Call for Papers: Historical Social Research – Special Issue

Digital Transformation(s)

On the Entanglement of Long-Term Processes and Digital Social Change

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There is broad consensus in both academic and public discourse that the omnipresent transformation process subsumed under the term "digitalization" is one (if not the major) dominant driving force of social change in contemporary society. A broad range of disciplinary perspectives and research areas are focusing their interest on digital phenomena and conducting intensive empirical research. However, studies of digital transformation have largely concentrated on contemporary manifestations, with little attention paid to the socio-historical conditions in which digital(ized) social change occurs. Consequently, works on methodology by process-oriented scholars have only been used to a very limited extent to understand the historical antecedents and heterogeneous entanglements that have led to the evolution of contemporary society's digital transformation. In this special issue, we are soliciting interdisciplinary, socio-historical, and comparative perspectives that address the structural characteristics of the current digital transformation and thereby demonstrate the "added value" of a process-oriented and cross-cultural comparative perspective on digitalization research.

In current fields of research on digitalization, the technologies under analysis are as multifaceted (Gläser et al. 2018) as the socio-technical constellations in which they cause social change and are actively shaped. Research projects are evaluating digital change at all levels of social aggregation, such as society (Zuboff 2018; Schultze et al. 2018; Nassehi 2019), the global refiguration of spaces driven by digitalization (Bratton 2016; Knoblauch & Löw 2018; Möllers 2020), and organizations (Büchner 2018a; Alaimo & Kallinikos 2020). There are also numerous studies on the effects of digitalization in particular areas of society, such as digital (surveillance) capitalism (Schiller 2000; Zuboff 2015, 2018), digitalized health care, or (technological) assistants (Biniok & Lettkemann 2017). Additional lines of enquiry include the changes wrought upon lifeworlds, daily routines, and practices by digitalization or the mediatization of everyday life (Hepp 2018; Faimau 2018). Another focus of interest is clustered around prominent digital technologies, such as studying the potentials and effects of big data (Constantiou & Kallinikos 2015; Diaz-Bone 2019; Baur et al. 2020), the platform economy (Gillespie 2018; Egbert 2019; Alaimo & Kallinikos 2020; Kirchner & Matiaske 2020), or artificial intelligence (Bader & Kaiser 2019; Bechmann & Bowker 2019; Grønsund & Aanestad 2020), all of which are fundamentally transforming ongoing social processes. Hence, there is no doubt that a fundamental transformation process of the social and economic institutions of contemporary society has taken place in recent years.

If we reflect on this profound diagnosis from a process-oriented and socio-historical perspective, the assumed certainty of the digital transformation's omnipresence and its alleged coherence becomes much less clear. From a methodological point of view and with an interest in comparative analysis, the term "transformation" raises the questions as to which (pre-)existing structures are transformed by digitalization, digitization, and datafication (Leonardi & Treem 2020, Jarke & Breiter 2020), and how this occurs. Such questions help sharpening the focus on the modus operandi of digital transformations and specifying the causal paths along which digital transformation occurs (Büchner & Hergesell 2021). What is *specific* about social changes referred to as "digital transformation"? What is new about the *modus* of digitally induced social change, for instance in comparison to previous fundamental social epochs, such as the Renaissance or Industrialization? From a cultural-historical viewpoint, this also leads directly to the question of what specific qualities are evinced by (extremely heterogeneous) digital technologies, particularly in comparison to earlier technologies with transformative potentials, such as the epoch-making invention of the yoke, the steam engine, the alphabet or the broad introduction of business analytics in the 1950s (Aradau & Blanke 2016). This is where we see the strong potential of process-oriented and cultural comparative perspectives: They allow a deep and contextualized understanding of digital transformation and its socio-historical origins in order to identify and explain the sociogenesis of digital phenomena and their integration into extant processes (see Schützeichel 2004; Bowker 2014; Schwietring 2015).

This Special Issue aims at gathering interdisciplinary contributions that, irrespective of their empirical subjects or theoretical approaches, involve one or several of the following process-oriented and cultural comparative issues:

1) Identification of Temporal Patterns in Digital Transformation Processes

Digital phenomena are often described, quite schematically, either as radical new developments, as disruptive innovations (Schumpeter 2003 [1943]), or as mere continuations (Nassehi 2019) or intensifications of well-known processes. In contrast, time-sensitive social research has developed significantly more nuanced process models to explore temporal patterns during social change (Baur 2005, 2015; Wajcman & Dodd 2016). Within the diversity of digitalized socio-technical constellations, it is not surprising that we can observe just as many diverse patterns of digitally induced social change. Consequently, we ask which temporal patterns of digital transformation(s) are empirically observable (Otto 2020)? Are long-term transformations or cyclical temporal patterns indeed rarer than disruptive digital change (fractures, turning points) (Hergesell et al. 2020)? How do these temporal patterns affect how we understand digital transformations and contextualize existing processes (Pfeiffer 2019)? In a similar vein, we also assess the durations of digital transformation processes. While historical and cultural studies have already stressed that digitalization is a process that has been going on for decades (or even centuries), current digitalization research nevertheless frequently focuses only on the present or the recent past. A shift in interest towards temporality reframes this recent past; it then no longer serves as a precipitous starting point or "context factor" for new digitalized developments, but rather as an explicit context of comparison and investigation. We invite contributions that discuss these temporal embeddings in which digitization evolves and that illuminate the temporal patterns of digital transformation.

2) Comparative and Cross-Cultural Digitalization Research

Historical social research looks back on a long tradition of socio-historical comparative approaches (Law & Mennell 2017) for characterizing current social change. In contrast, current research on digitalization is often dominated by individual case studies. We emphasize the benefits of comparative approaches for research on digital transformation. Comparisons open up opportunities to actually study similarity and differences of digitally induced changes (Hergesell 2021; see Tilly 1984), thereby offering an alternative to the opaque and monolithic term "digital transformation." On the one hand, we address scholars engaged in comparative-historical methodology and interested in already established process-oriented comparison strategies. On the other hand, we aim at authors approaching the digital transformation explicitly from a cross-cultural socio-historical perspective (Miller 2016; Karatzogianni et al. 2017). In addition to comparing culturally diverse digitalization phenomena, the goal is to overcome Anglo-Saxon centered and Eurocentric research perspectives on digital transformation that focus exclusively on Anglo-Saxon and European developments (Costa 2018, Postill et al. 2020).

3) The Micro-, Meso- and Macro-Level of Social Change in the Digital Transformation

In historical-comparative research, there is also a long tradition of process-method(olog)ical thinking on how different levels of social aggregation in change processes are entangled and can be analytically related (Kalberg 1994; Baur et al. 2019; Baur et al. 2021). This potential of social and cultural studies methodology and social theory concepts should also be applied to research on digital transformation(s). How do the daily effects of societal change processes show up in the lifeworlds of actors? And how do temporally and spatially limited actions become shaped and transformed by infrastructures (Star 1999; Bowker 2014; Büchner 2018b, Kornberger et al. 2019) and infrastructures as regimes of order (Barlösius 2019)? How do organizations and inter-organizational relationships interact with digitalization processes, both as agents shaping digitalization and as objects shaped by digitalization (Büchner 2018a; Husted & Plesner 2020; Büchner & Dosdall 2021)? What varieties of sociotechnical embedding unravel when we study the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of digital transformations?

We are interested in both empirical contributions and methodological-theoretical papers on the process-oriented, comparative analysis of micro-meso-macro-link digital transformation. This Special Issue explicitly aims to intensify the debate about process-oriented and cross-cultural underpinnings of current digitalization research based on empirical findings. We are particularly interested in gathering interdisciplinary contributions on digitalization research and welcome submissions from non-western scholars and post-colonial perspectives.

Proposals can be submitted in the form of an abstract (max. 3,000 characters) by **May 31, 2021**. Accepted papers (35,000-65,000 characters, see guidelines) should be submitted by **December 31, 2021**. The deadline for required revisions is **June 30, 2022**. The publication of the approximately fifteen finalized articles in the Special Issue of Historical Social Research is planned for **2022.** We are looking forward to your abstracts. Please send them to jannis.hergesell@tu-berlin.de and s.buechner@ish.uni-hannover.de. Do not hesitate to contact us for questions or further information.

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