

»Digital technologies are naturally no panacea«

Interview with Friedericke Hardering, labour market sociologist

By Anke Sauter

The coronavirus crisis has changed a lot of things – in the working world too. However, above all it has strengthened our awareness of where digital technology really makes sense and where face-to-face communication is only hard to replace.

Anke Sauter: Germany, as the media always say, is lagging behind as far as digitalization is concerned. Is that really the case?

Friedericke Hardering: We've slept through digitalization to some extent. The Scandinavian countries, for example, but also Estonia, New Zealand and Israel are much further advanced. There, certain digital processes, for instance digital administration, are more easily possible. Here at home, even infrastructure is already part of the problem. A good internet connection is not yet a matter of course everywhere in Germany.

Is the internet, to mention a frequently quoted statement by Angela Merkel, still »uncharted territory«?

No. There are meanwhile quite enough stakeholders who want to make Germany

– analogously to Silicon Valley – Silicon Germany. People recognize that the topic is important. In education, there's the Digital Pact for Schools, which targets faster internet and better technical equipment in schools. In times of the coronavirus crisis, of course, the demand for faster action is increasing.

In your view, what are the reasons for Germany failing to keep up with developments?

It could be reservations, for instance regarding security. But much is also driven by necessity. In the Scandinavian countries, for example, there are far more rural areas, so the benefits of digital solutions can be seen much more clearly. Additionally, the German government's focus has long been on old industries such as the automotive sector. As a consequence, we've been able to blank out the topic of digitalization and put it to the back of our minds for longer, while others have adapted their structures accordingly.

And that puts us now at a competitive disadvantage.

Yes, we must attempt to catch up now in certain areas. I still believe though – or perhaps it's more a hope – that we haven't

yet missed the boat. Germany is still very innovative in many fields. We still file a huge number of patents and are still leading in some areas. There too, we still have great opportunities to strengthen our position in certain niches. However, this must naturally also be wanted and supported accordingly.

The state must do its duty here.

Absolutely. Without state help, Silicon Valley wouldn't exist as it does today either: It didn't evolve thanks to entrepreneurial initiative but instead only on the basis of massive subsidies. It cannot work without a good infrastructure and corresponding support.

What role does the coronavirus crisis play in the advancement of digitalization?

Awareness has definitely grown. This process has been evident for some years now, but there are naturally still some deficits. The crisis has contributed to a better understanding of what is really needed and what digital technologies can do.

Do we really need online video conferences when there are no distancing rules and contact ban?



»A balancing act for workers«: Lots of people are working from home during the coronavirus crisis and looking after their children at the same time.

Under normal conditions – without the coronavirus crisis – we always need a combination of online and offline, in the working world but beyond it too. The coronavirus crisis has heightened the demand for information and communication technologies. But naturally we also need these technologies when we return at some time to normal operations. However, we'll also then need our normal interrelationships in the working world, that is, normal offline contacts.

My question was also concerned with decision-makers in politics and the economy: Did it need the jolt of the coronavirus pandemic to get things tackled faster?

The urgency has certainly now become clear. We have the opportunity now to catch up on certain processes in politics and organizations. However, digital

technologies are naturally no panacea. When other crises come, for instance cyberattacks that threaten our entire system, we're equally fragile but in a completely different way. We shouldn't therefore think that all solutions to crises of whatever kind lie in us being better networked digitally.

You're a labour market sociologist. Do you have the impression that working from home is a good way to resolve the situation?

That greatly varies. Many employees use a lot of technology. Above all the more affluent and well-educated who work, for example, in knowledge-based professions and were already able to work from home before: They have both the expertise as well as the equipment at home and can work equally well in this situation. But many other households don't own a computer and a printer and perhaps don't have the corresponding software and skills to use them either. Then working from home doesn't work. What we're seeing now in the crisis is the following: As far

as material assets are concerned, society is very divided, but also in relation to skills. Digitalization is making inequalities appear in a new light and become even more pronounced.

An extension of the »knowledge gap« hypothesis relating to the reception of mass media in the 1970s?

Exactly. We need to keep an eye on this. Not only when we think of rich and poor, but also of young and old, there are lines of division everywhere with regard to digital technologies, and these are being exacerbated even further now during the peak phase of digital use.

Many people also find the juxtaposition of professional and family life when working from home a great burden.

This is naturally an extreme situation at the moment, especially for young families with small children or single parents who have to work from home and look after their children at the same time. This is by no means the normal situation when working from home and is now

really putting people to the test. In general, we always have these transient boundaries when working from home, normally of course with properly functioning childcare. But working from home is characterized by a far higher degree of self-organization compared to activities at the regular place of work. And this is always a balancing act for workers, as research also shows.

Have you conducted studies on this yourself?

I recently wrote a review on the topic, in particular on how digital technologies in the working world have an impact on gender relations. On the one hand, it could be seen that digitalization makes it easier to combine work and family life, but on the other hand there is extremely high time pressure when working from home, so that the feeling of being overburdened is very high. It's not the simple path to a better working world, but rather the course has to be set very carefully so that working from home also means good-quality work. There are currently a lot of studies that are watching – on the basis of the coronavirus crisis – how the situation of working from home is developing. I'm already looking forward to seeing the data.

Digitalization also spawns new forms of work organization, such as crowdworking platforms. Have you already seen this in Germany too?

We have something like crowdwork and microwork here too. There are more and more solo self-employed people working in this domain, but overall it's still a small area. Mostly they are younger persons and students, but also highly qualified people. If you look at

clickworker platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, you'll find relatively simple tasks. To that extent, it's interesting that in Germany it tends to be higher qualified people who try out these services. However, very little is known about this labour market because it's difficult to obtain good data. But it's definitely a growing area, which also poses major challenges for the trade unions. As we know, solo self-employment is always a relatively unprotected area with a lot of uncertainties and precarities, irrespective of digital technology. This constellation becomes even more exacerbated on such platforms.

Creating regulations here is probably off the legislator's radar.

Partly. The trade unions are staying on the ball. They are also reaching out to crowdworkers and recognize the problems. But the question is, how can we motivate the solo self-employed to act collectively? Overall, certain workers' rights in Germany and in Europe have been continuously stripped back over the last years and job security reduced. In fact, all we see now is a field of new, radically precarious employment in digital clickwork and crowdwork.

Does digitalization exacerbate precarious employment situations?

Yes, digitalization can exacerbate them. New actors and platforms are emerging and even before regulations have been checked, for instance how the legal situation is in general in the case of players such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, several thousands of people have already worked there. This means that we're always lagging behind the latest developments.

But back to the traditional labour market: How can it be that in some countries paying in the supermarket is already fully automated but Germans, now as in the past, like best of all to go to the cashier?

I think there are several reasons for this. As we know, Germans love cash, but now several things are changing during the crisis because they must change. More people are paying by debit card now or with their smartphone. Other countries have had self-service checkouts far longer, and the customers there have long been confronted with them. People have to become accustomed to new technologies and learn to trust them.



»Germans love cash«: In times of social distancing too, people in this country prefer to go to the cashier than pay at a self-service checkout.

Especially services are being delegated more and more to the customer.

Yes. In their consumer behaviour, normal people are more and more becoming workers. For example, when booking flights. We're taking on more and more of the work that used to be done by employees. As a result, you need less and less employees. Obviously, flights are getting slightly cheaper. But we're not just paying for this with a loss of jobs. It also means that certain interactive situations, which are also important for many people, are decreasing; a little chat at the checkouts is an important element of everyday life for many people. That's why we should campaign to ensure that there are always several options and that we can continue to choose. There should always be a non-digital way to solve things.

It's already been the case for a long time with bank transfers: Do it online or pay extra.

This is, of course, discriminating because online banking is impossible without certain material prerequisites. Or for groups with limitations. That the only way to do certain things is online constitutes a real problem. It's contingent on too many factors and ignores the realities of people's lives.

At the beginning, you mentioned your current research project on the alienation of people from work that goes hand in hand with digitalization. This sounds a bit Marxist.

Marx made a lasting impact on the concept of alienation, but it has a longer tradition and goes back to Rousseau, among others. In our project, we have a somewhat broader concept of alienation. We're looking at workers' experiences with regard to digitalization, how they appropriate work under the conditions of new digital technology. Appropriation is the antonym for alienation: How we can connect with new forms of work, how this can succeed and under which circumstances it also fails. We're examining areas of the old economy, such as insurance or retail, but also ones in the new digital economies. We want to see how these appropriation or alien-

ation processes look – and this at different qualification levels.

What, then, would be an alienation phenomenon?

An alienation phenomenon would be, for example, if people reported that there had been a certain type of group spirit at work in the past which now, as a result of acceleration processes, for example, no longer exists due to ever-increasing time pressure and pressure to perform. Work is always also a place of social interaction and thus very important for appropriating the world. And if workers report that there is no longer any exchange among colleagues because of changes, that they feel isolated and suffer greatly under pressure of work, then this would mean they are experiencing alienation. But it might naturally also be that work is losing its complexity. Perhaps in the past you monitored certain processes from A to Z but now there is a new device and you just check at the end whether the device has done a good job. This changes your work completely. Nice parts of the task disappear, and you're only entrusted with a remaining task that is less complex and thus makes your work less attractive.

Thank you very much for this interview, Ms Hardering.



About Friedericke Hardering

Friedericke Hardering, 39, studied in Aachen and earned her doctoral degree with a thesis on increasing insecurities in the working world. She has been working as a post-doctoral researcher in the field of sociology of work at Goethe University since 2012. Since 2019 she has headed a research project funded by the German Research Foundation on the digital alienation of work, which is being implemented in cooperation with Professor Oliver Nachtwey of the University of Basel.

f.hardering@soz.uni-frankfurt.de