Universität Basel

Research Project

Digital alienation and appropriation of work: Experiences of alienation in digital service work

Third-party funded project

Project title Digital alienation and appropriation of work: Experiences of alienation in digital service work
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The digitization of the working world can be understood as a driver of a fundamental structural change in work. Many questions have arisen about the increase of heteronomy when using algorithms, about the loss of work time autonomy, about new forms of work fragmentation, or about changes in social relationships. In order to grasp such problematic developments, current discourse has come to employ the keyword 'alienation' to describe the changes of work in a digital age. The value of such a concept in the context of digital work lies in an exploration of problems that go beyond possible losses of autonomy and include questions such as the loss of meaning in work, changing social relationships in work contexts, as well as changing self-conceptualizations. So far, elaborations on the concept of alienation and its potentials have been mostly limited to social-philosophical works. An empirical analysis of the concept in the field of digital work remains largely absent. This project seeks to remedy this by examining digital alienation in detail, focusing on experiences of alienation and appropriation efforts of workers at various levels of qualification in digital forms of work. Because alienation was mainly investigated in low-skilled fields of industrial work in the past, little is known about the alienation potentials of digital service work. To close this gap, the project examines digital service work in the old and new, digital economy.

The aim of the project is the development of an empirically founded concept of digital alienation in work. A central question is in how far digital work across a number of different occupational groups in the service sector correlates to specific experiences of alienation. This is done by using an innovative form of access to subjective alienation experiences that differs between several levels of experiences of alienation (biographical, body-emotional, practically-acting, critical-evaluative). The study aims at garnering insights into the experiences of employees at different levels of qualification in order to retrace the ways in which alienation potentials in digital work are interpreted and coped with. This will lead to the development of a new, profound definition of digital alienation directly relating to worker experiences.
A qualitative research approach is used in which interviews and group discussions with employees in service work are conducted. It examines highly qualified, qualified and low-skilled employees in the field of service work. By this, the project combines theoretical, methodological and empirical questions of alienation research and aims to reconceptualize alienation as a category of sociology of work. Furthermore, the project aims at combining different approaches to alienation from sociology, psychology and philosophy. These connections allow the concept of alienation to become a useful tool for describing social problems.

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