

Work, Identity, and Paradoxes. The Intertwining of New Technologies, Algorithm Logic, and Individual Experiences

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Nowadays, people's everyday experiences in virtual and non-virtual reality overlap. It becomes increasingly apparent that the boundary between what is encountered "offline" and "online" fades away. Referring to Roland Barthes (1977) and Jean Baudrillard (1981), Manuel Castells (2009) notes that all cultural forms of communication are based on the production and consumption of signs. Reflecting on the phenomenon of real virtuality and defining the experiences of virtual reality specific to the present day, Castells (2009:404) emphasizes that "It is a system in which reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make-believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience." In this perspective, the internet as a medium "has become so comprehensive, so diversified, so malleable that it absorbs in the same multimedia text the whole of human experience, past, present, and fu-

ture" (Castells 2009:404). The category of "real virtuality" refers to the merging of virtual worlds, where individuals reside, communicate, and produce content (and/or are recipients of content), with everyday practices they undertake in non-virtual life.¹ In this light, virtually created communities² and relationships, mediated by technology, can have a symbolic impact on individuals' experience of the everyday world. It is recognized that "Cyberspace has its own unwritten rules" (Eshet-Alkalai 2004:102). Digital literacy and an understanding of the "rules" of cyberspace are deeply permeating contemporary individuals' experiences. Technological innovations enable interpersonal communication online, unlimited by time and space, which has significantly influenced and continues to influence the nature of social bonds, conversations, and contemporary communities (e.g., Tapscott 2009; Turkle 2011; Melosik 2016; Drapalska-Grochowicz 2019; Szpunar 2019). Researchers have long pointed to the issue of new technologies permeating the experiences of individuals. Don Tapscott (2009), for example, describes the concept of the "Net generation." He refers to the experiences of individuals who, through their life stories, are immersed in digital worlds. Many studies point out that people born after 1995 were significantly shaped by the internet and social media during adolescence (e.g., Katz et al. 2021). These technological enhancements and digital practices are perceived to influence (especially young) people's cognitive structures, social attitudes, and life orientations. In the experience of the present day,

¹ It is also worth noting the emergence of virtual communities in the computer games world that extend into the outside world to enter the space of real-life interactions.

² Virtual communities are characterized by the fact that "they are not 'unreal,' they work in a different plane of reality. They are interpersonal social networks, most of them based on weak ties, highly diversified and specialized, still able to generate reciprocity and support by the dynamics of sustained interaction" (Castells 2009:389).

"technology is becoming one of the decisive reference points for people in constructing their identities and lives" (Melosik 2016:57 [trans. JW]). In this sense, new technologies are not only a way to share information and produce content on specific topics. They are also a space where people can create and build their identities. Being part of digital reality can affect how people think about themselves, interfering with their personality and identity. Sherry Turkle (1995:267) states that "People who live parallel lives on the screen are nevertheless bound by the desires, pain, and mortality of their physical selves." Digital experiences express a sense of community, albeit ephemeral, but offering individuals channels of communication and spaces for self-expression.

With the next stage of network development, Web 2.0 interactivity, and the emergence of user-generated content, social media became popular. Social media has grown into an integral part of everyday life, with digital content intertwining with the tangible offline world. In this reality, the boundary between the public and private spheres is blurring. One practice that "is undergoing multidirectional changes caused by the global rise in popularity of social media is 'sharing'" (Filipek 2023:134 [trans. JW]). A study on sharing practices in social media shows that its characteristics include "flexibility, conditionality, and ambiguity" (Filipek 2023:151 [trans. JW]). The development of social media has also led to the emergence of an industry of online creators who have exploited and continue to exploit new opportunity structures,³ such as the creation,

³ I understand the concept of "opportunity structures" in reference to Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas and Katarzyna Waniek's (2020:286) considerations, both as: "subjectively experienced (consistent) aspects, components, and institutional arrangements but also as dimensions of the political/institutional systems or environments, which frame activities of individual and collective social actors."

distribution, and monetization of content on social media platforms. Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012) describe contemporary phenomena as the new social operating system of “networked individualism.” The networked individualism expressed in the actions of individuals is a consequence of the transformations resulting from the triple revolution (network, the internet, and mobile in terms of mobile devices). They consider how the transition to networked individualism has blurred the boundaries between personal and public experiences of private matters. They also note that technological developments have strongly encouraged individuals to create and share content digitally. It is advisable to distinguish between internet creators and influencers as two analytical categories. Influencers focus more on their personal brand and growing their audience. Internet creators, on the other hand, emphasize producing high-quality content (Kozinets, Gretzel, and Gambetti 2023). However, in the case of the second category, the relational aspect, inherent in the resonance of the content produced with the audience, is also essential.⁴ At the analytical level, it is still very difficult to fully separate these two categories because the experiences of both types of activities can overlap, especially in the context of content monetization and profits resulting from an increasing audience. Some of the articles released in this issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review* address this topic (see papers by Kaja Kaźmierska, Kamil Łuczaj, and Aleksandra Drączyk), and their authors, with a keen awareness of the research context, clearly specify whom they are writing about in their texts.

Being an internet content creator entails biographical and identity work, which can bring some income

(become paid work). Reflecting on the identity of an individual entangled in digital experiences brings to mind Ralph Turner’s (2006) classic concept of the self in social interaction. The author distinguished between a relatively permanent and usually idealized self-concept based on socially embedded shared values and attitudes, and variable and fleeting, ephemeral self-images that require tailoring to the requirements of the interactional situation each time it occurs (Turner 2006:279). When interpreted in the context of the experiences of individuals involved in new technologies, this theme indicates that (personal) digital content creation is based on identity dilemmas. The resolution of these dilemmas translates into the real status of the creators in and beyond the digital reality. Therefore, identity entangled and revealed through social media algorithms can also experience tensions, fractures, and crises inherent in the biographical experiences of internet content creators. One of the major challenges is balancing the authenticity of one’s message with the creation of content that can easily be monetized. Strategies creators use to balance authenticity and monetization are studied in the context of their dilemmas (Hofstetter and Gollnhofer 2024).⁵ In addition, internet content creators may find it difficult to produce enough new and sufficiently engaging content to keep up with the expectations of their audience. Changing preferences of online content users and dependence on the culture of algorithms and content moderation rules (e.g., Szpunar 2019; Duffy and Meisner 2022) generate experiences of uncertainty and fears about the future of their ac-

⁴ Furthermore, as Crystal Abidin (2016:2) notes, “Emically, influencers often brand themselves as having ‘relatability,’ or the ability to persuade their followers to identify with them.”

⁵ In the mentioned study, researchers analyze five in-depth interviews with mega-creators (content creators with more than one million followers). Referring to the proposed distinction between influencers and content creators mentioned in the text, they note that “As creators are more fundamentally engaged in content creation, they are most likely to be affected by the tension arising from creators’ dilemma” (Hofstetter and Gollnhofer 2024:428).

tions (Dopierała 2024). In this sense, referencing Actor-Network Theory (Latour 1996; 2005), it can be observed that creators treat algorithms as actants, partners in interaction, similar to internet users (Dopierała 2024:13). The entanglement of individuals' everyday lives in virtual and non-virtual reality, and the constant intermingling of the two, can also generate fears—concerning the progressive development of new technologies and technology itself,⁶ especially in the sense of the dependence of individuals' functioning and the content they generate on the efficiency of the technology itself. Being an internet content creator also involves “navigating between different motivations and often conflicting expectations of oneself, the audience, and media and market institutions (as is often the case when working with advertising companies)” (Dopierała 2024:19 [trans. JW]).⁷ Therefore, social media platforms are both a social phenomenon and a specific area of new technologies. They are spaces for expressing individual experiences, forming identities, engaging in interpersonal interactions, and collaborating with various organizations. This system of meanings operates within the technical limitations of new technologies and the constructed (explicit and implicit) rules of social media communities that have been and still are being formed.

Moreover, nowadays, the categories of digital work and digital labor represent broad terms that encompass a variety of technology-focused work practi-

⁶ I discuss yet another perspective on the fear of new technology in a text devoted to the relationship between humans and well-being chatbots. It is anxiety and fear about the feelings of the technology—that it cannot cope and function without the user's presence and their conversations. This dimension of anxiety and fear is directly related to users' concerns for the well-being of the virtual entity (see Wygnańska 2023).

⁷ Importantly, Renata Dopierała, who conducted a mentioned study of the experience of being an internet creator, based her analyses on materials collected as part of the project discussed in this editorial and three articles released in this issue.

es (Fuchs and Sevignani 2013).⁸ Lizzie Richardson (2018:248) stresses that “emergent properties of digital work are ambivalent. The extension of work beyond the formal/institutionalized workplace requires greater intensities of work that might be both affirming and negating.” Researchers argue that working on (and through) digital platforms goes beyond traditional employment relationships, with workers mostly considered entrepreneurs, independent contractors, or independent professionals. In addition, employees are often directed and controlled by technologically automated decision-making systems and algorithms (Waldkirch et al. 2021). Researchers studying the phenomena of the digital workplace and algorithmic management emphasize that “In nearly all categories of logistics jobs, capital expands the complexity of workplace control mechanisms through technological innovation employed to monitor and enforce productivity” (Miszczyński and Pieczka 2024:415). In this employment perspective, the category of employee autonomy deserves attention. It is a very vague concept and only a symbolic resource of the biographical experience of the world of work mediated by digitalization and algorithmization. “The autonomy...deliberate strategy in logistical capitalism, designed not to empower workers, but to shift operational risks and costs onto them, particularly in handling non-routine, interactive tasks” (Miszczyński and Pieczka 2024:427). Researchers point to the illusion of freedom that appeals to the imagination, especially of young people, who increasingly enter the labor market through platform work mediated by new technologies. As a result, the

⁸ The authors point out the need to distinguish between the concepts of digital work and digital labor because of the distinction between the concepts of work and labor. In this perspective: “labor is based on a fourfold alienation of the human being: the alienation from oneself, the alienation from the objects of labor (instruments and objects of labor), and the alienation from the created products” (Fuchs and Sevignani 2013:257).

experience of platform work often pushes platform workers into precarious employment and reinforces systemic inequalities (e.g., Borkin 2019; Polkowska 2019; Muszyński et al. 2022). The emergence of digital platforms and, more broadly, the phenomenon of the app-work and platform economy can be interpreted both as a revolution and a consequence of contemporary changes, often difficult for individuals to experience in their lives. The basis of platform work is the use of information and communication technologies, in particular, mobile applications or websites. The app informs the platform worker about the order to be completed and provides all the necessary information. At this point, it is also salient to mention the concept of the gig economy, which: “involves both work that is performed via platforms but delivered locally, and thus requires the worker to be physically present (e.g., Uber), and work that is performed and delivered remotely via platforms (e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk)” (Polkowska 2021:S322). Platform work, therefore, refers to work performed (or at least delivered) online and hybrid work that takes place offline but is enabled and mediated by apps such as on-demand passenger transport and on-demand food delivery platforms (e.g., Bolt food delivery platform studied by Maija Spuriņa and Iveta Kešāne in one of the articles published in this issue). One of the analyses of Polish platform workers’ experiences (Muszyński et al. 2022) indicates that loyalty is an important factor enabling them to remain in this algorithm-controlled work environment. Through loyalty, they “accept the disadvantages and instability that working outside a standard employment relationship entails” (Muszyński et al. 2022:472). Self-organization of work made possible by digital technologies, permeating the experiences of individuals in terms of artistic, creative, and platform work, may indicate that “people increasingly have to become their own micro-structures, they have to do the work of

the structures by themselves” (McRobbie 2002:518 as cited in Richardson 2018:248). In addition, technological startup organizations provide additional space in the landscape of shaping individual experiences through new technologies. An important feature of technology startups is the generation of technological workplaces. Apart from the modern technology and IT industries, startups are increasingly operating in other sectors of the economy. “Startups are most often regarded as a new type of entrepreneurship in the form of an internet organization that utilizes the latest technological solutions” (Adamczyk 218:43 [trans. JW]). They represent a specific ecosystem understood as complex networks of relationships and a modern form of work organization that plays a key role in the new economy development. Employees working in technology startups can also experience tensions resulting from interpretative patterns inherent in the world of technological work. Research devoted to studying work experiences in the technology industry focuses on issues of gender and ethnicity (e.g., Li 2023; Mellström, Balkmar, and Callerstig 2023). These have been discussed in detail in one of the articles in this volume (see Edyta Tobiasiewicz’s paper). As can be seen, the involvement of individuals in new technologies is a multidimensional and highly complex issue, covering many areas of their everyday experiences.

Some of the articles in this volume are based on data collected in the research project “Post-Transformation in the Perspective of Biographical Experiences of People Born Between 1980 and 2005. A Sociological Analysis.”⁹ Here, post-transformation should not

⁹ The project is carried out between 2022 and 2026 in the Department of Sociology of Culture (University of Lodz). It is funded by the National Science Center in Poland (UMO-2021/41/B/HS6/02048). The research team consists of: Kaja Kaźmierska (Head of the research project), Katarzyna Waniek, Aleksandra Drączyk, Kamil Łuczaj, and Joanna Wygnańska.

be understood as “the time after transformation” but as a fundamentally new aspect of an ongoing social change in Poland that is shaped by global processes. This assumption is made according to the logic of the processual and sequential nature of social change. The dynamics of post-transformation change are mainly shaped by at least two global processes: (1) the growing role of social media and the internal logic of the virtual world, which are influencing the lives of individuals, and (2) dynamic cultural changes in value systems and attitudes.¹⁰ The subject of the study is, therefore, individual sequentially-ordered biographical experiences influenced (and also discursively constructed) by contemporary global processes related to the development of technology, the role of social media, accelerating social changes, secularization, the processes of individualization, the impact of therapeutic culture and therapeutic discourse on feelings and experiences of individuals, et cetera. The research materials gathered in the project constitute a rich collection of 80 autobiographical narrative interviews conducted and analyzed according to the procedure developed by Fritz Schütze (2008). Consistent with the adopted method, in the collected interviews, people talk about the course of their lives *ex tempore*, without prior thematic guidelines. Themes that are insufficiently developed, unclear, or illegible are supplemented with additional questions after the story has been completed. Research questions are asked after the narrative themes have been exhausted. By examining life stories, it becomes possible to capture the dynamics and consequences of social change over a long period. This research perspective allows us to grasp the mutual influence between individual experiences and macro socio-cultural processes.

¹⁰ Researchers are still developing a more in-depth and more specific definition of the post-transformation phenomenon (based on the analyses carried out in the project).

Moreover, it allows us to study the interplay between public discourse and individual experiences, following the assumption that discourse shapes one’s cognitive structures, but, at the same time, it is shaped by how people act in their everyday lives. The discussed study is, therefore, an attempt to reconstruct the *emic* perspective (the experience of individuals involved in a given system of meanings), as opposed to the *ethic* perspective (Pike 1967:37). Following Herbert Blumer (1969), researchers in the project distinguished three “sensitized spheres,”¹¹ according to which they differentiate categories of interviewees sought for interviews: 1) the sphere of work; 2) the sphere of family¹²; and 3) the sphere of social networks.^{13, 14} Due to the subject matter of this volume and the topics discussed in the articles, it is salient to refer to the sphere of work identified among these “sensitized spheres.” One of the categories¹⁵ of interviewees chosen according to this sphere are people representing the so-called *new professions* connected mainly, but not exclusively, with the in-

¹¹ Based on the collected interviews, it is worth noting that the designated sensitized spheres do not exist in rigid, separate frameworks but often overlap at the level of individual biographical experiences.

¹² In the family sphere, researchers selected two cases: a) large families (having at least 3 children) and b) couples without children, the so-called DINKs (double income, no kids), i.e., people who, at least at the time of the interview, declared that they do not want to have children.

¹³ The sphere of social networks concerns the broadly understood building of social bonds through membership in various social worlds. Researchers mainly focus on the dimensions and biographical experiences of contemporary social activism.

¹⁴ It is important to emphasize that these spheres emerged from the autobiographical narratives collected in the previous project under the direction of Kaja Kaźmierska (see Kaźmierska and Waniek 2020), “Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective,” funded by the National Science Center in Poland, UMO-2013/09/B/HS6/03100, carried out in the Department of Sociology of Culture at the University of Lodz in years 2014-2019.

¹⁵ Furthermore, in the work sphere, researchers planned interviews with small and medium-sized entrepreneurs and public sector employees.

ternet sphere, for example, internet content creators. Researchers managed to collect 26 autobiographical narrative interviews with internet content creators. The empirical material gathered reveals similarities and differences between their experiences. Important topics for consideration here (addressed in the texts in this volume) include: the orientations and values shaping the biographical experiences of individuals; their visions of social reality; moral standards and their strategies for coping with everyday life; tensions between self-concepts embedded in contemporary influential public discourses and traditional patterns into which individuals inscribe their biographical experiences; also, the aspects of identity formation, authenticity, and uncertainty evident in the life stories of internet content creators, and the role the virtual space of the internet plays in their biographical experiences.

All articles presented in this volume analyze the experiences of individuals involved in new technologies. Some of them take the perspective of the individuals, voicing their experiences. One of the texts undertakes algorithmic management and discusses the internal functioning of control technologies in platform work. Despite the diversity of the issues addressed, all articles engage in a discussion of the role of new technologies in the everyday lives of individuals, immersed in algorithms, virtual codes, and interpretative frameworks shaped by contemporary transformations.

The first article by Edyta Tobiasiewicz, *Disruptive Masculinities? Male Workers Challenging Gender(ed) Norms in Technology Startup Organizations*, studies how men in different roles in tech startups challenge, transcend, and redefine dominant gender norms in their workplaces. The researcher draws conclusions based on the analysis of selected cases

from her collection of 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals engaged in tech startup organizations. The text contributes to discussions on masculinity and emotional labor, which are explored by Edyta Tobiasiewicz through her research on male employees of technology organizations.

The second text by Kaja Kaźmierska, *The Biographical Experience of Being a Stay-at-Home Mother of a Large Family Versus Online Activity. A Case Study*, explores tensions in the biographical experiences of women who attempt to reconcile their identity as mothers with that of active modern women. The researcher conducts an in-depth case study of two female internet content creators' life stories. The tensions studied are expressed in contrasting patterns of tradition and modernity, combined by the interviewees in their experiences and identified as mutually exclusive in public discourse. An interesting perspective is provided by the role of new technologies (in terms of social media space) emerging in the study of the biographical experiences of the interviewees.

The third article by Aleksandra Drążczyk, *Can You Make Money from Being Queer? Commodification of Queerness on Social Media as Biographical Experience*, analyzes the biographical experiences of a young booktoker. Through an in-depth case study, Aleksandra Drążczyk considers the interrelationships between the booktoker's activity on social media (bookmedia sphere in this case) and his biographical experiences. The analysis also addresses the thread of the queer identity of the interviewee and the problem of commodifying queerness. The author discovers social worlds at the intersection of virtual and non-virtual reality, which are a source of values and life aspirations for the interviewee in his everyday life.

Another text by Kamil Łuczaj, *Navigating Recognition: The Symbolic Struggles in the Biographies of Young Polish Internet Content Creators*, investigates the phenomena of “recognition” processes and “symbolic struggles” pertinent to the profession of internet content creators. Kamil Łuczaj attempts to highlight the difficulties associated with the professional career of internet creators, especially in the context of the symbolic struggle for recognition of their activities as work. The study presented in his article is based on a mixed approach (biographical method analysis and qualitative thematic analysis). The author reconstructs many dimensions in which the interviewees’ actions and struggles involving new technologies can be recognized as part of their broader biographical experiences.

The last article in the volume by Maija Spuriņa and Iveta Ķešāne, *Affective Governmentality in Food Delivery*

Platforms: A Study of Bolt Food Riga Push Notifications, focuses on the qualitative analysis of the content of push notifications sent by Bolt Food Riga to its couriers. The analysis is part of a larger study focusing on the experience and practice of remote work by food delivery couriers. The text highlights the affective aspect of control technology in platform work. By studying push notifications sent by the platform to employees, the authors inspect a valuable insight into the governmentality technologies in gig work. They also emphasize the importance of understanding the human element involved in automated algorithmic management systems, as defined by new technologies.

I hope this richly informative and analytical volume will serve as a salient contribution to further reflection on the experience of change in the context of individuals’ everyday involvement with new technologies.

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