

Informatized Work and its Socio-Cultural Implications

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Since the diffusion of computers into offices in the 1980s and 1990s our working environment has become more and more influenced by ICT (information and communication technologies). Under these conditions, it is not only the structures of work that are changing. In times of the so-called network society, work has become independent from time and space. It is indisputable that ICT change organizational processes as well as communicational processes and the management of relationships. These developments will be the focus of my presentation. To set a frame around them, I will first briefly introduce some theoretical concepts on virtual and informatized work. Then I will refer to my current study, in which I investigate the relationship between informatized work and the workers' perceptions of time and space. The main part deals with the socio-cultural implications of informatized work and gives a small insight into the preliminary results of the study.

1. Theoretical concepts

Virtual work

Concepts of virtual work deal with IT-networks which enable project-based work that is independent from space and time. This kind of work can also be called 'translocal work', as suggested by Birgit Huber and Gunther Hirschfelder (2004, 11). Examples for such virtual work can be found in the consulting business as well as in the IT and media business (see Huber & Hirschfelder 2004, 11). Enrico Palumbo (2004, 121) contributes the term 'virtual teams'. These are project-based teams whose members work at different locations but cooperate by communicating mainly through ICT.

One of the participants of my study was the leader of such a virtual team. While she sat in Austria, her team was located in the Czech Republic. They were connected to each other all day long via Instant Messenger.

The industrial psychologists Erik Andriessen and Matti Vartiainen have examined mobile and virtual working contexts: According to them, virtual work is challenging working structures for both employees and employers. "The social cohesion (social capital) in organisations may face large gaps when workers are not only geographically distributed, but also have less

fixed contractual relations with companies.” (Andriessen & Vartiainen 2006, 5).

Informatized work

As Frank Kleemann and Ingo Matuschek (2001, 262) propose, informatized work is characterized by the fact that the processing of information is the main subject of work. This kind of information work is conducted with ICT. A prominent example might be call centres, where information is spread via digital telephony and where computers control the communication.

According to Andreas Boes and Sabine Pfeiffer (2006, 21) informatization is a key factor of the current transformation of work. This change is marked by the following characteristics:

- With the use of the Internet, a new area of action is emerging that refers to all areas of life. This area of action is called sphere of information.
- Informatization is producing new structures of space and time.
- Enterprises are both actors of rationalizing processes and simultaneously objects thereof, because they are part of global power structures.
- The workers develop new literacies in order to cope with the challenges of informatization. (See Boes & Pfeiffer 2006, 20-21).

Baukowitz, Boes & Schmiede (2001, 220) state that the informatization of work corresponds to capitalist structures of production. That is why they speak of an “informational capitalism” (ibid., 224, translated from German by the author). If you think of the global finance market, this is the first field of business to be revolutionized, accelerated and expanded by ICT.

With regard to my definition of informatized work, the two concepts of virtual and informatized work interact with and complement each other.

2. The study

The study I am presenting is titled ‘Work in the dynamics of media, time and space’. Specifically, I am investigating working contexts that are dominated by ICT. This particular research focuses on so called ‘digicom-workers’. These are people who deal with and communicate intensively with digital media in their work environment, e.g. managers, software designers, communication consultants, entrepreneurs or even scientists. The smartphone, iPad and notebook are their virtual offices and their attendants throughout the day. Without digital media their work would often be bereft of purpose. The main questions of my study are:

- What are the influences of ICT use in working contexts?
- How does the use of ICT at work change the workers' perceptions of time and space?
- What socio-cultural implications derive from the extensive ICT use at work?

For the purposes of this paper, my focus is on the third question.

The methodological source of my investigation lies in 20 qualitative interviews with digicom-workers in different working contexts as well as visualizations, carried out and then verbally commented by the workers after each interview. This methodological approach helps to illustrate the subjective meaning systems of these people and to discover new aspects, which did not occur to them during the conversation. Another methodological source is the diary-method, which allowed me to analyze the media use of my interviewees before the interviews took place. And still to be done is a survey in order to expand the results of the investigation to a broader population.

3. Socio-cultural implications of informatized work

The preliminary results of my study show that the use of ICT at work is transforming not only our working conditions and structures, it also influences our communications, our relationships and the relation between private and business spheres. These developments can be classified into three main categories: acceleration, flexibility and subjectification. Each of them have both positive and negative effects. In the following I will explain these categories by using some examples from my study.

Acceleration

In neoliberal working contexts the so called "time-is-money" paradigm is one of the main values. Using ICT at work helps to increase efficiency and, as a consequence, to save money. E.g. a male university professor told me in the interview that he often communicates with his team via video conference although his team members are located two doors down from his office. When he tries to coordinate an appointment with them, it is easier to proceed this way than by going to their offices and speaking to them individually. But efficient solutions like that must not be seen just from one side. As a consequence, the digicom-workers increase their working speed and their amount of communication. More and more is done in less time, and sometimes even in a multitasking way. This is the case, e.g. when several communication channels are open at the same time and have to be answered immediately. This can, in fact, lead to stress as some of my interview partners stated.

Flexibility

ICT enables the digicom-workers to act independently from time and space. That gives them a lot of flexibility, for example the possibility of choosing their preferred working space. One of the participants in my study is an entrepreneur. Her enterprise is located in Austria, but her domicile is in the USA. She currently runs the company mainly via Skype, Team Software and E-Mail. She herself mentions that she could not live in the US without ICT. However, she emphasises that every six or eight weeks she flies to Austria to meet her employees and some of her customers face to face. This shows that the personal level cannot be transmitted exclusively via ICT. The above mentioned flexibility enabled by ICT can also be seen critically, as indeed some of my interviewees do. For a number of them it has already become normal to check E-mails at home before going to bed. Furthermore, the accessibility via smartphone or mobile phone is very often granted nearly anywhere and anytime. For example, a male sales manager mentions that he has to take business telephone calls at home, while he is playing with the kids. But his kids do not understand that although their father is physically at home, he is not really at home for them and they consequently complain. The dislimitation of the private and professional spheres puts him under pressure, and he has to work hard to balance his private and professional life.

Subjectification

The working contexts my interviewees deal with are very often organized on a project basis. There are goals that have to be reached, but the steps that lead to each goal lie within the responsibility of the individual employee. What is decisive is the outcome and not the efforts that lead to the goal. This mode of work implicates the chance of receiving self-affirmation. However, the employees also have to manage all of the processes at their own risk. This trend is called "subjectification" and is, in fact, influenced by ICT. E.g. one of the participants in my study, a female product manager, executes every separate working step on her laptop. There she has installed her personally tailored software, her file structures and her accounts. When she is not able to work, e.g. when she is ill, no one can operate this laptop and continue her work. This once led to the situation that she had to work at home while she was on sick leave.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, informatized work today means that the ubiquitous use of ICT is influencing the way people work and also the way people collaborate and communicate. It opens new possibilities but also establishes new barriers. Looking at the main implications of informatized work, it can be stated that they correspond strongly to neoliberal values. Thus

the preliminary results of my study emphasize the relevance of the so called “informational capitalism“ mentioned by Baukrowitz, Boes & Schmiede (2001, 224).

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