GENDER A VÝZKUM
GENDER AND RESEARCH

Convergences: Communication, Work, and Gender

Nicoleta Elena Apostol[a], **Romina Surugiu**[a]

[a]) University of Bucharest

Apostol, Nicoleta Elena, Surugiu, Romina. 2024. Convergences: Communication, Work, and Gender. *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research* 25 (2): 3–12, https://doi.org/10.13060/gav.2024.019.

The premise of this thematic issue is that work and communication are converging, and that the process is upheld by interactive (digital) technologies. 'Convergences' (in plural) was chosen to emphasise the 'always-existing entanglement' (McRobbie 2011:61) between the 'nature' of work, gender, and other dimensions of identity, such as social class, age, race, ethnicity, educational background, occupational status, job type, bodily and cognitive abilities, non-normative sexualities, and nationality.

The intrinsic link between labour and technology surfaces regularly in public debates, which include concerns about risks to the workforce in the future, as we have seen in the past decade with the rise of generative artificial intelligence (Reeves 2016). Currently, we experience 'technology' through the intensification of our interactions with it (Rogers 1986). An interaction necessarily involves another entity (human, non-human); it relies on action and cognition and manifests across different forms of communication, verbal and non-verbal. Interactive technologies have created a media ecology with different genres of participation compared to print media, radio, and television (Madianou, Miller 2013). The increased access to digital infrastructure and the relative affordability of devices have led to an environment in which we alternate between being on- and off-line. A major outcome is that production (remunerated work in the market) and social reproduction (the unpaid work needed to make life itself possible, for oneself and for others) are further enabled to go along. The household is no longer considered the sole site of social reproduction, nor is social reproduction limited to housework and care responsibilities, as it has instead come to be understood as 'the work of creating and sustaining social forms

and relations of cooperation and sociality' (Weeks 2007: 235). With technological interconnectivity, we are exposed to and compelled to participate in the incessant production of symbols and data (Morini 2007; Virno 2004), both when we are engaged in paid labour and when we are at home, as we are performing domestic work or enjoying our leisure time.

The role of work in (de)focusing gender

Like previous technological milestones (e.g. the steam engine, electricity, the assembly line), computing and the internet – the basis of interactive technologies – have changed labour processes and workplace relations, thereby transforming social dynamics (Moll 2022). Nowadays, the distinction between working life and private life has become untenable, as the subject must take advantage of opportunities to instantiate its potentiality: 'subjectivity itself, in its experiential, relational, creative dimensions' represents what is exchanged in the labour market (Morini, Fumagalli 2010: 236). As such, the central asset becomes one's capacity to mobilise linguistic intellect and communicative competencies (Morini 2007; Virno 2004). *Prima facie*, one might associate these patterns exclusively with today's growing share of intellectually oriented jobs, but as Carlo Vercellone (2005: 3) points out, 'human labour is an activity that reunites within it both thought and action', and employment in industrial capitalism has produced a distortion by emphasising the standardised and repetitive aspects of work. The pioneering study by Shoshana Zuboff (1988) captured the transition from manual dexterity to intellectual capacity in American industries with the integration of computing, and nowadays it is accepted that to accomplish work people need to draw on a mix of intellectual abilities and action-centred skills.

While we are being collectively transformed into a 'labour society' through a diffused system of production (Virno 2004: 101), with a generalised sense of anxiety about the availability (and suitability) of jobs in the background, gender remains a core dimension of personal identity. To paraphrase Donna Haraway (cited in Weeks 2007: 239), we are living in times characterised by both the erosion and the intensification of gender. We know that in more economically developed countries, as well as in less economically developed regions of the world, there has been a steady increase in women's labour market participation (WTO 2017). Women with tertiary education outnumber male graduates, and even though by 1998 one-half or more of all professionalised occupations were held by women (ILO 2004: 50), in what today is labelled 'knowledge work' the earnings disadvantages of women persist (Sauer, Van Kerm, Checchi 2022). Historically, they have been more likely than their male counterparts to be concentrated in precarious forms of labour (e.g. temporary work, part-time positions, underemployment, low-wage jobs with diminished levels of control over

hours and work conditions), both due to segregated occupational patterns and because within the private sphere of life they have been (and continue to be) the main providers of domestic work and childcare (Betti 2018). However, with the onset of post-Fordism and the decline of manufacturing, male workers in industrialised countries have been exposed to insecure employment at higher rates and to jobs that lack regulatory protection and are poorly paid (Kalleberg 2012).

It seems that we are moving irreversibly towards 'equalisation', and that gender as a political category is losing its impact on 'citizenship rights, educational and employment opportunities, levels of income and wealth, access to prestige and power' (Hawkesworth 2013: 3). Female workers are catching up with their male peers, and this enables them to exert more choice in their lifestyles, in key areas such as partnerships, marriage, mothering, and childrearing, and in managing disposable income and consumption patterns (McRobbie 2011: 67). As the emerging generations of women are benefitting from the equality achievements of the first two waves of feminism and living the intellectual sophistication of the third one, it has been suggested that precariousness is becoming a gender-unifying experience (Fumagalli, Morini 2020). Traditionally, young people are a vulnerable category of workers (Esping-Andersen 2000), and they are further disempowered in bargaining for working conditions in a context that is marked by the rising costs of pursuing higher education and of embarking on a particular occupational path, costs that young people and their families bear with limited or inexistent welfare-state support (Antonucci 2018). Among the various forms of precarious work, underemployment is considered to have become 'the global normality for youth in the labour market' (Roberts 2009: 4), which has been defined as an insufficient 'quantity and quality of employment to meet the needs and wants of workers' (MacDonald, Giazitzoglu 2019: 729), in terms of wages, job security, aspirations. This restates the importance of intersectionality for acknowledging how various aspects of one's identity interact and the need to pay attention to how identity categories coexist under the influence of socioeconomic, political, and environmental contingencies.

The amplification of the impact of gender on labour began to occur in the 1970s, with the growth of the service (tertiary) sector, predicated on an influx of female workers. Women were the largest available workforce to enter this labour market, in addition to being considered naturally more qualified to deal with clients in retail, to provide care services, and to perform clerical tasks, which had lost status with the diffusion of education (Blackburn et al. 2002). The distinction between the feminised service sector and the masculinised manufacturing sector has since then faded, as male workers have increasingly taken jobs in service industries, and there has been a diversification of the sector through the rise of the information economy, which has also increased the demand for knowledge work. With the permutation of the econ-

omy, Cristina Morini (2007: 42) argues that women have become a model for the contemporary labour market, both in their historically driven capability to be 'elastic' (Thompson 1983: 193), to stretch themselves in order to have a wage and to maintain their involvement in the domestic sphere, and because of the advantage of bringing to the point of production attitudes and behaviours related to their social reproductive role (e.g. to care for the other, to impart linguistic meaning).

The feminised ethos of labour

The newfound centrality of these dimensions in the labour market – elasticity and social reproductive prospects – has been linked with the presumably low-skilled character of service jobs, creating the expectation for women to always 'give that little extra something' (Grossman 2012: 71) to compensate for the fact that what they were bringing to the table were innate inclinations, not skills that require hard work or the physical strength and authority embodied by the (white) male worker. The growing spectrum of service industries at the intersection with mediatisation has caused the paradigm to shift and made desirable those workplaces and skills that involve 'actions affecting primarily people and paper' and currently relying on screens (Greene, Swenson 2018: 242).

As we have moved firmly into the cultural feminisation of economic life (Adkins 2001), there has been a generalised attempt to extract from the workforce qualities that carry the trace of female labour that is, a labour that is flexible, interactive, affective, and self-aware. Originally, the concept of the 'feminisation of work' referred to the overrepresentation of women in jobs with low status and rewards, since men were clustered in the better unionised branches, while women were segregated in areas of work that were considered low-skilled, conveniently viewed as a natural extension of their domestic roles (Thompson 1983: 203). Thus, the feminisation of work is also the quiet advance of a feminised ethos of labour, which has spread from the 'bottom' of the labour market towards the labour market's specialised branches. What in the past was perceived as female disposition is getting recognition as a skill, i.e. something that takes effort to master and implement, exchangeable in the labour market. Concomitantly the labour market is becoming de-gendered, as the attributes that were traditionally associated with female labour are in the process of being expropriated from female embodiment to become the standard expected from the average worker. An illustration is the transversal demand for soft skills. The quintessential worker, even if in possession of expertise or 'hard' skills, is expected to train and make use of their 'soft' abilities. These skills are intensely cognitive in nature and require intrapersonal and interpersonal exchanges, and in the labour market they are codified, for example, as communication, management, relationship skills,

and continuous learning (Weber et al. 2009). They convey infinite possibilities, and in tandem with interactive technologies they support the multiplication of surplus value.

With the diffusion of education and with computing, the occupational profile of workers who are in demand has changed as well. Women's greater participation in the labour force coincided with these developments and correlates with an economy (with forms of capital accumulation) thriving on social reproduction.

The contributions of this thematic issue

For this special issue, we have prioritised the term 'work' over 'labour', as the former is inclusive of the latter. 'Labour' is the institutionalised form that the organisation of work takes in society, and it is associated with estrangement (alienation) from oneself, from the process and the product of one's effort, and from social relationships, while 'work' refers to the general process by which humans satisfy the various needs that exist at a given time, creating goods, providing services, and simultaneously impacting nature, culture, and society (Fuchs, Sevignani 2013: 240). Work is what it takes to create and maintain life and the world we are inhabiting, it is constitutively reproductive before it is productive. We were interested in the experience of work in its variety, and we sought to explore how communication actualises the potential of work to be a source of toil and hardship and a source of satisfaction and self-expression (Frayssé 2014: 472), and we aimed to provide gendered illustrations of this phenomenon.

Alina Silion's 'The Aftermath of Minds, Hearts and Symbols: A Multidimensional Perspective of Digital Housework' is the sole contribution that focuses on the domestic sphere of life. We know that housework has paved the way to the 'double shift', from which women have not been able to free themselves. What is the impact of interactive and smart home technologies on the division of labour? Do they foster a more equal workload? According to the author, digital housework is mostly performed by men, while women assist the process. Men interact in-depth with these devices in the buying process and in ensuring their proper use and maintenance, and they communicate with household members for endorsement and regulation purposes. Digital housework does not affect (yet) the paradigm of domestic work, it only adds tasks that men are willing to engage with. It raises men's self-esteem, as it enables them to bring technical improvements into the household, while women increase their ability to connect online and offline aspects of life through these technologies.

The study co-authored by Alexandra Codău and Valentin Vanghelescu, 'The Limits and Opportunities of Practicing Journalism in the Digital Space: A Gender Perspective', is a case study on the professional debut of a female journalist in the visible – instantly praising and hostile – digital environment. Their research analyses the twisted outcome of a feature article on a music festival hosted in Romania. The article went

viral and generated not just positive comments – acknowledging the young journalist's work of showing aspects of interest for the community – but also many negative reactions from the publication's online readers. Predictably, the female gender of the journalist was used as significant grounds for justifying the criticism levelled against the piece she had authored. Such a debut would be likely to put a person off pursuing journalism as a career but given the simultaneity of communication practices in the digitised public sphere, the young journalist immediately received 'institutional' support. Well-established media figures, a feminist NGO, and university representatives, along with allied social media users, were able to discursively counter the imprint left by the aggressive and misogynistic speech being expressed online.

The article of Mariana Fagundes, 'The Transnational Construction and Maintenance of Digital Feminist Media Activism: Engagement Practices in the Global South and North', explores how collectives in Brazil and France organise their editorial workflows. Through the accounts of different actors involved in the market production and social reproduction of feminist media projects, the article offers readers a glimpse of the work it takes to produce this type of content as a readily available discursive resource that offers an alternative to the mainstream media's heterosexist biases. The author underlines the precarity of the working conditions in media activism and how symbolic rewards – access to social and cultural forms of capital – to some extent compensate for the low-paid or voluntary nature of work in this field. The exposure granted by these spaces allows authors to gain visibility in the world of activism, and professional recognition in the world of content creation. At the same time, the danger of online harassment endures, feminist websites and blogs are regularly hacked, and their authors are threatened and often have to discontinue their own social media accounts.

Keren Darmon's 'Time to Change the 'Change': Stigma and Support in Blogs about the Menopause' describes a development rarely observed in industries such as public relations, which traditionally seek to follow protocol and maintain 'respectability' in an effort to appeal to audiences – namely, women working in public relations who are using their skills in this case not for the benefit of their clients but to reflect on the transformation that menopause brings about at work. As often happens with occupations that rely predominantly on intellective skills, bodies are placed in parentheses, except with respect to the concern for the aesthetics of self-presentation. Menopause symptoms – such as low energy levels, impaired memory and concentration, and 'brain fog' – are brought to light in blog posts created by members of women-only networks. 'Menopause talk' is placed at the crossroads of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities: on the one hand, there is the imperative of ensuring women's full participation in the labour market by raising awareness on this specific issue; on the other hand, a step is being taken to de-normalise and to question the expectations that we have from labouring bodies.

Chiara Perin offers an auto-ethnographic account in 'Washing "Dirty Work" in Academia and Beyond: Resisting Stigma as an Early Career Researcher Investigating Sexuality in the Digital'. The paper provides us with insight into the tensions that young women can experience when studying topics related to sexual attitudes and behaviours that cannot be examined using measurable variables and impersonal numbers. The paper also prompts reflection on the disjunctive worlds of academia, where there is one world that provides an environment for engaging with and publishing on hitherto (metaphorically speaking) 'closeted' strands of research, and one that is linked to the institutionalised spaces in which (work-in-progress) theses are defended, diplomas are conferred, teaching commitments are assigned, and (sometimes) job security is granted. Institutional and personal struggles are inherent to gender and sexuality scholarship, as society seems to reject the boundary between the researcher's professional life and personal life. This then seems to be part of the 'dirty work' required to master this area of research.

Concluding remark

How can we bring these theoretical and research insights together? The 'convergence between labour and communication' (Brophy 2011) was the syntagm that inspired us for this call for papers after several years of discussing media convergence and engaging with the scholarship on labour in communication studies. These words were used by Enda Brophy (2011) to capture the alienating uses of communication in the post-Fordist economy, specifically in the form of call centre labour. Our call for papers departed from this syntagm by using 'work'. When we launched the call we decided to keep things open, to accommodate various layers of experience. Around the same time (September 2023), we attended a welcome celebration for first-year students at our university, which to a certain extent augured the direction of this thematic issue. It is customary in the faculty where we teach to invite professionals from the media and communications industries (many of them alumni) to serve as role models for incoming students. The leitmotif established during the event was that if you enter the media and communications industries, you will never feel that you are 'really' working. This view was articulated by one of the (male) invited professionals, after a timid attempt was made by a (female) journalist to discuss instances of personal precarity in the field. As they stepped in front of the audience in the university amphitheatre, the guests active in these industries followed the lead of the second speaker in declaring communication jobs to be among the best occupations in the labour market for the 'usual' reasons: creativity, flexible work schedules, learning new things, and interacting with 'interesting people'. Based this anecdote, and on the articles published in this issue, and with the support of the literature we have cited, we

suggest that communication as such – interpersonal exchanges, content creation, the acts of disseminating, sharing, and commenting on social media posts, etc. – is also what often makes day-to-day labour seem less alienating. When we say this, we are referring not just to the segment of workers who are paid to create and disseminate communication, but also to the increasingly larger section of the population that has become invested in performing its share of paid work (Moulier Boutang 2011). We have become attached to paid work as we have been given the chance to put our thoughts, linguistic intellect and communicative competencies into it, and it thereby contains a part of us, a part of our living power.

Acknowledgements

Nicoleta Elena Apostol would like to thank the Research Institute of the University of Bucharest (ICUB) for supporting the research of this article (grant no. 8371/25.07.2023).

References

Adkins, L. 2001. Cultural Feminization: 'Money, Sex and Power for Women'. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26 (3): 669–695, http://doi.org/10.1086/495625.

Antonucci, L. 2018. Not All Experiences of Precarious Work Lead to Precarity: The Case Study of Young People at University and Their Welfare Mixes. *Journal of Youth Studies* 21 (7): 888–904, http://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1421749.

Betti, E. 2018. Historicizing Precarious Work: Forty Years of Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities. *International Review of Social History* 63 (2): 273–319, http://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859018000329.

Brophy, E. 2011. Language Put to Work: Cognitive Capitalism, Call Center Labor, and Worker Inquiry. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 35 (4): 410–416, http://doi.org/10.1177/0196859911417437.

Blackburn, R. M., J. Browne, B. Brooks, J. Jarman, 2002. Explaining Gender Segregation. *The British Journal of Sociology* 53 (4): 513–536, https://doi.org/10.1080/0007131022000021461.

Esping-Andersen, G. 2000. Regulation and Context: Reconsidering the Correlates of Unemployment. Pp. 99–112 in G. Esping-Andersen, M. Regini (eds.). *Why Deregulate Labour Markets?* New York: Oxford University Press.

Frayssé, O. 2014. Work and Labour as Metonymy and Metaphor. *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 12 (2): 468–485, https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v12i2.546 .

Fuchs, C., S. Sevignani. 2013. What Is Digital Labour? What Is Digital Work? What's Their Difference? And Why Do These Questions Matter for Understanding Social Media?

TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society 11 (2): 237–293, http://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v11i2.461.

Fumagalli, A., C. Morini. 2020. Anthropomorphic Capital and Commonwealth Value. *Frontiers in Sociology* 5 (24), http://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2020.00024.

Greene, R. W., K. Swenson. 2018. Precarious Cooperation: Soft Skills and the Governing of Labor Power. Pp. 234–254 in W. S. Hesford, A. C. Licona, C. Teston (eds.). *Precarious Rhetorics*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.

Grossman, B. 2012. The Feminised Service Sector: From Micro to Macro Analysis. *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* 6 (1): 63–79.

Hawkesworth, M. 2013. Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: From Naturalized Presumption to Analytical Categories. In G. Waylen, K. Celis, J. Kantola, S. L. Weldon (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ILO. 2004. *Breaking through the Glass Ceiling: Women in Management*. Geneva: International Labour Office.

Kalleberg, A. L. 2012. Job Quality and Precarious Work: Clarifications, Controversies, and Challenges. *Work and Occupations* 39 (4): 427–448.

MacDonald, R., A. Giazitzoglu. 2019. Youth, Enterprise and Precarity: Or, What Is, and What Is Wrong with, the 'Gig Economy'? *Journal of Sociology* 55 (4): 724–740, http://doi.org/10.1177/1440783319837604.

Madianou, M., D. Miller. 2013. Polymedia: Towards a New Theory of Digital Media in Interpersonal Communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16 (2): 169–187, http://doi.org/10.1177/1367877912452486.

McRobbie, A. 2011. Reflections on Feminism, Immaterial Labour and the Post-Fordist Regime. *New Formations* 70 (1): 60–76, http://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.70.04.2010.

Moll, I. 2022. The Fourth Industrial Revolution: A New Ideology. *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 20 (1): 45–61, http://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v20i1.1297.

Morini, C. 2007. The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism. *Feminist Review* 87 (1): 40–59, http://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400367.

Morini, C., A. Fumagalli. 2010. Life Put to Work: Towards a Life Theory of Value. *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 10 (3/4): 234–252.

Moulier-Boutang, Y. 2011. *Cognitive Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Reeves, J. 2016. Automatic for the People: The Automation of Communicative Labor. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13 (2): 150–165, http://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1108450.

Roberts, K. 2009. *Youth in Transition: Eastern Europe and the West*. London: Palgrave

Rogers, E. M. 1986. *Communication Technology*. New York: The Free Press.

Sauer, P., P. Van Kerm, D. Checchi. 2022. *Higher Education Expansion & Labour Income Inequality in High-Income Countries: A Gender-Specific Perspective*. LIS Working Paper Series No. 837. Luxembourg: LIS Cross-National Data Center.

Thompson, P. 1983. *The Nature of Work: An Introduction to Debates on the Labour Process*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Vercellone, C. 2005. The Hypothesis of Cognitive Capitalism. Paper presented at 'Towards a Cosmopolitan Marxism', the annual Historical Materialism conference, Birkbeck College & SOAS, 4–6 November, London, United Kingdom. Retrieved 22 November 2024 (https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00273641).

Virno, P. 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotexte.

Weber, M. R., D. A. Finley, A. Crawford, D. Rivera. 2009. An Exploratory Study Identifying Soft Skill Competencies in Entry-Level Managers. *Tourism and Hospitality Research* 9 (4): 353–361, http://doi.org/10.1057/thr.2009.22.

Weeks, K. 2007. Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics. *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 7 (1): 233–249.

WTO. 2017. *World Trade Report 2017: Trade, Technology and Jobs.* Geneva: World Trade Organization.

Zuboff, S. 1988. *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*. New York: Basic Books.

Nicoleta Elena Apostol is a lecturer in communication and media in the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Communication at the University of Bucharest. She has a PhD from the University of Bucharest (2016), she researched gender and labour in journalism, and she has published on media convergence. She has been involved in the work of NGOs, taught courses, and has worked on projects focused on the intersectional dimensions of identity. ORCID: 0000-0001-5777-7230. Contact e-mail: nicoleta.apostol@fjsc.ro.

Romina Surugiu is an associate professor of journalism and media studies and dean of the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies at the University of Bucharest. She holds an MA in gender studies, an MA in labour studies, and a PhD in philosophy. She has worked as a postdoctoral researcher in communication studies at the University of Bucharest (2010–2013) and Uppsala University (2012). She has also worked as a journalist and served as a board member of Romanian Public Television. She is a board member of the European Sociological Association – Research Network 18: Sociology of Communications and Media Research. ORCID: 0000-0003-2731-2058. Contact e-mail: romina.surugiu@fjsc.ro.