Worlds of Work:

Implications of Urbanisation, Technology and Sustainability

Ben IAQUINTO, KIM Jung Eun, Florin SERBAN and Tommy TSE

What might the world of work look like in 2050? There has been considerable debate about the impact of urbanisation and technology on social relations, spatial inequalities, and individual wellbeing in the context of work, particularly in the Global South. While 'smart' cities exemplify utopian ideals of technology-driven efficiency and innovation, the role of technology in the world of work is dynamic and contested. In September 2019, the Cities 2050: Urbanisation, Sustainability, and Mobility cluster in the HKU Faculty of Social Sciences organised a three-day international symposium supported by the British Sociological Association's Work, Employment and Society journal. The event brought together an array of UK, Asia and Australia-based world-class social science scholars, to dialogue and critically reflect on the rapidly changing dynamics and multi-faceted effects of urbanisation, climate change, technological change and mass migration in the context of work, offering new insights into the social relations and problems derived from the emerging worlds of work, the changing nature of the urban, and the intensifying complexity of cities across the global North and South divide.

Keywords: cities 2050, Global South, migration, sustainability, technology, urbanisation, worlds of work.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nw2TOzswXJW4RsISpTQ74UJDEMwy9H1N/view

Introduction

What might the world of work look like in 2050? What is the relationship between the transformations currently occurring in the workforce, and the futures of work, urbanisation, urban life and economies? There has been considerable debate about the nature, patterns and consequences of mega-urbanisation, migratory movement, urban forms linked to and produced from technology, and their impact on social relations, spatial inequalities, and individual wellbeing in the context of work. Asia and Africa currently have the highest rates of urbanisation. China and India have strived to seize the urban moment, legitimise the building of hundreds of new cities as national economic priorities; in particular, China has aimed to move nearly 300 million more people into 'green, smart and sustainable' metropolises by 2030 (The 'Cities' issue of *National Geographic*, April 2019). 'Smart' cities, or variants of this urban form, exemplify utopian ideals of technology-driven efficiency and innovation. Yet technologies embody specific forms of power and authority, and the role of technology and the world of work has a long history which is dynamic and contested. Will the new waves of technological advancement – such as automation, artificial intelligence (AI), robotics and digital platforms –bring about a utopian 'post-work' society where humans are free from work, smart cities become sustainable, and the deep-seated problems of inequality, exploitation and environmental degradation disappear? Or will people become redundant as AI outperforms our physical and cognitive abilities, creating unforeseen socio-economic and environmental harms (Harari 2018)?

Between the 9th and 11th of September 2019, the Department of Sociology, Department of Geography and Department of Politics and Public Administration under the *Cities 2050: Urbanisation, Sustainability, and Mobility* cluster in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong, co-organised a three-day international symposium entitled 'Worlds of Work: Implications of Urbanisation, Technology and Sustainability'. The symposium was supported by the British Sociological Association's *Work, Employment and Society* journal, focussing on five timely themes, namely (1) 'Migration and work in the urban setting: Education/training, social life, labour rights'; (2) 'Creative and technology industries as the future of work: Identity and wellbeing'; (3) 'Mobility and the future of work: Flexible, networked, precarious, sustainable?'; (4) 'Economic restructuring, organisational practices and workers' responses'; and (5) 'Work, sustainability, geopolitics and social policy'. The event brought together an array of UK, Asia and Australia-based world-class social science scholars, to dialogue and critically reflect on the rapidly changing dynamics and multi-faceted effects of urbanisation, climate change, technological change and mass migration in the context of work. This international symposium uniquely spanned across divergent academic disciplines and geographical and social contexts, offering new insights into the social relations and problems derived from the emerging worlds of work, the changing nature of the urban, and the intensifying complexity of cities across the global North and South divide.

Highlights of the event

Theme 1: Migration and work in the urban setting: Education/training, social life, labour rights

One of the key themes covered in our panel discussions was migration, which has major implications for urbanisation, the world of work and the right to the city. One example raised by Eleonore Kofman, Joint-Editor-in-Chief of *Work, Employment and Society*, was Sarah Swider's article 'Building China: precarious employment among migrant construction workers' (Swider 2015), which was awarded the 2016 WES Prize for Best Article. Swider's work critically analysed the diverse nature of precarious informal work operating outside of state regulations and labour markets among migrant construction workers in China. In doing so, she drew attention to the continuing significance of internal migration, usually marginalised by scholars in the Global North, but which remains highly significant in the Global South in shaping cities.

In addition, workers' responses to state and managerial efforts in promoting organisational

sustainability in the auto parts industry in China were discussed, aiming at understanding the contradiction between managerial strategies in achieving sustainability in economic, environmental and human dimensions. Bill Taylor's case study of Huawei also provided exploratory lens towards more general issues of ownership, control and influence in China. His case study illuminates some specificities of the development of PRC capitalism and the military-industrial complex, in addition to elucidating how workers should be involved in technological development.

Emotion and labour is another political-cultural project that incessantly creates valuable working-class subjects; a project that often starts in vocational training school, a site generating multiple forms of mobility between learning and workspaces. In the context of China, Pun Ngai presented an important topic about the emotional reproduction of working-class subjects through schooling and internship experiences, investigating students' sense of belonging to the nation-state as well as their aspirations and fears for the future. Susanne Choi examined how male rural-to-urban migrant taxi drivers experience a loss of control over their working condition in urban South China. As their work becomes more precarious, they experience feelings of disempowerment, a profound sense of livelihood insecurity and a crisis of social reproduction. The main reasons for this precarious state of mind are a workplace reorganisation that marginalises workers and shifts away their control over working conditions. Seonyoung Hwang and Alexandra Beauregard focused on how East Asian migrant women benefit from various resources stemming from both their home and their host cultures. Their double minority status is challenged by negative ethnic stereotyping at work and family pressures to confirm to traditional values. However, the presented paper highlights how these migrants also profit of resources such as positive ethnic stereotyping and norms for gender egalitarianism, individualism and work-life to increase their sense of agency and satisfaction.

Theme 2: Creative and technology industries as the future of work: Identity and wellbeing

By 2050 machine-learning and robotics technologies promise to be able to replace some tasks or whole jobs that have traditionally been performed by humans. Like previous technologies introduced in the past couple of centuries, this possibility has been met with either optimism that will permit liberation from the tyranny of employment, or pessimism that it will lead to mass precarity and unemployment. In the symposium, keynote speaker Brendan Burchill presented qualitative and quantitative evidence to explore the possible societal consequences of a radical reduction in the length of the normal working week. His discussion drew upon the evidence for the economic, sociological and psychological literatures on employment. It is argued that paid work does have important benefits beyond the wage, but the minimum effective dose of employment for such benefits may be as little as one day per week. He also discussed why the historical increases in productivity have not been matched with proportionate reductions in working time.

Recently launched digital video platforms such as *Douyin* [*Tik Tok*] attract many young users and some of them use it for financial gains by producing and distributing content on this social media platform. Anthony Fung presented his research on how this platform transforms the production procedures in traditional occupations. He has identified ten occupations emerging from this digital video platform. Some of his findings highlight that contrary to commonplace conceptions the young users who seek a career on this platform do not depend on *Douyin* for a living. Instead, they use this platform to rediscover their job satisfaction, confidence, autonomy, and eventually labour as creators but without a fixed identity.

Whilst media production and consumption become more automated and algorithmically dictated (Napoli, 2014), the technologies of algorithms and natural language generation (NLG) and 'Heliograf' can be both empowering and disturbing to the everyday experiences and psychological wellbeing of those working in the creative industries, especially media professionals (Carlson, 2018). Indeed, research studies

suggest media professionals in Hong Kong and China are increasingly affected by automation and anxious about the transformations this process will bring to their career development (e.g. Li & Yu, 2018). The wellbeing of information and narrative gatekeepers (e.g. reporters, editors, copywriters, public relations officers) in our future 'smart cities' is vital for the communities they work in. Florin Serban critically analysed how algorithms and automated technology impact media workers' wellbeing and how they go about their media production operations - newsgathering, production practices and dissemination.

Another study by Anne Peirson-Smith and Tommy Tse focuses on investigating how creative workers locate meaning in precarious work situations using specific psychosocial mechanisms based on social values highlighting the separation between creative work aspirations and implicit meanings, versus structural, societal and rhetorical notions of work. In searching for meaningfulness and avoiding meaninglessness, creative workers respond by accepting, negotiating or rejecting their workplace situation. While coping with external uncertainties and finding agency in internal work factors, creative workers redefine and reframe work boundaries as a form of sensemaking through relational ties and social networks, as an outlet for creative talents and as a coping strategy.

Theme 3: Mobility and the future of work: Flexible, networked, precarious, sustainable?
Politically and economically, the future of resource work is currently high on the agenda in many countries. In Australia, for instance, this year's general election revolved around the promise of jobs for regional communities in the mining sector. Yet the intensification of automation is rapidly changing this sector, with potentially far reaching implications for the people and places involved. In his research, David Bissell explored the changing nature of work in the resources sector in Australia where increased automation means that an increasing proportion of jobs are moving from regional to urban centres. Through fieldwork with workers differently positioned in the resources sector, Bissell speculated on how automation becomes differently disclosed through the aesthetic dimensions of

encounters. Political and ethical value of admitting ambiguity, incoherence and confusion are explained as qualities of our relations with technological change.

At the same time, the current globalising capitalist economy has continued to reward wealth more than work. Hypermobility of wealth and human resources has led to worsening environmental degradation, climate crisis and extreme socio-economic polarisation. It is high time we reflected on the value and nature of mobility and work. Urban mobility should be seen as a tool to facilitate our building of communities, not about the seeking of monetary return. Unless we reclaim the true meaning of work—to promote environmental sustainability and develop positive human relationships in the course of satisfying one another's socio-economic needs, we are giving up the wellbeing of the earth and ourselves. Mee Kam Ng discussed the pursuit of doughnut economics (Raworth, 2018), that is, economic systems that respect the ecological ceiling and safeguard the social foundation, is vital for the sustainability of the earth and Homo sapiens. To counteract the destructive trend of privatising nature and culture, Ng suggested to resurrect the practice of recommoning and assume collectively our duties to take care of the ecological systems that embrace us, socio-economic and spatial beings. Pursuing doughnut economics and recommoning will provide ecological, safe, socio-spatially just spaces for regenerative human activities that can nurture positive human relationships and purposeful undertakings, all essential for the psychological and social wellbeing of urbanites.

Benjamin Iaquinto analysed the entanglements between tourism and work. His case study on holders of holiday visas, initially introduced in mid- 70's for cultural exchange purposes, highlights how these temporary workers contribute to maintaining Australia's food security and economy. These holiday visas holders they comprise one quarter of Australia's agricultural workforce. Nevertheless, long-term agricultural productivity in this country is threatened by both the effects of climate exchange and by the cases of sexual harassment, exploitation, and withholding of wages.

Theme 4: Economic restructuring, organisational practices and workers' responses

Across the developing world, platform-based informal workers are increasingly using new Internet communication tools for collective action. While there is a growing interest in Internet-facilitated collective action, there are still limited studies on industries that have traditionally been left unregulated, such as the motorcycle taxi industry in Indonesia. Joanna Octavia presented new evidence and timely debates on social networks in online spaces, and how they are taking shape within the informal sector of the developing world. She has also showcased policy developments in Indonesia and their effectiveness in impacting platform business decisions and regulatory change.

Another internet-facilitated collective action is online thrift activities. Tom McDonald and Dan Li explored the social significance of the widespread and popular online thrift activities that are colloquially described as 'pulling sheep's wool' – frequently involving collecting various credits and points through novel online infrastructures such as digital shopping and payment platforms in Chinese factories, showing how these practices are reshaping the rhythms and structures of everyday factory life by bringing into sharp focus competing demands between online and offline, work and leisure, and challenging the distinctions between these domains. It is argued that online thrift oriented practices provide a novel perspective from which to understand workers' attitudes to labour and economic relations as they occur in the factory environment.

In recent years, 'Mass Innovation and Entrepreneurship' has been promoted in China as an important impetus to promote economic restructuring and social equity. A new wave of innovative entrepreneurship has started, attracting people from diverse social backgrounds to join the trend with the hope of kickstarting innovative businesses with the support of investment capital funds. To better understand the complexities and nuances of these practices, Yanan Guo's study closely documented the struggles of grassroots innovative entrepreneurs' pursuit of angel investment in contemporary China, and examined how their interactions and communication with angel investors and the latter's interpretation of those play a role in informing the investment decision making processes.

Theme 5: Work, sustainability, geopolitics and social policy

Automation, sustainability and work are keywords for the future of developing countries. Bridgette Wessels highlighted that current discourse about robotics and autonomous systems (RAS) is couched in terms of jobless growth and technological unemployment resulting in greater inequality (Peters 2017). However, assessments are mixed, with some observers suggesting that persistent technological unemployment will deepen inequality, whereas others expect employment to rise again after a short period of economic and work restructuring that will readdress inequality (Peters 2017). Bridgette Wessels discussed the challenges that RAS raises for social policy in terms of supporting a sustainable and inclusive society.

To shift our focus onto the next generation, young people are sensitive to rapid social transformations. Gina Chin-Yi Yang presented her research on the process of transition for Kinmen county in Taiwan. Young people of that area which is located in the vicinity of Xiamen, China are bonded with the decision-making processes of migration, employment and education. After 1992, Kinmen has quickly transformed from being a war frontier to become a frontline borderland for business and politics between Taiwan and China. The reshaping of borders has reconstructed life paths for youth. Using a geopolitical lens to understand globalisation, neoliberalism and cosmopolitanism, she has identified four types of young people: home-staying observer, cosmopolitan pursuer, great-power dreamer, and cross-border travellers.

Mark Wong examined inequality and marginalisation and pointed out that a sole emphasis on technological innovations could overlook persistent issues in the opportunity structure of societal institutions and the global economy. His presentation focused on the impact of increased precarity and insecurity of work on marginalised young people, and thereby

question how future imaginings of work and skills may reinforce deep-rooted exclusions of the most disadvantaged in society. Sustainable futures for frail communities is one of the important perspectives the future of work will bring in megacities of the world such as Mumbai. Chitra Venkataramani examined how changing horizons of risk emerge for the fisher community in Mumbai as they contend with the looming threat of displacement and loss of livelihood resulting from ecological harm. Her ethnographic work in the fishing community, highlighted how risk is not simply suspended in an unknown future, but actively engaged in different ways through the uncertainties that characterise fishing as a profession and status of the fisher community as urban residents. The short-term risks of meeting profit margins, the medium-term risks of displacement, and the long-term risks of climate change are folded into the everyday practices of working in and inhabiting a fragile and rapidly transforming urban coastline.

Concluding Note

In Caroline Knowles' view, if current trends continue the cities of 2050 will be more and more asymmetrical. Plutocratic cities, shaped in the everyday ecologies of wealthy life, and lived by the masses, are profoundly asymmetrical. Extreme accumulations of wealth not seen in a century now shape London and other cities too. Asia produces more new millionaires than any other region. Cities like London are an unfolding experiment in the consequences of the coexistence of want and wealth. This makes research into the substance of wealth and the mechanisms creating it in the fortunes, lives and habitats of plutocrats an urgent priority. There are intellectual and political benefits in understanding cities through close encounters with the infrastructures of wealth generation and consumption.

Details of the event can be found at:

http://www.socsc.hku.hk/cities2050/wes/

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nw2TOzswXJW4RsISpTQ74UJDEMwy9H1N/view

Florin C. Serban is a Lecturer in the School of Communication at Hong Kong Baptist University. His main research is on media sociology and the impact of public participation and artificial intelligence on media work. Florin has collaborated with the Department of Sociology, the University of Hong Kong and with the Department of Media and Communication at City University of Hong Kong. He has worked as a journalist in Bucharest and in Brussels before obtaining his doctoral degree in Communication Studies from Hong Kong Baptist University.

Tommy Tse is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at The University of Hong Kong. He specialises in Asia's media and cultural industries, consumer culture, creative labour and fashion. His work has been published in top international journals, including *Information, Communication and Society; Journal of Consumer Culture; Journal of Cultural Economy; Journal of Business Anthropology* and *International Journal of Fashion Studies*. He has worked in various media and creative companies, and also taught at the Hong Kong Baptist University's School of Communication and Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts in London. Currently, Tse is the Vice-President (2019 - 2021) of Hong Kong Sociological Association and an Associate Board Member of *Work, Employment and Society* (Sage).