

LABOURATORY¹: MAKING WORK AND DIGITALIZATION PARTICIPATORY – INSTEAD OF DISCURSIVELY PLAYING THEM OFF AGAINST ONE OTHER²

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ABSTRACT

Digitalization is often thought about only in terms of technical possibilities; the feasibility of its implementation in labor processes and the needs of the latter are given little attention. In our Labouratory, we want to invert this process: to place the focus on the needs of human labor and, with this as point of departure, to ask where and how digitalization can best support and facilitate labor processes.

Keywords: digitalization, digitalized labor, labor processes, participatory research, mixed methods

1. INTRODUCTION: DIGITALIZATION IN LABOR PROCESSES – AND IN DISCOURSES

Digitalization takes place on (at least) two social levels, which appear to have little to do with each other: both (a) in work contexts in firms and action contexts outside of them, and (b) in discourses, which mostly concern a (continuously very near) future. It is striking that not only the contexts – the concrete performance of labor and actions, on the one hand, and statements and texts, on the other – and the points of reference – present and future – are different, but the content too, despite the same name, clearly differs: Firms are cautiously assimilating digital technology and digital solutions are mostly being integrated into existing processes. Neither the organization of future labor and value-creation processes nor the interactions with the supply and demand of human skills and qualifications have, for the most part, been conclusively clarified here (Fuchs, 2014; Pfeiffer and Suphan, 2015). In recent years, research and development budgets have sometimes even declined in firms, and office technology – among other places, in German public health departments – is very often characterized by fax machines more than artificial intelligence.

Explanation is needed for the contrast between this picture and the digital revolution that has been postulated for around a decade now, with its radical, disruptive upheavals in all areas of work and society, including a polarization of the working world and a crumbling of entire occupations and industries (Dengler and Matthes, 2018; Frey and Osborne, 2013). Attempts to reconcile the apparent contradiction by invoking different time references (present and future) do not seem very convincing given the density on the discursive level: The ‘very near’ future of yesterday must long since be the present (or even the past) of today. It thus seems – unsurprisingly – that the digitalization discourse is not only related to facts, but also (and above all) related to interests (Staab and Butollo, 2020).

It seems understandable that a big coaching and consulting scene needs big narratives of social upheaval, in order to monetize its (often dubious) services. It is also not surprising that employers point to the replaceability of human labor to counter demands from the employee side or to negotiate layoffs as technology-induced instead of a conscious decision (Staab and Butollo, 2020). But there is a definitive need for explanation when scholarship adopts this same logic and itself succeeds by excessively spreading the idea of radical breaks and their dramatic consequences, thereby forgetting that innovations are necessarily technical, social, political and economic processes (Erixon and Weigel, 2016). Hence, we want to regard digitalization as a technical, as well as economic, social and political, process that is susceptible to being

¹ The “Labouratory” – using in British spelling of „labor” – is the official name of our lab. It is, in other words, a “labor-atory”, in which, as explained in what follows, we examine digitalization from the point of view of labor processes.

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