms of literature, these topics recall Korac-Kakabades and colleagues' work (2017). While organisational literature deals with how to introduce and manage teleworking based on a strategic – or at least planned – decision, and on the societal effects of such a decision (i.e., Nilles, 1998; Jackson and Van der Wielen, 1998; Jackson, 1999), topics elicited in our corpus show how emergent and emergency related is COVID-19 teleworking: topic 1 deals with the fundamental role played by teleworking for avoiding the complete closure of organisations, while topics 11 and 13 reports decisions and procedure adopted by enterprises (topic 13), also after discussing with unions (11) to guarantee the safety of workers. The other topics elicited disentangle teleworking related issues in a tangible and pragmatic way, if compared to literature: topic 5 deals with laws and decrees regarding teleworking, topic 9 deals with procedures that must be put in place by enterprises, topic 6 with software and education that are needed by employees, and topic 7 deals with Italian technological infrastructure. Finally, two topic deal with the narration of the events, more than with the concept of teleworking: topic 4 regards the events in the regions where the pandemic was stronger, while topic 8 is about the journalistic account of the epidemic. Finally, topic 14 frames teleworking within societal changes (14). Overall, if we compare these topics with the literature regarding teleworking, we see that the concept of working from home that emerges from the Italian discursive space is completely emergency related: nothing is planned. Therefore, also the negative effects of teleworking cannot be addressed in terms of favourite or disliked institutional arrangements, but under the framing of how to cope with the unwanted extreme situation.

This former consideration is very relevant when addressing the institutionalisation of the concept of teleworking during COVID-19 pandemic: we identified two distinct phases in such an institutionalisation process. We called the first step of institutionalisation *dealing with the exceptional*, as it is characterised by those topics that are prevalent at the beginning of the period under scrutiny, and which usage decreases afterwards. Taken together, these topics depict a new world, where we must define tools (Topic 6 - technologies for distant learning and working) and processes (Topic 9 – technicalities regarding agile work) for working from home, while at the same time dealing with the need of a work-life balance which respects the exceptional needs of these times (Topic 12 – children, elderly and family). While journalistic chronicles of the terrible events depict the changes as inevitable (Topic 4 – lockdown and teleworking), in the first period also the narrative of how the new arrangement can have positive effects on productivity, personal well-being and work-life balance makes its way to the newspapers (Topic 2 – every cloud has silver lining: the perks of teleworking).

The second step in the institutionalisation process is characterised by those topics which usage increases over time. We called the second phase *the new normal* as, taken together, these topics describe that the initial phase of the emergency is over, and that some changes are here to remain. Therefore, we must look ahead, and the first step is including coronavirus as one of the societal emergencies that we must face (Topic 14 – epic of the crisis). We must thus prepare for a new institutional arrangement that will not exhaust its effects in the short term. We must tackle the infrastructural weakness of the country (Topic 7 – Italian digital infrastructure and providers), define new shared rules for safe employment (Topic 11 – safety measures within workplaces), and support enterprises in the transition (Topic 5 - national and regional laws to support incomes and enterprises). More in general, different industries will have to adapt to the new normality (Topic 1 - smart working and how to conduct the activities in different industries).

Four topics represent underlying themes, that are not characterising any of the two institutionalisation phases. These topics report positive stances over teleworking (Topic 3 – someone likes it at home), or even ambiguous ones (Topic 10 – practising ‘smart working’); nonetheless, these experiences are narrated bottom-up, as they are not depending on laws, decrees, or agreements between workers’ and employers, so they are an expression of the experiences of the workers during the whole period under analysis. For the same reason, also the experiences of individual firms are reported (Topic 13 – organisations applying ‘smart working’ and safeguarding employees). Finally, also the journalistic jargon, which is used to describe the evolution of the pandemic, is used constantly throughout the whole period (Topic 8 – newspapers’ coverage of the emergency). Overall, teleworking gets institutionalised in a positive way, as an effective mean to counter the pandemic. Indeed, laws DPCM 26th April 2020, Decree-Law 18, 17th March 2020, and Decree-Law n.34, 19th May 2020 extended the possibilities for introducing teleworking within private enterprises and Public Administration. While we do not know how much of the changes that were put in place during the pandemic will remain afterwards, we can now safely say that the concept of teleworking was introduced in the public sphere without encountering strong critics, and was apparently accepted by all actors involved as a positive instrument. Of course, such positive acceptance was due to the exceptional circumstances, but in any case teleworking is now institutionalised as a legitimate way of working.

A limitation of our study regards our database: although it is quite big, it would be interesting to extend to research to a wider period of time⁹, or to include regional newspapers to account for the impact of teleworking in regions differently affected by the pandemic. Also, as COVID-19 is impacting the whole world, future research can explore the way in which teleworking was framed in different countries, within different cultural milieus.

Keywords

COVID-19, teleworking, smart working, flexible working, topic modelling, content analysis

⁹ We cannot do that, as the repository we used for downloading data was discontinued.

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