



Extended Abstract

Virtual Work and Place in Creative Industries

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Introduction

This paper explores the relation between an increasing ‘place-independence’ of labour in creative industries and the persisting necessity of local embeddedness. The creative industries are predestined to display new trends of structural change in labour organisation (Manske/Schnell 2010). Because of dynamic developments of new forms of labour and labour organisation caused by developments in ICTs, as well as the potential for economic growth, the creative industries are an interesting field of research. Though these changes of labour organisation were in recent years more common in low-skill- and highly standardised areas commonly referred to as ‘crowdwork’ or ‘crowdsourcing’ (Howe 2006), these labour practices increasingly spread to high-skilled labour, the creative industries on its forefront.

Methods

This paper is the first output of an ongoing research project from the University of Vienna (Department of Sociology) and FORBA (Working Life Research Centre, Vienna). To provide a brief overview of current discussions about place and virtual work the paper sums up noteworthy contributions found in literature. In addition to the literature review first insights in our empirical research and preliminary results will be presented. The research’s design comprises a qualitative panel survey (35+ qualitative follow-up interviews) with people working in the creative industries. These interviews were and are being conducted in 2005 and 2015. The second part is a mapping of Austrian crowd workers and companies that outsource creative tasks. The third part of the empirical research implies 10-15 qualitative interviews with crowd workers. And in the fourth part 5-7 interviews with clients (people who or companies that outsource creative tasks) and 5 interviews with experts in the field of creative production

are being conducted. All interviews will be fully transcribed and interpreted using sociological hermeneutics (Hitzler 1999; Froschauer/Lueger 2009) and content analysis (Mayring 2000).

Results and Discussion

The emergence and progression of information technologies have a vast impact on many aspects of creative work. Easier access to information technologies (i.e. computers, laptops, smartphones, tablets, etc.) contributes to a growing ‘place-independence’ of the production of creative goods. This delocalisation of ICT-enabled or virtual work is, ‘in principle’, always possible and is leading, according to commentators (see, for example, Friedman, 2006), to ‘world flattening’ effects. Better and easier access to the internet as well as faster and more reliable network structures increasingly allow creative producers to work online and connect themselves to clients from basically all over the world, for example via crowdsourcing platforms, e.g. Elance.com, 99designs.com, Freelancer.com etc., and thus drastically impact creative production itself as well as power relations between the creative producer and the client.

In contrast to this view, we argue that especially creative work is rooted deeply in places. Spatial aspects and social milieus influence the creative work process in various ways. In literature there are several arguments pointing to the spatial and geographic ‘embeddedness’ of (creative) work. There are, for one, classical agglomeration effects (Simmel 1992; Wirth 1938) that benefit the clustering of creative workers and hence foster the emergence of the creative industries. These arguments include infrastructural factors, such as architecture, transportation possibilities, size and density of the agglomeration area. Other explanations stressing the importance of place in regard to creative production focus on human capital (Florida 2002; Kotkin 2001), networks (Granovetter 1983; Grabher 2004) or social interaction (Storper/Venables 2003; Clare 2012; Currid 2007; Merkel/Oppen 2012). These theories emphasise, to a varying extend, the importance of place and spatial relations.

Conclusions

The paper concludes what is often perceived as ‘place-independence’ needs to be actively ‘produced’ in every single case through a process which may include the digitisation of information, the modularisation of creative processes and the standardisation of tasks (Huws et al. 2004). In such processes, aspects of organisation, labour relations, technology and space are closely intertwined. To examine the socially contingent effects of digitalised work we need to analyse the ways in which crowdwork within social and economic power relations is made possible in the first place and the ways in which it can empower people or make them vulnerable.

References and Notes

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