

## **AGORA 81**

### **EDITORIAL**

It is so commonplace and easy nowadays to access extensive documentation, services or products marketed online in a few clicks, that we tend to forget how much this fabulous tool that is the Internet, powered by the development of high-speed networks and enriched by multiple applications, has revolutionized our lives.

We can no longer do without our smartphones. And how could it be otherwise? These miniature supercomputers, which we always carry with us, allow us to do almost everything: communicate, get informed, feed ourselves, move, shop, be entertained, sometimes even disregarding the most basic safety rules. The "smartphone generation", born between 1995 and 2012, would have difficulty imagining an every-day life with only a landline, mandatory visits to libraries, queues in stores and supermarkets, paper maps... As for virtual social networks, they have become essential and are increasing in importance, even influencing public opinion, as we have recently seen with the "yellow jackets" in France.

Coupled with the reach and speed of the Internet and the mobility of smartphones, Big Data (agglomeration by Internet platforms of gigantic masses of commercial, personal and geographical information that can be directly used) is disrupting our daily lives. Some even think that it is changing the way we function in the world, transposing us towards a society of the moment and the virtual.

The diffusion of technology and its uses has had a similar impact on the professional sphere, where it has grown exponentially in recent years, leading to new forms of work, new concepts of work spaces and working time, and disrupting the professional world in general. These new tools open up an immense horizon for us in terms of both access and knowledge sharing and access to services and products in a limited time and at a lower cost. Dematerialization also allows us to work remotely with all the flexibility that this implies, allowing many of us to manage professional emergencies remotely or to adjust working hours if necessary according to more personal requirements.

This mutation also has its drawbacks. Hyper-connectivity is an example; it is at the origin of the theme chosen for this issue of our magazine. This phenomenon blurs the boundaries between professional and private life and leads to health problems in many cases.

In Europe, governments as well as private and public companies seem to be gradually coming to terms with this development, that began long ago. 50 years ago, the installation of the first ATMs offering services formerly provided by employees over the counter was the beginning of a thus far nameless revolution; they are now being replaced by new practices encouraged by faster and faster technological change: online banking, payment via smartphones, contactless cards, etc. One progress drives out the other...

We are now witnessing the rise of the platform economy and crowd working, which are transforming many employees into "self-employed entrepreneurs", certainly enjoying the opportunity to create their own jobs. In return, however, they are dependent on constraints linked to the pace of reaction imposed,

the weight of responsibilities and risks that fall largely on their shoulders, and the competition with "self-employed entrepreneurs" from all over the world. Platform managers are most often content to supervise activities and recover their commission.

Thanks to the progress of artificial intelligence (AI), and despite appearances, modern robots or intelligent machines are increasingly replacing humans to perform certain tasks, sometimes in defiance of ethical considerations. Thus, while the use of AI saves time and resources, indiscriminate decisions made on the basis of biased algorithms may nevertheless have significant implications for human rights, for example, in medical care or the judiciary. Studies have shown that Google tends to offer higher-paying jobs to men than women. It has also been proven that AI can increase discrimination. Human rights-conscious institutions are sounding the alarm and calling for the ethical use of these tools.

Users are also becoming aware that, while tools such as smartphones, GPS, or Uber, are popular for the ease of access to multiple services they provide, when we use applications or social networking platforms, particularly for our business activities, large amounts of personal data are collected, often without our knowledge, and can be used to establish our profile and predict our behaviour.

Through the articles in this issue, we will try to take stock of the subject and see how the digital revolution is shaking up our concepts of distance, work place, working time, or interactions (especially managerial) at work. We will address the issue of hyper-connectivity in terms of regulations to be devised, psychosocial disorders and lived experiences, as well as the trend towards "uberisation". We will address the gender dimension, the ethical component and the place of human beings in an environment where algorithms and mega-data sometimes take precedence over human interactions.

Faced with these important changes, which are not to be opposed, but on the contrary, to be used for the benefit of all, USF trade union action must take on its full meaning in order to accompany these profound changes, so that workers can derive full benefit from them. Trade union action must take place, alongside workers and other trade union bodies, in social dialogue with employers and governments, in order, in the words of the Mettling report, to "combine adaptation, modernisation and also protection".

On a more universal and human level, let us reflect on the statement of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights: "Artificial intelligence can considerably increase our chances of living the life we aspire to. But it can also destroy them. Hence the need to subject the AI to strict rules, to avoid its metamorphosis into a modern version of Frankenstein's monster."

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