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PROTEST MOVEMENTS ON LINKEDIN AS SPACE FOR CHALLENGING SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES

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Introduction

This paper aims to reflect on how the transformation of LinkedIn into an online environment from which are carried out critiques and questionings about the labor market, management practices, and work relations in Brazil, allows to challenge of sociotechnical imaginaries (Silva, 2020) about the relationship with the platform.

LinkedIn was launched in 2003 as a recruiting platform for job seekers and companies looking for professionals. With the dissemination of content production practices, users from different professional areas, have begun to problematize, inside and outside the platform, ready-made formulas and posts with "fictitious" and "romanticized" narratives, enunciated by coaches, CEOs, entrepreneurs, and gurus present in the corporate social network.

The emergence of protest movements, posts aimed at criticizing circulating content (Hine, 2015) on the platform, reveals that, although certain technological configurations impose themselves on users, digital platforms such as LinkedIn are not unique, universal, or deterministic. They are multiple and can have their ontological and epistemological assumptions questioned by different cosmotechniques (Hui, 2020).

The article framework is in the ontological turn movement, proposed by authors such as Hui (2020) and Latour (2019), by addressing technology as one of the component elements of human existence. According to this approach, humans constitute technologies, and these, in turn, act as mediators in the human relationship with the world, participating in the definition of realities and subjectivities.

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Technologies are not neutral but configured in specific socio-historical and ideological contexts. As well as sociotechnical imaginaries, references or lenses for interpreting actions and thinking about the present and future relationships between humans and technologies (Silva, 2020), like what LinkedIn is for and how it can be used. In this sense, we can produce new technological futures (Hui, 2020) from established relationships and the development of new technologies.

Following this approach, this article addresses the protest movements on LinkedIn as a starting point for challenging pre-existing sociotechnical imaginaries about the platform, to boost societal change and new technological futures. According to Hui (2020), the ontological turn movement must further address the technical issue as a dimension of human existence and be capable of establishing global collaboration.

Methodological Framework

To capture and describe movements tensioning the use of LinkedIn, beyond an online resume and venue for celebrating accomplishments and skills and therefore, the repositioning of users with the technology, the methodological strategy adopted to conduct this study was digital ethnography.

According to Hine (2015), it consists of adapting the traditional ethnographic method, characterized by employing strategies such as prolonged field observations and in-depth interviews to understand cultures, local practices, and representations, to the online environment. According to this approach, the internet does not have transcendental effects and therefore, has to be studied in situated practices, specific everyday engagements, and emerging circumstances from the researcher's immersion in the field (Hine, 2015).

Since digital ethnography is about following connections that are not circumscribed to a specific locality, the study was conducted from news reports on LinkedIn and observations of posts and discussions on LinkedIn and among members of a blog and a Facebook group, both of which are Brazilian and gathered to conduct critiques of the content circulating on LinkedIn. Data collection took place between March 2021 and February 2022 by recording data in a field diary. For confidentiality reasons, this paper will not disclose the names of the persons, the blog, and the group. Data presented in the article are part of ongoing research.

The following categories arose from the collected data: (1) criticisms addressed to the platform and (2) criticisms addressed to circulating content and users. These remarks provided input to identifying alternatives and suggestions for changing LinkedIn itself, the labor market, management practices, and work relations.

Main findings

Preliminary findings suggest that users are objecting to the content circulating on LinkedIn more frequently. They tend to question the purpose of interlocutors and the veracity of the content disclosed. At first, the platform itself seems to be the target of criticism. However, most users question the use that is made of LinkedIn. Such as the

transformation of any event into a great learning experience, the exaltation of precarious situations or the fulfillment of basic workers' rights, the concealment of real motives and feelings associated with layoffs, and the repetition of clearly plagiarized stories as if they were personal experiences.

The fact that users have to use their real names to join and make comments on LinkedIn is one of the factors that lead to the embarrassment of protesting attitudes. Users who understand they depend on the platform for job search and that recruiters monitor online actions on LinkedIn for recruiting decisions, avoid expressing their opinions freely, using the private Facebook groups as a space to make their criticisms. In these groups, there are sometimes incentives for users to report or comment on posts that refer to work-related discrimination or abuse, to support victims and expose offenders.

Some users question the circulating content from LinkedIn itself. They use the platform, its algorithms, and its connections strategically, to raise awareness, and expose and question inappropriate work situations. Such as those that make workers prone to psychic illness and that refer to the precarization of work relations. Generally, these users consider themselves to be in a privileged and somewhat protected position to express their opinions freely. Therefore, they assume the role of agents of complaint and/or change.

Implications

Preliminary findings of the research suggest that the blog and the private group for discussion of the content circulating on LinkedIn, both present on Facebook, act as a space of catharsis and mental health support for its members, bringing them together around their criticism, victim support, and offender exposure. The movement of questioning from the platform itself, in particular, seeks to appropriate the technological affordances and constraints imposed by LinkedIn to make it a space for awareness, problematization, and promotion of societal change.

Protest movements are broad and not restricted to a specific professional segment. By establishing new uses for the platform, unrelated to the commercial objectives for which it was created, these movements give conditions for the constitution of new sociotechnical imaginaries about the platform itself, beyond an online resume and venue for celebrating accomplishments and skills and also, to rethink work relations.

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