NEGOTIATING THE DIGITIZATION OF WORK: NEW CHALLENGES FOR EMPLOYEES AND WORKERS' COUNCILS FROM THE USE OF SOCIAL COLLABORATION PLATFORMS

Tanja Carstensen
LMU Munich, Department of Sociology

The "digitization of work" has become a vibrant topic in recent years. This umbrella term embraces different technologies, different fields of application, and different transformations: the use of digitally controlled robots and smart technologies in industrial production (in German, "Industrie 4.0"); the use of digital and mobile devices, which produces questions of permanent availability and changing boundaries between the job and other areas of life; and crowdwork as a new way of (precarious) job placement based on online platforms.

Additionally, the use of social media platforms within companies for internal communication and collaboration is an increasingly important part of the digitization of work. Companies implement such social networks to improve project organization and knowledge management, to avoid duplication of effort by increased transparency, to improve access to existing competencies within the company, and to support the development of new ideas and innovations. This so-called "Social Collaboration" or "Enterprise 2.0" promises better teamwork which is more focused and network-like – company-wide, world-wide, and over different divisions and locations. These ideas are also connected with a change of corporate philosophies and cultures: openness, transparency, flat hierarchies, networking, sharing, and participation become new important leitmotifs for employees.

While employers' expectations regarding social media platforms have been broadly discussed, their effects on the working conditions of employees have, as of yet, been neglected in research. However, the use and design of social media platforms is often reason for a re-negotiation of work relations as well as implicit and explicit rules of collaboration. This paper therefore investigates the negotiations on use and design between employers, employees, and workers' councils – or in other words, rule-making and rule-breaking—and follows the questions:

- which issues are contested by implementing and using a social media platform,

- which (new) demands are employees confronted with by the use of social media,
- how do employers, employees and workers' councils deal with these challenges, plus what kind of usage and working conditions do they negotiate and develop, and
- how far do employees adopt, modify or resist the company's social media rules?

To do this, the paper starts with short theoretical remarks on the relation of technology and work, as well as sociological considerations on the transformation of work and its challenges for individuals. Against this background of a theoretical understanding of an interrelatedness of social and technological change, the implementation of social media, its negotiations, and the transformations of work have to be considered as interwoven.

The empirical results of this paper are grounded on the research project "Work 2.0. New demands on employees and their workers' councils from the use of social media". On the basis of case studies in three large companies (automotive supplier, telecommunication and electronic engineering), including 47 interviews with a range of different employees (working in HR, office administration, IT, communication, engineering, call centers, workers' councils, etc.), critical issues, old and new demands, and different usage patterns were investigated. The data were collected in companies that implemented social collaboration platforms several years ago; the workers' councils were involved in the implementation process in each of the companies (Carstensen 2016).

Technology and Work

In the last few years, fundamental transformations have occurred in the spheres of work. The German sociology of work characterizes the transformations of work with keywords as "de-limination", "subjectivation", and "precarization" and states the arrival of new challenges for working individuals (Kratzer 2003; Voß & Pongratz 2003; Jürgens 2006). These transformations make practices such as flexibility, self-organization, self-responsibility, and self-management into everyday actions.

Technology has been a major part of sociological research on work for a long time. The mechanization of society can always be considered a materialization of the existing relations of production. Technology has three primary functions within the work process: labor savings, efficiency improvement, and process control (Pfeiffer 2010). At the same time, the use of technology not only saves labor and makes it easier and more controllable, but also has ambiguous consequences. New technologies often lead to an increase of work, and to new problems and requirements. The relation between technology and work is shaped by a range of contradictions (Baukrowitz, Boes & Schmiede 2001; Kern & Schumann 1970).

Currently, it is obvious that the internet, and especially social media, demand similar practices as the transformations of work do: self-management, self-presentation, networking etc. These technologies support, ease and increase the requirements of the changing working world and can be considered the material side of the transformation of work (Carstensen 2012).

Contested Issues

The results of the study show that in contrast to employers' euphoric expectations, a significant proportion of the members of the workers' councils as well as of the employees have many concerns regarding the use of social media. The interviews show that specific issues are framed in opposite ways: transparency is identified as surveillance and control, the demand to share knowledge is perceived as dangerous in competitive working environments, and active participation in the platforms is framed as additional work instead of a reduction of it. The benefit of these platforms is often not obvious. Workers' councils therefore, for example, negotiate the turning off of specific functions which could record employees' working behavior and try to enforce the voluntariness of use. Furthermore, it can be shown that the way social media is used and negotiated gives a great deal of information about existing corporate culture and rules; it does not only inform us about the applications of technology.

New demands and challenges from the use of social media

From the employee perspective, the case studies also show that these new technologies challenge working individuals, intensify existing demands and make new, and in particular, very informal ones: (1) Social media use requires significant competences of *self-management*, e.g., time management, information management, boundary management, the handling of expectations of permanent availability, multitasking, etc. (2) The interviewees describe that the use of social media implies having the "right attitude," which in particular means *openness for change*. It seems to be important that you "want" to use it, that you "develop passion" for it, and that you "engage yourself" with social media. (3) Another important demand is the willingness to *become public*. Employees are required to present themselves in the public sphere of the company, to discuss publicly, to publish their work and ideas, and to position themselves with opinions and assessments. It becomes obvious in the interviews that this is overwhelming for many employees. (4) The employees describe that it is a time investment to understand how social media work and what it means to post, to share, to link, to comment or to like something. You have to use the right style of communication, and the perfect conversational tone. More than ever, a "*social*", collaborative employee with the willingness to help, to give answers, and to share knowledge is required.

At the same time, the case studies show a wide range of usage patterns which depend on different categories: job positions, qualifications, age, attitudes towards technology, internet usage, data security and privacy, level of autonomy at work, etc. We can find non-use alongside passionate or pragmatic use. Employees do not accept the new demands without resistance. They defend their boundaries and privacy, resist against transformations, develop their own ways of using social media and negotiate their employers' expectations and requests.

New Rules for Work?

Although we can observe a lot of resistance, refusal, lack of interest, and cautious use, there are indicators that social media platforms and digital technologies that will follow will, in the long term, fundamentally change working conditions and in doing so, set new rules for work and collaboration. The paper ends with a short outlook on developments which can already be recognized in the case studies. Aside from new forms of participation, productive collaboration, and networking, as well as reduced workload as advantages, social media platforms in companies could support and establish:

- a new level of utilization of subjective potentials and access to the entire personality of working individuals
- training in a new way of working: self-disciplined, transparent, and "social" (for a similar analysis, see Reichert 2009)
- additional burdens, exhaustion, and health risks caused by increased work load, new demands, permanent availability, and multitasking
- the habituation of transparency, data collection and storage, surveillance, and control
- a digital divide within the workforce due to different competencies, attitudes, and opportunities to use the social media platforms, which as a consequence, creates divergent ways of working and an increasing social inequality within the staff
- the dissolution of company boundaries by opening its platforms to customers and freelancers—which could lead to the liquidization of work and an increase in precarious crowdwork.

References

Baukrowitz, A./Boes, A./Schmiede, R. (2001): Die Entwicklung von Arbeit aus der Perspektive ihrer Informatisierung. In Matuschek, I./Henninger, A./Kleemann, F. (Eds.): Neue Medien im Arbeitsalltag, Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag: 217–235.

Carstensen, T. (2012): Die Technologien des 'Arbeitskraftunternehmers'. Zur Bedeutung des Web 2.0 für den Wandel der (Erwerbs-)Arbeit. In: Soeffner, H.-G. (Ed.): Transnationale Vergesellschaftungen: Verhandlungen des 35. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in Frankfurt a.M. 2010, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, CD-ROM, 1–13.

Carstensen, T. (2016): Social Media in der Arbeitswelt, Bielefeld: transcript.

Jürgens, K. (2006): Arbeits- und Lebenskraft. Reproduktion als eigensinnige Grenzziehung, Wiesbaden: VS.

Kern, H./Schumann, M. (1970): Industriearbeit und Arbeiterbewußtsein. Eine empirische Untersuchung über den Einfluß der aktuellen technischen Entwicklung auf die industrielle Arbeit und das Arbeiterbewußtsein, Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt.

Kratzer, N. (2003): Arbeitskraft in Entgrenzung. Grenzenlose Anforderungen, erweiterte Spielräume, begrenzte Ressourcen, Berlin: edition sigma.

Pfeiffer, S. (2010): Technisierung von Arbeit, in: Böhle, F./Voß, G. G./Wachtler, G. (Hg.): Handbuch Arbeitssoziologie, Wiesbaden: VS, 231–261.

Reichert, R. (2008): Amateure im Netz. Selbstmanagement und Wissenstechnik im Web 2.0, Bielefeld: transcript.

Voß, G. G./Pongratz, H. J. (1998): Der Arbeitskraftunternehmer. Eine neue Grundform der „Ware Arbeitskraft"?, in: Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Jg. 50, H. 1, 131–158.