

# 'We Cannot Not Be on Facebook'. Individual Practices Between Web 2.0 and a Changing Working World<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

During the last few years, there have been fundamental transformations in work as well as technology. Concerning work, 'de-limitation', 'subjectivation', and 'precarisation', as well as an accompanying set of new challenges for working individuals, can be observed. Voß and Pongratz (2003) state that the tendency towards self-organized work replaces the passive 'employee' by a much more active 'entreplooyee'. On the side of technology, the internet, and especially what is known as Web 2.0, have lead to prominent changes which also demand new practices of individuals. Both transformations make practices such as self-responsibility, self-management, self-presentation, and networking into everyday actions. This paper poses the question of what role Web 2.0 plays within the transformation of work, and analyzes, based on results of the research project 'Subject constructions and digital culture,' the practices of individuals in fields of web-based work (i.e., as programmers, web designers, content managers, and social media consultants) who work with the internet.

## Introduction

Technology has been a major part of sociological research on work for a long time. The mechanization of society can always be considered a materialization of the existing relations of production. Technology has three primary functions within the work process: labor savings, efficiency improvement, and process control (Pfeiffer 2010). At the same time, it quickly became clear to observers that the use of technology not only saves labor and makes it easier and more controllable, but also that technology has ambiguous consequences. The relationship between technology and work is shaped by a range of contradictions. New technologies often lead to an increase of work, and to new problems and requirements. Additionally, questions of control or freedom, enforcement or self-realization, aliena-

tion or emancipation, and de- or re-qualification have led to ambivalent answers (Baukrowitz, Boes & Schmiede 2001; Kern & Schumann 1970; Pfeiffer 2004; Projektgruppe Automation und Qualifikation 1987).

In the last few years, fundamental transformations have occurred in the spheres of work and technology. The German sociology of work characterizes the transformations of work with keywords as 'de-limitation', 'subjectivation', and 'precarisation', and states the arrival of new challenges for working individuals. On the side of technology, the internet—and especially Web 2.0—has led to prominent changes which also demand new practices of individuals. Both transformations make practices such as self-responsibility, self-management, self-presentation and networking into everyday actions.

In this paper I pose the question of what role Web 2.0 plays within the transformation of work, and analyze the practices of individuals who work with the internet. Where do practices with the web support the requirements of work, and where do they constrain the same? For this investigation, I first discuss the transformations of work and the internet, and then present the results of a research project on web-based work. To conclude, I discuss the relation of these social and technological changes.

## Transformation of work

In recent years, social transformation processes like the globalization of markets, increasing economic competition, and political deregulation have lead to transformations of work that have caused a range of contradictory effects. The German sociology of work discusses these changes, among others, using a set of specific terms. 'De-limitation' characterizes the dissolution, erosion, and blurring of traditional norms, structures, and regulations of work (i.e., those concerning working times and workplaces, but also organizational aspects) (Voß 1998). De-limitation is discussed as an ambivalent process that increases the requirements of flexibility, self-organization, and self-management. It offers chances of advanced autonomy within work relations, but also introduces the dangers of increased stress, and a tendency towards self-exploitation (Döhl, Sauer & Kratzer 2000). These developments are intensified by the growth of

unstable work relations (part-time jobs, mini-jobs, and limited contracts). For individuals, this 'precarisation' leads to uncertainty (Brinkmann, Dörre & Röbenack 2006). Additionally, 'subjectivation' of work means that individual actions and interpretations are of increasing importance in the work process. Individuals bring more subjective, creative, and passionate attitudes into work, while work also requires more of the personality of working individuals (Kleemann, Matuschek & Voß 1999).

On the whole, a reduction of control as well as a tendency towards self-organized work can be observed in recent developments. In these processes, workers become much more active. Voß and Pongratz (2003) state that the passive 'employee' has been replaced by a much more active 'entreplooyee' (*Arbeitskraftunternehmer*) who acts in a self-determining 'entrepreneurial' manner in the labor market, as well as within the company. Individuals are forced to act competently, self-responsibly, and flexibly within changing working conditions. They have to be self-organized and create structures and orientation patterns on their own.

Voß and Pongratz (2003) describe the 'entreplooyee' by three important characteristics:

- Self-commercialization: the intensified active and practical 'production' and 'commercialization' of one's own capacities and potential in the labor market, as well as within companies;
- Self-rationalization: the self-determined organization of one's daily life and long-term plans, and the tendency to accept the importance of the company (employer) as an integral part of life; and
- Self-control: the intensified independent planning, control, and monitoring of work by the person responsible for performing it.

Therefore, individuals are presently faced with intensified challenges of self-responsibility which offer gains of autonomy on the one hand, and stress on the other. This mainly concerns the field of paid work, but also affects other parts of life. Foucault's (2008) concept of 'entrepreneur of the self' found within his governmentality studies is also relevant here, as the intensified demands for a government of the self seem central to the neoliberal rationality which affects all areas of social life.



Feminist researchers emphasize that care workers have also experienced an intensification of demands and a compression of tasks. For example, there are increasing requirements of child education, and complex challenges of coordinating the different spheres of life and different time tables of family members (Winker & Carstensen 2007).

Further debates focus on the integration of consumers as active producers into the production process, and the blurring boundaries between production and consumption, as well as the intensified effort that consumers have to make. Keywords in this discussion are 'crowdsourcing' (Papsdorf 2009), 'working customers' (Rieder & Voß 2010), and 'produsage' (Bruns 2008).

Thus the observation that individuals have to manage, govern, present, and organize themselves seems to have become a central characteristic of contemporary life. At the same time, there is evidence that these demands are not always accepted by individuals without resistance. In her analysis of reproductive activities, Jürgens (2006) shows that individuals defend boundaries, build new boundaries willfully, and actively oppose these new requirements, often in order to guard their interests against intrusion by other parts of life.

## Web 2.0: the material side of social changes

Meanwhile, it is uncontested that technological transformations do not take place independent of social transformations, or that any of these has a one-way impact on any other. The mutual relation of technology and society is discussed as 'co-construction' or 'co-materialisation', especially in Science and Technology Studies. Technology can be considered expression, materialization, or objectification of social relations, and therefore has to be investigated concerning its construction (see, among others, Bijker, Hughes & Pinch 1987; MacKenzie & Wajcman 1985). Technology incorporates scopes in design and use (Oudshoorn & Pinch 2003), and reveals its impact first in combination with practices and discourses of the actors involved (Carstensen 2007). At the same time technology is not reducible to its social constructedness; it is not only a passive object in social conflicts, but is, with its materiality, also a resistant and active

participant in social transformations (Haraway 1991; Latour 2000; Rammert & Schulz-Schaeffer 2002). Technologies shape normative actions, pose problems, and set requirements (Joerges 1988). They are constitutive parts of society that cause new opportunities and generate new forces (see, among others, Degele 2002, 162; Dolata & Werle 2007).

Referring to this understanding of technology and society as co-constructed, it is less surprising that the transformations to a participative and user-oriented Web 2.0 offer some similarities to the transformations of work. Web 2.0 refers to a 'second generation' of internet development and design wherein websites enable users to do more than just retrieve information. Weblogs, wikis, and social networking sites facilitate communication, information sharing, collaboration, community building, and networking.

Weblogs (blogs) are websites with entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or videos, displayed in reverse-chronological order. To create and care for a blog is extraordinarily simple. Many blogs provide news or statements on particular subjects. Blogs also incorporate a 'blogroll'—a list of blogs recommended by the blogger—and a commentary function which allows readers to remark on and discuss blog entries. This ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs, which can thus be used for exchange of ideas, thoughts, and experiences, as well as for communication and discussion (Schmidt 2006).

A wiki is a hypertext system whose content not only can be read by users, but can also be changed by users online. Wikis allow different users to work on a common text, and as such, they are often used to create collaborative websites. Wikis allow many authors to contribute to a text, and this opens up space for new forms of cooperative and collective creation of knowledge. This is illustrated by the very prominent example of the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia. Generally, there is no review before modifications to the text are published. Many wikis are open to the general public without requiring people to register and create user accounts before contributing to them. A further characteristic of wikis is that the revision history of every entry is viewable, allowing previous versions of the wiki to be reinstated (Klobas 2006; Reichert 2008, 210; Stegbauer, Schönberger & Schmidt 2007).



Social network sites try to build online communities of people who share similar interests. They are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and navigate their list of connections and those made by others within the system. After joining a social network site, an individual is asked to fill out forms containing a series of questions. The person's profile is generated from the answers to these questions, which typically include descriptors such as age, location, interests, or business information (boyd & Ellison 2007).

Through these activities, Web 2.0 promises an increase in user participation, as well as new forms of cooperation, discussion, and networking (O'Reilly 2005; Reichert 2008, 9). Similar to the recent transformations of work, Web 2.0 also requires self-responsible, entrepreneurial, and self-organized practices. Paulitz (2005) shows that already the early web was connected with interpellations and activations of users as active and networking individuals, which she, referring to Foucault, interpreted as 'technologies of the *social* self'. Reckwitz (2006) emphasizes navigation and immersion as requirements for the 'computer subject', who trains to make decisions permanently while dealing with interactivity, hypertextuality, and permanent situations of choice on the web. By investigating wikis, blogs and social networks against the background of governmentality studies, Reichert (2009) observes practices such as self-government, self-control, denomination, accounting, benchmarking, and self-staging—all technologically supported and provoked by personal profiles, ranking systems, questionnaires, check lists, and e-learning tools, etc. He considers Web 2.0 a 'prototype of neoliberal governance technology' (Reichert 2009, 13). Schmidt (2011) also emphasizes the management practices required by the web. He states different affordances for the use of the internet: identity management, relationship management, information management and privacy management.

In correspondence with the above-mentioned studies, which focus on the self-responsibility, management, and entrepreneurial requirements of internet practices, the following will consider the mutual constitution of work practices and internet practices. What role does Web

2.0 play within the transformation of work? Where do practices involving the web support the requirements of work, and where do they constrain these requirements? What kinds of new activities, requirements, scopes of action, and enforcements are generated by Web 2.0? And where do resistances, limitations, and gaps become relevant?<sup>2</sup>

## Using web 2.0 at work

In the following, answers to the above questions will be supplied based on interview data of the research project 'Subject constructions and digital culture' (funded by Volkswagen Foundation and Austrian Science Fund, 2009-2012). Within the sub-project 'Web-based work' at the Hamburg University of Technology we interviewed thirty young adults who co-construct and co-design the internet as part of their jobs (i.e., as programmers, web designers, content managers, and social media consultants). This particular sample is interesting insofar as these young internet designers, as technology- and media-competent individuals, are likely to develop trendsetting usage patterns which can be considered pioneer practices. The interviews focused on the biographies of these young adults, as well as their work, everyday practices, self-image, plans for the future, and views of technology. I present the results of these interviews in parallel to the three characteristics of the 'entreplooyee'—self-commercialization, self-control, and self-rationalization (Voß & Pongratz 2003)—and address the question of what role Web 2.0 plays in each (see also Carstensen 2012).

## Self-commercialization

If we look at the interview data, self-commercialization as intensified active and practical 'production' and 'commercialization' of one's own capacities and potential becomes quickly evident. Most of the young web-workers in this study find it self-evident to present themselves on the web, and do so with their own websites, blogs, and social media accounts. In fact, many individuals reported using more than twenty dif-



ferent networks. Some of them perceive this more as a necessity to be public than as reasonable, voluntary activity.

It is important to 'show that you are there'<sup>2</sup>, one research participant said. 'Sometimes you are there only because of the presence, because you have to be online. We are an internet company, we cannot not be on Facebook and cannot not be on Twitter, and in the best case we also develop an app. So these are things, where I am not sure about the use, but do it anyway, because I think, you have to do it.'

However, self-presentation alone is not enough; additionally, individuals have to provoke attention to be seen by their audience. The participants have different strategies for accomplishing this: they post advertising that they pass off as private news on social networks, regularly post new messages, care for their professional networks on Twitter, and work for a good Google ranking, etc. Autodidactic learning has become a matter of course, while the participants lament that they do not learn important competencies in their formal education. They accept the requirement to enhance themselves, to adopt knowledge, and to increase skill sets on their own.

However, we can discover limitations and gaps in these developments. On the one hand, extended self-presentations are limited by dominant data protection discourses, which call for a careful handling of personal data. A central issue in such discourse is the trope of (potential) employers who conduct web searches on applicants and discover party photos. The practices that individuals develop in the area of conflict between public self-presentation and protection of one's own data are diverse and vary from refusal of social networks; to focusing on a strictly professional and very strategically-controlled cultivation of one's image; to pleasurable blurring of boundaries between the public and private spheres. Similarly, it becomes clear that extended usage of social network sites is not reducible to self-commercialization, but also represents mutual experiences of community, emotional support, and care. As one participant said, 'And you have your community, which also has certain solidarity and who also helps one with difficult things.'

Posts, entries, comments, and profile information often do not fit with the image of a self-commercialized 'entreplooyee'. We can find political,



subversive or ironic content, as well as information about hobbies, and about personal issues which highlight the importance of life beyond paid work. In some cases, the web-workers surveyed give revealing statements about dissatisfaction with current or former employers, for example on question-and-answer-based social networks such as Formspring. It is noticeable that the economic situation of participants is of central meaning here. We found self-confident statements, such as the following, only from those in well-paying jobs (particularly from people working as programmers or developers):

So, I Twitter a lot of private things, so, 'Oh today I am not in the mood for work,' or such things, but also a lot of professional stuff—which frameworks for development I work with ... So, everybody has to live with this. I mean, everybody has a private life and everybody drinks sometimes somewhere and if that plays any role at work, then this is not the proper employer, that's my opinion.

Furthermore, there are additional conditions which restrain individuals from using Web 2.0 more broadly for self-commercialization. Participants name, for example, lack of time. Although they accept the necessity of regularly updating their own blogs with new content, or of being present and active on social networks, they perceive these duties as a source of pressure. Some consider the necessity to be online from a very distanced and de-personalized perspective: they see Twitter as a waste of time and have a very pragmatic relationship to the internet.

### Self-rationalization

Self-rationalization means a self-determined organization of one's daily life and long-term plans, and the tendency to willingly accept the importance of the company (employer) as an integral part of life. This development is accelerated by Web 2.0. On the one hand, Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, and the blogosphere are experienced by users as effective support for everyday organisational tasks. These entities lead to time saving, as one participant explained, 'Without Twitter I would have to search for every single piece of information extra.' Daily news and infor-

mation about busses, trains, and weather, but also details about where friends are spending time at a given moment, are organized quickly and make planning the day easier. Dates are co-ordinated via XING or Google; Facebook reminds users of birthdays; and creative workers get their 'daily inspiration' from the web.

On the other hand, the amount of information which has to be handled increases with each of these internet offers. Users are under growing pressure to be well-informed. A successful self-rationalization therefore requires the development of strategies of managing information, relationships, and communication, and in some cases necessitate the non-use of or limitation on specific uses as a protection against wasting time. Participants spoke of deliberate strategies, like consciously turning off their internet connections, deleting personal profiles on social networks, deciding to be present on only two social networks, designating fixed time slots in their schedules for Twitter, and consciously abandoning computer games.

Furthermore, the web-workers surveyed interact with different social networks at different times of day (e.g., XING during working hours and Facebook in the evening). Although these users are online the whole day, they try to read no professional e-mails in their leisure time. The internet does indeed have de-limiting effects, however it also enables and supports re-establishing or setting new boundaries. Again, it becomes evident that an active individual is required to make conscious and disciplined decisions. One participant explained:

Facebook is more private, but over time has gotten mixed with the job, because how can you explain it to your colleague that you'll add her or him on Xing but not on Facebook ... This is sometimes a little bit difficult. That's the reason why it got mixed sometimes, but you can create groups and then everything is fine again.

Additionally, differentiated technological support now exists which assists individual strategies of boundary management and such supports—Google reader, reading tweets by relevance, push and pull notifications for the smartphone, and others—are intensively used by our participants. Services such as About.me bundle different social network profiles

and attempt to solve the problem of managing many profiles simultaneously.

However, self-rationalization is not without its contradictions and gaps. Sometimes the interpellations to communicate and to network are ignored completely. One participant stated, 'Yes, you need not communicate. So, on the web I try to do only things which have an added value for me, and to communicate doesn't have an added value for me.' Others spoke of their unstructured, de-limited, and unregulated daily routines, sometimes because they devote themselves to the temptations of the web, distract themselves from paid work, or use the internet as a toy and as entertainment.

## Self-control

Lastly, self-control, which means the intensified independent planning, control, and monitoring of work by the person responsible for doing it, is also practiced on Web 2.0. According to participants, Web 2.0 offers a range of control tools. It is a daily routine for many users to help control, measure, and value the success of their own web services and activities, for example with Google Analytics, Facebook statistics, or XING information about viewers of one's profile. Some use Favstar.fm to analyse how often their tweets are favorited, others install the application of Flattr—a social payment service—to collect micro-donations for their blogs. Furthermore, services such as Twitter and Facebook suggest controlling one's entire daily routine, with the help of status updates and geo-services, which announce a person's location to others in his or her network. In other ways, self-control becomes evident when it comes to data security, for example when participants describe their practice of leaving social networks and switching to e-mail when communication becomes more personal, keeping different services separate, using their own servers, or refusing certain services.

At the same time, opposite usage patterns are also developing. These can be unrestricted, unstrategic, unlimited, and unmindful use of diverse tools and services, motivated by passion and fun, without doubt or restrictions. Or, the other way around: the reluctance to communicate or



write in a permanently archived way leads to refusal of the requirements of public self-presentation and self-control.

## **Conclusions: (new) contradictions in the relation of work and technology**

In closing, it can be shown that Web 2.0 can be considered the materialization of the transformation of work. Weblogs, wikis, and social networks support, ease, and increase requirements within different work areas. A range of technological tools are therefore available for the 'entrepreneur's' self-commercialization, self-rationalization, and self-control.

However, technology does not only support existing requirements materially and thereby normalize them: new additional requirements also arise. Facilitating the tasks of everyday life via diverse web tools increases the standards of information processing and density of communication. Relation, communication, information, network, community, and especially boundary management accrue as a new concentration of requirements. Individuals are expected to learn new competencies and routines, and to actively and independently negotiate boundaries between public and private spheres, as well as between paid work and other areas of life. The adoption of new and changing technologies becomes a daily and permanent challenge. At the same time, technological tools are developed which support this boundary management. Individuals do not integrate themselves unresistingly into these requirements of work and web. They act stubbornly and draw borders against both social and technological calls for action.

Web 2.0 does not determine individuals as 'entrepreneurs'. It makes willful demands and strengthens transformations, causing them to become more acute, but it also opens opportunities to establish new boundaries against the requirements of (paid) work. Not least, contradictory discourses on what constitutes good usage leaves Web 2.0 with ambiguous norms. So, individuals negotiate, subordinate, resist, and ignore requirements.

Internet use and design at work therefore take place between increased requirements concerning self-presentation, self-marketing, per-

manent learning, self-control, and boundary management on the one side, and facilitation, time-saving, community experiences, support, passion, reluctance, and denial on the other. Once again, with Web 2.0 and changed working conditions, many (classic) contradictions within the relations between technology and work become evident.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A previous version of this paper is published in German, cited as Carstensen (2012).
- <sup>2</sup> All interviews were conducted in German and translated to English by the author.

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28 Tanja Carstensen

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