

The 'new' social relations of digital technology and the future of work

Rationale

There is increasing interest in the effects of digital technology on work, although opinion has been sharply divided over just how transformational digitalisation will prove. Utopian visions see in digital technologies the potential for post capitalist futures, with more liberating options for the meaning of work (e.g. Bastani, 2019; Mason, 2015), while dystopian visions predict a bleaker future, where robots and automated processes led to mass casualization, surveillance or even human irrelevance (e.g. Ford, 2015). In contrast, much academic analysis has tended to tread a more cautious path, noting that digital technologies are most likely to impact on the nature and quality of work rather than replacing it per se (e.g. Thompson and Briken, 2017; Spencer, 2018). Nevertheless, the future is difficult to predict, and the likely effects of different dimensions of digitalisation are still to be fully understood. The scope of the impact of digital technologies, the number of contrasting pronouncements about what they mean for the future, and the volume of new evidence that is emerging, all present researchers with significant empirical and theoretical challenges in understanding its impact on the world of work, and differentiating between radical and incremental change.

Technology is not, of course, just a factor to be input into production processes, free from the wider dynamics that surround the world of work. How technologies develop, the forms they take and their manner of implementation (or not) into specific workplaces are all shaped by wider capitalist social relations. It is thus essential to maintain a sharp focus on the agency of employers, state actors, workers and representative bodies in analysing digital technology. As Baldry (2011) notes, in an era of weakened trade unions, the introduction of new technology often coincides with the introduction of new management methods and new forms of work organisation. Moreover, different forms of capital- from venture capital, state capital, to more "impatient" forms of financialised capital- have different imperatives and orientations which alter their relationship with technological development. Likewise, workers are rarely powerless in the face of managerially-imposed technology and their collective agency also guides its implementation.

New technologies of work thus arrive enmeshed in managerial systems and are shaped by different, often conflicting, imperatives. These coinciding dynamics have to be disentangled if we are to fully grasp the specific impact of technology. The aim of this special issue is to put social relations back at the heart of our analysis, at a moment when mainstream discourse on digital technologies at work is in danger of being dominated by determinist and managerialist claims (or fantasies) about the transformative or disruptive capacities of these technologies.

New Technology, Work and Employment has a long-standing record of critiquing attempts to sever technology from social forces, repeatedly emphasising the social relations in which technological change is embedded (Howcroft and Taylor, 2014). The aim of this special issue is to put social relations back at the heart of our understanding of digital technologies by asking: **how does the agency of actors within the labour-capital relationship drive, reshape, and even limit, the development and dissemination of new technologies?** In this question, we hope to develop accounts of the impact of digital technology on work that avoids the incipient dangers of technological determinism, and

which go beyond the persistent but overly dichotomised debate between technological utopias and dystopias.

Objectives

We seek papers that explicitly place the social dynamics of the capitalist workplace at the heart of understanding digital technology. As such we centralise the following objectives:

1. Theoretical papers which make a new and innovative intellectual contribution to our understanding of the relationship between technological change and social forces in the workplace. While there is no shortage of critiques of technological determinism, what does it mean to go beyond this? What kind of theories and concepts can help us to strike a balance between over-inflating, and unduly dismissing, the effects of technology?
2. Direct critical engagement with the claims associated with the latest wave of digital technologies, such as platforms, big data and data analytics, and AI. Interrogating the theories that claim digitalization brings about a revolution in economic and social relations at work, including those relating to the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2016), the second machine age (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014) and Industrie 4.0.
3. Empirical work that directly examines the actors and interests which shape the development and dissemination of digital technologies at work. This could include a focus on how different "varieties of capital" (Lee, 2017) interact with digital technologies, including an interest in financialisation, venture capital, and the role of the state. It may also include a focus on evolving forms of management, and the extent to which new managerial tools such as people analytics constitute incremental or radical change.
4. Examination of the relationship between digitalization and labour, including a critical engagement with claims that associate digitalization with the limitless casualisation or surveillance of the worker. What powers do workers have to resist or reshape the implementation of digital technologies? Where digital technologies do affect workers' conditions and bargaining power, how do these changes interact with long-entrenched inequalities on the basis of race and gender? Are new forms of representation and agency emerging to advance and potentially protect the interests of workers in the context of digitally disrupted labour markets and workplaces?
5. Studies that place the contemporary challenges of digital transformation within a more historical context. There has been debate about the extent to which the current wave of digital transformation is any more radical than periods of rapid innovation in the past. While some commentators point to the pace of contemporary technological change, others assert that there have been more profound periods of change historically. What lessons can be learnt from the past in terms of the causal dynamics between social relations at work and the potential outcomes of technological innovation?

Submission guidelines

Please read carefully the aims and scope of the journal: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/1468005x/homepage/productinformation.html>.

Details on all aspects of the submission process can be found at the following link: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/1468005x/homepage/forauthors.html>

Timeline

Submission of Papers: 30th September 2020

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