WORKSHOP SYNOPSIS

November 2020 | **Magdalena Pichler & Florian Ranft**

#TECH4SOCIETY

New technologies and the individual

Health and good work: How can new technologies help secure individual welfare in times of crisis?

In the workshop "New technologies and the individual" we explored the opportunities and risks that new technologies hold for the future of work and the healthcare system. At the core of individual wellbeing stands high-quality healthcare and work. Both are essential aspects of a good and fulfilling life for many. They are significantly affected by the changing parameters of an economy and society that is increasingly built on data, digital services, and online interaction.

The COVID-19 pandemic magnifies the social risks and opportunities associated with new technologies in healthcare and work, including regional economic disparities, labour market polarisation or health inequalities. On the one hand the current situation has caused a significant level of disruption to the world of work and healthcare emphasizing the exposure of front line workers in healthcare and key workers to the risks of the pandemic. On the other hand these disruptions may create the momentum needed to update our healthcare institutions and the principles of what good work means in the modern age.

The pandemic and the shifts in the world of work

The pandemic has upset labour markets and the organisation of work in an almost unprecedented manner worldwide. There are five major developments and trends that require the attention of policymakers:

1. Due to the sudden disruption a share of the labour force has already lost[1] or is at risk of losing their jobs due to a lower demand for services, commodities and manufacturing but not so much through increased automation (as of yet, at least).

2. Another significant chunk of workers, roughly one third of the workforce in Germany, France, Britain as well as Italy and Spain, finds themselves in temporary leave of employment, where in most developed economies the state has jumped in to cover payroll expenses.

3. For those working, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced a large majority of mainly office and/or knowledge workers[2] to adapt to a new work environment which is primarily set within their own four walls at home. Since working from home, workers have reported higher levels of productivity but also greater levels of stress and anxiety.

4. For front line workers the pandemic has meant an increased health risk at the workplace (in particular in retail, public transport, social care, etc.) having triggered a debate on the value of work and social justice.

1. EU-wide unemployment was 7.5 % in September 2020, up from 6.6 % in September 2019. Unemployment statistics eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics#Unemployment_in_the_EU_and_the_euro_area

2. Florian Kunze, Kilian Hampel & Sophia Zimmermann: Working from home in the Coronavirus crisis: Towards a transformation of work environments? University of Konstanz & Das Progressive Zentrum, August 2020. https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/working-from-home-in-the-coronavirus-crisis-towards-a-transformation-of-work-environments/?lang=en

Thinking ahead.

5. In combination with the need to reorganise, the COVID-19 pandemic has given us a glimpse of what an environmentally friendly economy might look like. We have learned that we can efficiently organise work and that we don't need to travel that much. These developments will bring the chance to reorganise our cities and infrastructure and lead to more flexibility at work for knowledge workers.

"We have learned several major lessons in this pandemic about how to significantly reduce CO2 emissions. The combination of new technologies with fewer travels, commutes and working from home has shown us a path as to how we can organise work in a more sustainable manner."

- Dieter Janecek

At the same time, the challenges and risks of the pandemic and the accompanying increasing digitisation become ever more apparent. A key issue is the high level of market concentration of big tech. First indications show that the digital sector is likely to grow even more powerful and influential as a consequence of the pandemic.[3] When services and work suddenly shift online, those who own the digital tools and infrastructure will benefit. On the one hand this development might further increase market concentration (also because the start-up world will inevitably take a bigger hit in the short-term) and strengthen super-star firms.[4] This would be bad news for income inequality. On the other hand the silver lining of the pandemic may be that it might reinforce political trends towards stronger regulation of big tech. Regulators who were already concerned about the influence of the tech sector may be even more so today.

Another point of discussion is whether the automation of work will receive a boost as a result of COVID-19. A recent report[5] by the Royal Society of Arts highlights that the

retail and service sector in the UK is more prone to the automation of work. Going forward there is a question mark behind the impact that the pandemic will have on the levels of automation in manufacturing and other industries. The pandemic may not only accelerate the pace of automation, it will also create new winners and losers in the labour market. Industries that were previously regarded to be more resilient are now on the brink of collapse, for example tourism, arts and culture. This means that we need to move beyond 'a one size fits all' approach to developing policy recommendations, as different groups of workers will need very different kinds of support.

"You need a systemic and holistic approach to restructuring the labour market, which has happened at a ridiculously fast pace during Covid."

- Alan Lockey

If we want to ensure the access to good work for all people in this age of technological change and crisis, we need a systemic and holistic approach to restructuring the labour market. This will include: targeted support to protect jobs at risk of COVID-19, job transition measures for displaced workers as well as the upskilling for workers at risk of automation. For example, governments could explore long-term versions of current job support schemes ('Kurzarbeit', furlough, etc.), for businesses facing longer term difficulties due to COVID-19. Especially jobs in health and education can be seen as holding viable job opportunities for the future, as they seem to be most resilient to automation as well as the pandemic. Ensuring that sectors such as postal and courier activities, food retail and residential social care are resilient in the future we will need to upgrade these occupations by giving workers more opportunities to develop their skills at work.

The changing world of work and the increase of teleworking provides an opportunity for rural areas to benefit from more spatially independent knowledge workers. **KoDorf**[6] is an initiative which establishes coworking communities in rural areas which are being integrated in the already existing local social life and infrastructure. This opens

3.   Science Po: Is the Covid-19 pandemic a victory for big tech?: https://www.sciencespo.fr/public/chaire-numerique/en/2020/08/13/is-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-victory-for-big-tech/
4.   Vox EU: The rise of superstar firms: https://voxeu.org/content/rise-superstar-firms
5.   The RSA (2020): Who is at risk? Work and automation in the time of Covid-19: https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/_foundation/new-site-blocks-and-images/reports/2020/10/work_and_automation_in_time_of_covid_report.pdf

6.   KoDorf Wiesenburg: https://www.kodorf-wiesenburg.de/

up the possibility of bringing together the advantages of rural life and typical urban infrastructure in order to enable a good working and living environment. The question for policymakers is how to scale up initiatives such as KoDorf and release the pressure on housing and public services in the growing metropolitan areas. One solution may be the support of housing cooperatives in rural areas. Another solution could be a fund which enables rural areas to pay for the building permission – an important and costly prerequisite to start a project, which many cooperatives can't afford.

Innovation and new tech in healthcare

As the healthcare system has been quite resistant to changes in the past, the potential of innovation in health is greater than in the world of work. At the same time the pressure to innovate and reform healthcare is piling up due to ageing populations, the prevalence of multiple chronic diseases, health inequalities and the shortage of healthcare workers and insufficient access to healthcare in rural areas.

COVID-19 has put these challenges in the spotlight. There is growing evidence that more vulnerable people in our societies are bearing the brunt of this health crisis. They are more likely to be hospitalised due to COVID-19 and socially deprived children are more likely to suffer from sleep disturbances, concentration difficulties, headaches and development delays in building up their motoric abilities.[7] As a result access to healthcare has to improve and we need to provide patients with the tools for active participation and self-empowerment.

New technologies can help to close some of these gaps. They can deliver care services directly into patient's homes, which is crucial in a pandemic like this, but may also yield great benefits in the future. What is especially important here, is the use of data. It can help personalise treatments, improve predictability and resource utilization.

"We want to use technologies to bring healthcare to the patients and meet them where they are at, and at the same time be able to use the interactions to gather anonymised data to personalise treatment and improve predictability."

- Nora Zetsche

So far, digitisation in the healthcare sector has been very slow. Now, with COVID-19, we realise the importance of this arena in terms of digitisation and in connection to work. The big tech companies have understood the huge economic potential of the healthcare sector. While they contribute to societal benefits with their innovations, their near-monopoly like position poses a problem in regard to the issues of competition and social justice.

Because of this, initiatives like the **#WirVsVirus hackathon**[8] by the Federal German Government have become increasingly important as they allow for linking new technologies and applications with the needs of society. The hackathon has shown that digital participation processes can be quickly organised and provide us with concrete solutions for the challenges of COVID-19. Some of those have already come into practice, including tools that facilitate the digitisation of processes in public health departments.

In Europe, we need to lay the foundations for a third way between a US model of private turbo-capitalism, where a handful of big tech companies have accumulated a significant market power and entered the healthcare sector, and the Chinese state-dominated model, where innovation in big tech advances the country's ambition to become the global tech powerhouse but is also increasingly used to exert surveillance and social control over its citizens.

A European third way must bring forward a model that:

- fosters a research and development health tech landscape across the European Single Market,

- respects a data protection rules and rights regime and ultimately further strengthen ethical norms and

7.   Ärzteblatt: Coronakrise trifft sozial schwache Kinder härter: https://www.aerzteblatt.de/nachrichten/117615/Coronakrise-trifft-sozial-schwache-Kinder-haerter

8.   #WirVsVirus Hackathon: https://wirvsvirus.org/

democratic rights (GDPR is already on the brink of becoming a standard even outside Europe),

- sets standards in global bodies,

and strikes a balance between competition and scaling-up tech start-ups to the extent that they are big enough to stay (and don't move away) but don't stifle competition in the long-run.

Yet, with the tables turning in the White House there might be a more favourable strategy to pursue for the incoming US President, Joe Biden, and his administration which would seek to negotiate a 'grand bargain' with Europe over a closer transatlantic cooperation in big tech, in particular in research and development, security and the harmonisation of technical and data rights standards.[9]

"In Europe, we have the opportunity to define a third way between the US model of private turbo-capitalism and the Chinese state-dominated model."

- Alexander Schellinger

While Germany's new law for better healthcare through digitisation and innovation ('Digitale-Versorgungs-Gesetz') has been a big step in that direction, we now **need to bring the digitisation in line with the solidarity principle of statutory health insurance**. In order to do this, first of all, we should regulate the collection of data in a way that the data is not controlled by a single actor, but distributed among several actors. In this respect we should build on public institutions, who should integrate innovations like AI and the usage of data based on value-based approaches. Secondly, the state should further the expansion of the digitisation of infrastructure (patient-records, e-recipes). Thirdly, the solidarity principle of the statutory health insurance should be extended to the usage of data, because collecting and bringing together data can contribute to improving the healthcare service for everyone.[10]

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9. The Economist: The China Strategy America Needs: https://www.econ-omist.com/leaders/2020/11/19/the-china-strategy-america-needs
10. Alexander Schellinger, Nora Zetsche: Digitalisierung stärkt Solidarität. Tagesspiegel Background, 10.11.2020: https://background.tagesspiegel.de/gesundheit/digitalisierung-staerkt-solidaritaet

Conclusion

Healthcare systems and the world of work are being challenged by the advances in digitisation. The pandemic is not only accelerating these trends, but also highlighting the risks and challenges associated with this digital transformation. At the same time new technologies hold the opportunity to update our principles on good work and innovate healthcare in Europe, ultimately improving individual wellbeing.

In order to do so policymakers will need a systematic and holistic approach for restructuring labour-markets mitigating the social risks of job displacements and automation. This will require the state to set the framework for smooth job transitions and provide workers with safety nets during these times of disruption. But it will also require a cultural mindset shift at the firm level in order to create an environment for a more flexible and digital world of work.

At the heart of the agenda to improve healthcare stands addressing health inequalities and improving access to personalised healthcare solutions by using new technologies. So far progress has been slow. Crucial will be the availability and use of data and how we can bring forward a European model for tech health which is built upon trust, inclusion, and fairness. In this respect, it will be essential to strengthen the principle of solidarity within the statutory health insurance or healthcare system where the value of personal health data will benefit society overall.

Our speakers:

Alice Greschkow | Political Scientist & Author (chair)

Dieter Janecek | Member of the German Bundestag and Spokesperson for Industrial Policy and Digital Economy, Alliance 90 / The Greens

Alan Lockey | Head of the Future Work Centre and Associate Director of the Economy, Enterprise and Manufacturing Team, Royal Society of Arts

Alexander Schellinger | Head of Healthcare Development, Techniker Krankenkasse

Nora Zetsche | Co-Founder, Veta Health

Contact

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Magdalena Pichler has been a Project Assistant in the Programme "Economic and Social Transformation" at Das Progressive Zentrum since October 2020. From January to March 2020 she was an intern in this programme. She finished her studies of philosophy and European ethnology, during which she worked on questions of identity politics, media anthropology and the transformation of work. She wrote her bachelor thesis on the relation of work and necessity from Hannah Arendt's The Human Condition.

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About the workshop series
The online workshop "New Technologies and the individual – Health and Good Work" was the third in a series of three workshops in the **#Tech4Society innovation series** and was part of the **Berlin Science Week 2020**.

Das Progressive Zentrum
is an independent, non-profit think tank founded in 2007, devoted to establishing new networks of progressive actors from different backgrounds and promoting active and effective policies for economic and social progress. It involves especially next generation German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programmes Future of Democracy, Economic and Social Transformation and International Dialogue, with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organisation is based in Berlin and also operates in many European countries as well as in the United States.

Thinking ahead.