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# Media Change—Precarity *Within* and Precarity *Through* the Internet

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## Abstract

The article outlines a perspective on the societal dimension of the ongoing media change. One thesis is that the media change effects a double precarity—whereby precarity is defined as stable instability: The media change effects a stable instability or precarity. Social practices throughout the diverse societal fields are questioned through the media change which leads to a digital age. As a socio-economic phenomenon, precarity influences life planning and self-narrations of the affected individuals. Precarity and neoliberal subjection processes unfold in the digital age and are performatively re-produced by the way new media are used. Using semiotic analyses and a discourse-analytical orientated approach the article unfolds the thesis of a double precarity—a *precarity through digital media* and a *precarity within digital media*.

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## Keywords

Digital media • Neoliberalism • Precarity • Symbolic order • Digital age • Assignable self

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## 2.1 Introduction

The article outlines a perspective on the societal dimension of the ongoing media change. One thesis is, that the media change effects a double precarity—whereby precarity is defined as stable instability.

The media change effects a stable instability or precarity. Social practices throughout the diverse societal fields are questioned through the media change which leads to a digital age. With the internet, new social spaces emerge which require new social practices. The ‘racing standstill’ of the media change leads to a stable instability: The individuals must face new emerging technologies and therewith new possible social practices—from the internet to the Web 2.0, from the mobile internet to the internet of things.

Oversimplified, precarity can be understood as an unstable employment relationship, which grounds among others on fixed-term contracts and are an effect of neoliberal roll-back processes. As a socio-economic phenomenon, precarity influences life planning and self-narrations of the affected individuals. Precarity and other societal power structures manifest in the digital age and are re-produced by the way new media are used.

Along these lines, we can formulate the thesis of a double precarity—a *precarity through digital media* and a *precarity within digital media*. The article unfolds the thesis of a double precarity as an effect of the media change. First, the guiding thesis of a double precarity will be developed. Afterwards the ‘precarious symbolic order of the internet’ is discussed from a socio-semiotic point of view. The next subchapter addresses the ‘socio-economic dimension of the internet’ and the way precarity as a neoliberal employment relationship inscribes itself within the internet.

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## 2.2 Precarity and Internet—Three Theses

Originally “[t]he descriptive term ‘precariat’ was first used by French sociologists in the 1980s, to describe temporary or seasonal workers” (Standing 2011, S. 9). Although the meaning of the term precarity might vary one basal meaning of precarity is the stable instability of employment relationships. Precarious employment relationships are a.o. caused by fixed-term contracts:<sup>1</sup> “[T]he constructs of precarity emerged to signify labour conditions of permanent insecurity

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<sup>1</sup>At least in Global North, see the contribution of Bula Bhadra in this book.

and precariousness” (Mahmud 2015, p. 1). This kind of employment contract effects precarity as a stable instability: Career planning and subsequently life planning get difficult. “Precarity is the outcome not only of insecurities of labour markets but also of capital’s capture and colonization of life within and beyond the workplace” (Mahmud 2015, p. 2f.). With the insecure job-situation and therewith insecure life situation social pressure and social suffer arises: “The precariat experiences the four A’s—anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation” (Standing 2011, p. 19). To be exposed to a precarious employment situation means to be precarized. One has to deal with the stable instability and integrate this instability in his/her own self-narration: “To be precariatized is to be subjected to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through word and lifestyle” (Standing 2011, p. 16).

One basic question is, whether or how precarity is inscribed within the media change which leads to a digital age: How is the social phenomenon precarity linked with the ongoing digital change? Standing (2011) argues, that effects of media change are “consistent with the idea of the precariat” (Standing 2011, p. 18). The challenges of the speed of media change meet the flexibility which precarity requires:

But it is becoming harder to deny that mental, emotional and behavioural changes are taking place and that this is consistent with the spread of precarisation. The literate mind—with its respects for the deliberative potential of ‘boredom’, of time standing still, for reflective contemplation and a systematic linking of the past, present and an imagined future—is under threat from the constant bombardment of electronically prompted adrenalin rushes (Standing 2011, p. 19).

Standing’s argumentation—which problematizes that the ‘literate mind is under threat’—is similar to the media-scepticism of the post-modern media-theorist Virilio. According to Virilio, an increasing speed of media development and therewith an increasing speed of communication processes/exchange of information leads to an alienation of the human being from its own epistemological roots and capacities. The human consciousness is exposed to the accelerating speed of technological change. “REAL TIME—this ‘present’ that imposes itself on everyone in the speeding-up of daily reality” (Virilio 2006, p. 25). With the technological change, our perception of space and time change as well. The human being is forced to extend the already achieved states of perception—the individual is forced to be ‘extreme’:

Confronted by the general speeding-up of phenomena in our hyper-modern world, this curbing by conscience seems feeble. We are familiar with extreme sports, in

which the champion risks death striving for some pointless performance—‘going for it’. Now we find the man of science, adept in extreme sciences, running the supreme risk of denaturing the living being—having already shattered his living environment (Virilio 2006, p. 27).

This acceleration is characteristic for media change and technological development, which estranges the human being from itself and leads to a “nihilism of contemporary technology” (Virilio 2006, p. 27).

With reference to such an understanding of media change and to the media-theoretical conception of Virilio it is possible to formulate three theses towards the relation “Precarity and media change:”

- One crucial question is whether there is an ‘ontology of media development’. According to such an ontology of media development, it would be a characteristic trait of media development that media expand their impact/their outreach: The development leads to an increasingly rapid change of media structured and media-based social practices. This rapid change of media practices causes a stable instability, because it re-structures media-based social practices in an accelerated pace—and thus evokes a media-based precarity.
- Another, more media-sociological approach is the thesis, that the societal structures inscribe themselves within the media change. According to this approach, precarity as societal phenomenon unfolds itself within the use of new media and plays a part in the way ‘precarized individuals’ use media.
- A third thesis is a compound of thesis one and thesis two: With the internet, a new social space emerges. This social space changes ongoing media structure. With this new social space ‘traditional’, established media practices are questioned. Technology like the User Generated Content-Technology enables or even requires new forms of social interactions—and thus constitutes the user-centred Web 2.0 (O’Reilly 2006) with social software networks like Facebook. Within the Web 2.0 the user can create content and does not only consume content.

The so-called ‘mobile internet’ (internet access with mobile digital devices like smartphones) causes a pervasion of the virtual and the material world. One effect is a digital augmented reality. Augmented reality can be defined as perception of reality which is influenced—or augmented—via digital media (Kergel and Heidkamp 2016): For example, the individual can act in the real world, document his actions via the post of a photo/video within social networks—and thus expose his actions to the digital comments of his ‘friends’. The perception of reality is thus digitally augmented.

In this context it might be relevant to define the relation Digital Media and the internet: The term ‘Digital Media’ is used for devices like smartphones, laptops, smart glasses, etc. which display digital-based information, provided by the internet. These Digital Media are in turn a metonymy of the internet: Digital Media communicate on their surface (at their screens) the digital-based information which are provided by the internet. The performative implication is that these digital-based information exchange constitutes the internet as communication platform (Heidkamp 2014).

The ongoing, rapid media change (from the internet, to the Web 2.0 to a digital augmented reality) effects a stable instability. The media structure and the media practices are constantly changing—the internet is in flux: The “computer technology of the digital age is in constant flux. We have moved from personal computing to cloud-based computing, employing tools that are also dramatically redefining the way we use the medium, ranging from the mouse (i.e. drag, point and click mechanisms) to complete gesture control” (Rosenfeld 2015, p. 3). With this change, the “everyday life is becoming more difficult to predict and conceptualize” (Rosenfeld 2015, p. 72). The social meaning of new media practices is in motion. And there are multiple possibilities to use new media: Facebook can develop a subversive impact—as seen in the Facebook-Revolution (see below) as well as a panoptic effect, where the individuals disciplining each other a.o. via likes (Han 2013). From this point of view, the internet represents a new social space which is open to different readings, different semiotical constructions and narrations: The internet can be a space of disciplining power where socio-economic phenomena like precarity are established. But the internet can also be a place of anarchistic desubjectification, i.e. a space where the individual can detach from his social roles and the linked social interpellations, requirements and constraints (see below). In any case, the meaning of the internet as key medium seems to be signified by a stable instability and semiotical insecurity/precariety.

Due to the fact that the internet is open to different readings and that the internet is in flux, it can be understood as a precarious space. To elaborate on this thesis, it is relevant to have a semiotic perspective on the symbolical order of the internet.

### 2.2.1 The Precarious Symbolic Order of the Internet

With reference to the thesis, that the internet is in flux, precarity, basically defined as a stable instability, can be considered as one of the main features of the constitution-period of the digital age. The multiple new social spaces (e.g. the different social software networks like Facebook or LinkedIn), which are

constituted via the internet, require new media practices and thus restructure interaction processes. The internet represents a new space or even a multiplicity of spaces, which are constructed via online interactions. With the technical possibilities of the Web 2.0 and the mobile internet, new interaction possibilities and therewith new social spaces emerge—"After all, what do we do on the Web? We link. No links, no Web" (Rosenfeld 2015, p. 187). These new spaces need a discursive meaning/a symbolic order.

With the need of a symbolic order the internet turns into an open discursive space and thus provides a platform for idealistic and utopian thinking. Therewith the meaning of interaction processes is open to interpretation—which interaction processes can and should take place within the internet? The internet is a space where desubjectified orientated collective hacktivist groups like Anonymous and panoptical interactions like on Facebook exist at the same time. From this point of view, the symbolic order of the internet is at stake: There are different possible levels of meaning of the internet. These different possible levels of meaning can be considered as an effect of the societal power structures. Existing societal power relations and resistance movements influence the way, the internet unfolds its impact on society. For this thesis it is relevant to have a closer look on the notion 'symbolic order'.

### 2.2.2 The Symbolic Order—A Short Description

The symbolic order is an analytical category which describes the symbolic dimension of power structures. The symbolic order gives hierarchies and relations of dependence a meaning and thus discursively re-produces these hierarchies and relations on a symbolical level. The symbolical order provides explanations/reasons for hierarchal structures of social spaces. The individual is 'thrown into a symbolic order' and confronted with the specific codes and – partly unconscious – epistemological, anthropological and ontological presumptions of this symbolic order (to describe these partly "unconscious presumptions" appropriately, Foucault provided a redefinition of the notion episteme, Foucault 1989). During the socializing process the individual internalizes the semiotical code of a symbolic order. The individual acts and reflects according to the provided meaning pattern, in which the symbolic order is metonymically inscribed (Butler describes this process in addition to Lacan and Foucault as subjection, Butler 1997; Kergel 2014). Via socialization processes the symbolic order reproduces itself performatively, inscribing the code within the individuals in course of a subjection process. The truth claims of a symbolic order/the codes of a social order provide rules of conduct and therewith certainty—

you know to behave: If you need to go to a restroom, you orientate yourself at the iconic representations on the doors of the restrooms. As a man, you—‘normally’—choose the restroom at which door a male-icon is affixed. You know where to go. As a woman you—‘normally’—choose the restroom at which door a female-icon is affixed. You know where to go. At the same time, you choose the appropriate door, you acknowledge the binary gender structure which is part of most of the symbolic orders.

The symbolic order constructs a meaningful space in which hierarchies and power structures are discursively legitimized and performatively re-produced. But the symbolic order also constitutes a space of resistance where meaning can be questioned. For example, when a person wants to protest against the binary gender-structure and chooses as a form of resistance the ‘inappropriate’ restroom-door or defaces the iconic-gender representations at the restroom doors. Despite such acts of resistance and the questioning of the symbolic order, the symbolic order represents the symbolic dimension of power structures. With the revolution of power structures new meanings emerge—with new power structures new symbolic orders are constructed: for example, coffee became the ideological beverage of civil society. In the era of absolutism, the French nobility drank hot chocolate. The sweet beverage represented pleasure. With its activating effect, coffee represents the activity of the citizen in a civil society.<sup>2</sup> With the increasing power of the citizen and the civil society and with the loss of power of the nobility, the coffee achieved popularity (*cf.* Schievelhofe 1990). With the civil society, a new symbolic order emerged, which can be re-constructed by the analysis of the symbolic meaning of beverage.

With the emergence of the internet a new social space is constructed in which societal meaning is still open, what might evoke uncertainty, e.g. how to use the internet/new media appropriately. Within the next subsection, it will be argued, how the media change effects a new symbolical order. To do so, the digital age will be contrasted with the Gutenberg-Galaxy. While the internet represents the key medium of the digital age the book can be considered as the key medium of the Gutenberg-Galaxy.

### 2.2.3 From the Gutenberg-Galaxy to the Digital Age

McLuhan’s (1962/2011) concept of the Gutenberg-Galaxy provides an analytical perspective on the ongoing media change: In his analysis of the so-called

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<sup>2</sup>As a sign of protest, the Bohème in the early 20th century drank hot chocolate.

Gutenberg-Galaxy, McLuhan point out how fundamentally the book-print changed the media landscape and therewith the social practices of Western society. According to McLuhan, we experience today another media-based change of societal structures:

We are today as far into the electric age as the Elizabethans had advanced into the typographical and mechanical age. And we are experiencing the same confusions and indecisions which they had felt when living simultaneously in two contrasted forms of society and experience. Whereas the Elizabethans were poised between medieval corporate experience and modern individualism, we reverse their pattern by confronting an electric technology which would seem to render individualism obsolete and the corporate interdependence mandatory. (McLuhan 2011, p. 1)

McLuhan states, that the book and the print technology provided a media foundation of civil society. This new media foundation had specific effects on social interaction “Print had a levelling function on all verbal and social forms” (McLuhan 2011, p. 239). Due to the spread of printed books the idea of a cross-locational cultural identity and a national idea could spread. Print created national uniformity and centralized government, but also individualism and opposition to the government (McLuhan 2011, p. 235). With the print technology, the idea of the single, creative author gets relevant and leads to copyright laws: In 1790 the copyright was established in the USA, 1793 in France and 1837 in Prussia. The copyright laws constituted the author as a legal person (Dommann 2008, p. 44). In 1962 McLuhan wrote that the ongoing media change leads from a book-based Gutenberg-Galaxy to an ‘electronic age’. With reference to the internet, we could term this electronic age today the digital age. According to McLuhan one essential feature of the change, which detaches from the book and leads to an electronic age, “is the new drive for decentralism and pluralism in big business itself. That is why it is so easy now to understand the dynamic logic of printing as a centralizing and homogenizing force” (McLuhan 2011, p. 230). McLuhan points out that “all the effects of print technology [...] stand in stark opposition to the electronic technology” (McLuhan 2011, p. 230):

In the electronic age, which succeeds the typographic and mechanical era of the past five hundred years, we encounter new shapes and structures of human interdependence which are ‘oral’ in form even when the components of the situation may be non-verbal (McLuhan 2011, p. 3).

This media change challenges our everyday routine: “Contemporary citizens live in complicated times where fundamental understandings of reality are being expanded and challenged” (Rosenfeld 2015, p. 2). With new media, new forms of social



interactions and new processes of reality construction emerge: “For each software and application there is a specific method of interaction” (Rosenfeld 2015, p. 69). From this perspective, the internet seems to be a societal space which is (still) open to discursive definitions. The following subsection discusses the different articulations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) which provides different levels of meaning of the symbolic order of the internet. These articulations/different meanings of the symbolic order reach from the internet as a utopian space where anarchistic anonymity can unfold to a space of surveillance and the ‘assignable self’.

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### 2.3 The Internet: Utopian Space or Space of the ‘Assignable Self’

Since the 1990s the term cyberspace, coined by the Science-Fiction author William Gibson, has become increasingly popular. With the cyberspace, the internet was discursively thematized as an alternative societal space:

Virtuality need not be a prison. It can be the raft, the ladder, the transitional space, the moratorium, that is discarded after reaching greater freedom. We don’t have to reject life on the screen, but we don’t have to treat it as an alternative life either. We can use it as space for growth. Having literally written our online personae into existence, we are in a position to be more aware of what we project into everyday life. Like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the voyager in virtuality can return to a real world better equipped to understand its artifices (Turkle 2011, p. 263).

Turkle (1995/2011) distinguishes sharply between a “real” and a “virtual” world. Within the virtual world, the normative constraints of the real world could vanish. The concrete social space with its normative requirements disappear in a world of pseudonyms and anonymous avatars. Turkle stresses that “the personal computer culture’s most compelling objects give people a way to think concretely about an identity crisis” (Turkle 2011, p. 49). Within the virtual world, the individual can create own/new identities which are detached from the identity in everyday life. According to Turkle, via the ‘simulations’ which are possible within the virtual world, “identity can be fluid and multiple, a signifier no longer clearly points to a thing that is signified, and understanding is less likely to proceed through analysis than by navigation through virtual space” (Turkle 2011, p. 49). An emancipative epistemological position, formulated by Deleuze (2004), seems to come true:

Individuation is no longer enclosed in a word. Singularity is no longer enclosed in an individual [...] And in our wealthy societies, the many and various forms of non-integration, the different forms of refusal by young people today, are manifestations of it. You see, the forces of repression always need a Self that can be assigned,

they need determinate individuals on which to exercise their power. When we become the least bit fluid, when we slip away from the assignable Self, when there is no longer any person on whom God can exercise his power or by whom He can be replaced, the police lose it. This is not theory (Deleuze 2004, p. 138).

Rosenfeld stresses that this utopian thinking needs to be contrasted with the ‘materiality’ which inscribes itself into the ‘virtual space of freedom’:

[A]long with the magical utopia of freedom, democracy, and unfettered learning the virtual represents, there is ideology and materiality to it that is not always so idealistic. There is physicality to the virtual that relies on the actual bandwidth, pipelines, wires, towers, servers, and the myriad sophisticated objects with their unique affordances. A human factor accompanies the physicality in the form of social class, race, gender, and hegemony that accompany the armada of service providers, designers, creators, and marketers who are tangible parts of this fantastic world and are often implicit actors in our virtual experiences (Rosenfeld 2015, p. 2).

The social spaces of the internet are tied to the material world and its power-structures. With reference to Rosenfeld, one could argue that the individual performatively reproduce the subject patterns, which are already given within the ‘material’ world: By reproducing these subject patterns within the ‘virtual’ world, the individual implements power structures and hierarchies from the ‘material’ world into the ‘virtual’ world: Due to the technical possibilities of Web 2.0-tools like WordPress or the narrative-structure of social software like Facebook, people can easily create self-narrations within the virtual world. They are able to create ‘images of themselves’:

The dissemination and diffusion of these images gives people an outlet for self-expression [...] individuals engage in a manufactured mass exercise to publish photos, videos, and the like to show their individualism to the world. In doing so, they are conforming to a larger capitalist driven trend to publish personal artefacts of a viral nature in the hope of boosting their sense of self by attaining celebrity status. These modern-day presentations of self are manufactured through the absorption of celebrity culture and presentational media (Rosenfeld 2015, p. 68).

The media structure of the Web 2.0 enables self-narrations which constitute a virtual ‘self that can be assigned’. It is possible to trace the narrations of the individual by their Facebook-likes and Snapchat posts. From this point of view ‘Singularity’ is re-produced via digital-based self-narrations of the individual. One constructs oneself as an “assignable self”, when s/he narrates as a civil individual on Facebook (Kergel 2014).

## 2.4 The Internet Between Surveillance and Anarchistic Anonymity

The conflict within the internet between a political anonymous movement and a governmental power can be considered as the representation of the conflict between societal bound identities and new spaces of (inter-)actions which are detached from an officially recognized and “state approved” identity. One popular example for the emancipative and subversive dimension of the internet is the so-called ‘Facebook-Revolution’. Within the ‘Facebook-Revolution’ in 2011, Facebook was at least at the beginning, the most important medium concerning the mobilization of the population. Via Twitter and YouTube the protestants sent information about the Egyptian mass protest around the world and created thus a counter-public. The blogger Morozov (2011) points to the emancipative implications of such a use of the internet:

After all, Internet users can discover the truth about the horrors of their regimes, about the secret charms of democracy, and about the irresistible appeal of human rights on their own, by turning to search engines like Google and by following their more politically savvy friends on social networking sites like Facebook (Morozov 2011, p. 12).

While the Egyptian state-television sent pictures of an empty Tahir-Square, Al-Jazeera broadcasted movies and pictures of a Tahir-Square which was full of protestants and which Al-Jazeera received via Twitter and Facebook from protestants. To some extent, the Facebook-Revolution mirrors also the replacement of the old mass-media “TV” through the digital media and their polydirectional possibilities: One aspect of the digital age is the ubiquity of a mobile internet which re-defines the societal media landscape. “For mobile societies, smartphones initiate a relationship with their users. This relationship in turn influences the way users perceive and interact with the world” (Rosenfeld 2015, p. 72). The emancipative potential of this mobile Web 2.0 ubiquity can also be shown with reference to the Facebook-Revolution: before the Facebook-Revolution a quarter of the population in Egypt had internet access, but more than two-thirds had a cell phone. During the Facebook-Revolution information had been recorded and shared via cell phones. Subsequently on the 27. January 2011, Egypt’s government shut down the internet. Here one can see the influence of the power structures of the material world on the ‘open-spaces’ of the internet.

But even such a media-theoretical perspective of the Facebook-Revolution re-produces established power-structures: El-Mahdi (2011) provides in her article “Orientalizing the Egyptian Uprising” a post-colonial perspective on the

discursive narration of the Facebook-Revolution. The article, which was published on the online-site of the media project “Independent—A free paper for free people”, points out, that the uprising Egyptians are exposed to a ‘Westernized’ discursive thematization:

In the case of Egypt, the recent uprising is constructed as a youth, non-violent revolution in which social media (especially Facebook and Twitter) are champions. The underlying message here is that these “middle-class” educated youth (read: modern) are not “terrorists,” they hold the same values as “us” (the democratic West), and finally use the same tools (Facebook and Twitter) that “we” invented and use in our daily lives. They are just like “us” and hence they deserve celebration. These constructions are clear from a quick look the CNN, Time, Vanity Fair and others representations of the so-called leaders or icons of this revolution. They are all middle (upper) class Egyptians under the age of thirty. Most of them have one or more connections to the West, either by virtue of education (Time’s cover feature of seven “youth,” included three students from the American University in Cairo), work (e.g. Wael Ghoneim, sales manager at Google), or training (El-Mahdi 2011, para. 2).

El-Mahdi analysis reveals how the discursive thematization of the internet is entangled with established power structures and re-produces in this case colonial narration-topoi.

Despite such a post-colonial critique of the discursive thematization of the Facebook-Revolution, it is possible, to identify via other examples the dichotomy ‘subversive digital-based information sharing/established power structures’ as one of the basic binary oppositions which define the power struggles within the internet: A similar conflict between new forms of subversive digital-based information sharing and established power structures represents the so-called ‘PayPal-freeze’ of the WikiLeaks-account on 4th December 2014. WikiLeaks could not receive any donations via PayPal. From this point of view, the construction of new—virtual—social spaces is accompanied by hegemonic conflicts. For example, there are

- on the one hand phenomena like Anonymous—a decentral, international network of hacktivists, seemingly without hierarchies—who take action against internet censorship. The identities of the Anonymous-members become fluid and vanish behind a Guy Fawkes-Mask – the logo of Anonymous. The mask in turn is adapted from the dystopian graphic novel ‘V for Vendetta’.
- On the other hand, there is the NSA-surveillance programme PRISM (Planning tool for Resource Integration, Synchronization and Management). PRISM enables a surveillance of digital communication inside and outside of the USA. Via PRISM the individual and its activities can be monitored—the individual cannot disappear behind a Guy Fawkes-mask.

From this point of view, one can interpret the construction process of the symbolic order of the internet as a hegemonic struggle. This hegemonic struggle takes place within the internet between anarchistic spaces of freedom and the reconfiguration of the societal symbolic order of the material world and established power-structures. It is also possible to interpret this struggle as a performative conflict between demands of a post-individual ‘liquid’ freedom and subjection-processes which form the civil individual (Kergel and Heidkamp 2017). And it is also this struggle which makes the interpretation of the meaning of the internet a precarious project—since the meaning of the internet is left open. With reference to the fact, that the internet is in flux, one could raise the thesis that we have to deal with this openness of the meaning of the internet in terms of a stable instability.

The following subsection discusses the socio-economic dimension of internet and digitalization processes. One emphasis is on the relation between neoliberal discourses, precarity and digitalization.

## **2.4.1 Socio-Economic Dimension of the Internet**

From a media-theoretical perspective, one could argue, that new technology re-defines human interaction and societal structures. Another perspective is that new technologies re-produce established power structures and therewith economical orders and socio-economic effects like precarity. Within this subsection, the relation between established socio-economic structures and the internet will be discussed. In the course of this discussion it will be thematized, how precarity as socio-economic phenomenon is re-produced within the internet.

### **2.4.1.1 Computerization of the Stock Market**

As mentioned above, Standing argues with certain ontological perspectives towards the internet: “The digitized world has no respect for contemplation or reflection; it delivers instant stimulation and gratification” (Standing 2011, p. 18). He points to the speed of the media change. From a sociological perspective, this ‘racing standstill’ of modern communication is inseparably linked with economical structures. As one example one could refer to the so-called computer-based ‘Programme Trading’ which accelerated the stock exchange:

Programme trading/computerized trading led to an acceleration of the stock exchange and effected the so-called Black Monday in 1987. The Black Monday was the first stock market crash since the second world war. The Dow Jones lost 22.6% which affected in turn other international stock exchanges. A loss of trust in the dollar led to a so-called ‘cascade-effect’ which spread quickly. The speed of

this cascade-effect was possibly due to the computerization of the stock market exchange: Computer-based algorithmic trading functions according to an ‘if...—then...—logic’. According to this logic, the computer programs liquidated stocks, when certain ‘loss targets’ were obtained. As a consequence, the prices lower and the lower prices subsequently led to more liquidation with stocks dropping (Virilio 2012). The economical dynamics were accelerated by the computer and its algorithms.

#### **2.4.1.2 Parallel Motion—Neoliberal Policy and Technological Development**

Besides this example of the impact of the computer within the economic field, the progress of computerization and digitalisation goes hand in hand with the unfolding of neoliberal policy—which effects a.o. precarity: Although Springer et al. (2016) stress that “Neoliberalism is a slippery concept, meaning different things to different people” (Springer et al. 2016, p. 1), it is possible to provide a basal definition of this term: Neoliberalism can be defined as an ideology which focus on the beneficence of the free market. In this context, the market has crucial role to ensure the maintaining of individual freedom. The role of the government is mainly considers to support the free market that leads to a critical view on the concept of the welfare state (Biebricher 2011). From a meta-perspective, Springer et al. (2016) point out that “[m]ost scholars tend to agree that neoliberalism is broadly defined as the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society” (Springer et al. 2016, p. 2). When one speaks about neoliberalism one is “generally referring to the new political, economic and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility” (Springer et al. 2016, p. 2). Neoliberal thinking has increasingly come to shape social policy in Western countries. This social policy initiated a roll-back of the welfare state and started with Reagan’s US-presidency, occurred in Britain with the Thatcherism of the 1980s. In Germany, this roll-back of the welfare state took place in the early years of the new century (Biebricher 2012). During the ‘neoliberalization’ of the labour market, precarious employment situations emerged increasingly (Kergel 2016): “The contemporary neoliberal era is marked by an exponential expansion of contingent, flexible and precarious labor markets” (Mahmud 2015, p. 1). This kind of employment situation fits to the neoliberal premise of deregulation of the economy:

In the neoliberal era, debt sustains aggregate demand amidst precarious labor markets and facilitates assemblage of risk-taking entrepreneurial subjects responsible for their own economic security. The result is pervasive existential precarity (Mahmud 2015, p. 3).

The neoliberal roll-back, initiated by the Reagan administration at the beginning of the eighties coincides with the appearance of the so-called “digital native.” According to Palfrey and Gasser (2008) every person who was born since 1980 is a so-called digital native—because s/he has been socialized with the unfolding of a still ongoing computerization and digitalization processes. The technology developed during this time at an increasing speed:

- 1982 the Computer Commodore-C64—presumably the most sold home computer ever—entered the market<sup>3</sup>.
- 1990 World—the first commercial internet provider—was introduced.
- 1999 Apple presented the iBook, the first computer which had a wireless access to the internet.
- Another crucial turn is the emergence of the Web 2.0 since the early years of the new century.

From a discourse-analytical point of view, one could ask, whether there is a discursive re-production of the neoliberal narration-topoi, when societal self-understanding discourses thematize the relation between internet/digitalization and economy. With reference to Apple (2006) it is possible to identify ‘economic rationality’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘cost-benefit analyses’ as neoliberal narration-topoi (Apple 2006, p. 60). These narration-topoi re-produce the neoliberal concept of a ‘liberal’/free-market beyond governmental control. This free market regulates itself according to the above criteria. If neoliberal thinking would be applied to the technological change, this change would be thematized according to neoliberal narration-topoi such as the above mentioned (‘economic rationality’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘cost-benefit analyses’).

It seems that such a narration is already established: In a study by Frey and Osborn (2013), in which they analyzed the risk of US-Employees losing their jobs due to computerization:

According to our estimate, 47 percent of total US employment is in the high-risk category, meaning that associated occupations are potentially automatable over some unspecified number of years, perhaps a decade or two (Frey and Osborn 2013, p. 38).

The digital progress leads to an automatization of processes. Digital technology substitutes human beings. Within a neoliberal narration such a substitution would be a pragmatic action which follows the imperative of economic rationality. Regarding employment situations, such as economic rationality, cause social insecurity and

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<sup>3</sup>URL: <http://www.pagetable.com/?p=547> (last accessed: 18 January 2017).

therewith precarity—and would be a performative re-production of the neoliberal-narrations within the digital age. From a discourse-analytical point of view, which thematizes the meaning of new media and computerization-processes, it is interesting, that digitalization and computerization mean a risk. Digitalization threatens jobs. This seems to be the underlying topic which reminds us of the so-called Swing Riots in 1830. The Swing Riots were a widespread uprising by agricultural workers. The workers destructed threshing machines which threatened their jobs (Hobsbawm and Rudé 1973): Technological progress threatens established job-structures and has the same effect as the neoliberal market, which is described by Wallace (2008) with the following words:

[t]he Market' was always seen as outside the actions of individuals, certainly beyond their control, and more often than not beyond their influence. However, in these examples the market can be seen as a product of multiple actions, market demand and the emergent properties of complementary or undermining behavior of the people managing or operating it (Wallace 2008, p. 266).

The concept of the neoliberal market is applied to the discursive thematization of the meaning of the technological progress of digitalization. Like the neoliberal market, the digitalization seems to be beyond of control and inevitable—both appear like a natural force. These discourse-topoi re-produce the neoliberal narration-topoi of an efficiency-logic of the market: digitalization enables a cost-reduction through the diminution of costlier human resources—which expand in turn the profit margin by job cuts. Digitalization turns into a threat scenario which might cause a stable instability which can be summed up with the following two questions:

- How the labour market will develop under the influence of digitalization?
- How and to what extent the digitalization threatens job positions?

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## 2.5 Outlook: The 'Openness' of the Digitalization-Discourse

Besides the interpretation of digitalization according to the discursive logic of neoliberalism, yet there is still an open discursive space which thematizes the meaning of the relation between internet, digitalization and economy. For example, the World Economic Forum stresses the 'openness' of the labour within the digital age:



Recent discussions about the employment impact of disruptive change have often been polarized between those who foresee limitless opportunities in newly emerging job categories and prospects that improve workers' productivity and liberate them from routine work, and those that foresee massive labour substitution and displacement of jobs. [...] Both are possible. It is our actions today that will determine whether we head towards massive displacement of workers or the emergence of new opportunities (World Economic Forum 2016, p. 6).

According to this discursive thematization, the digitalization provides possibilities and threats. The society has the possibility to create a digitalized future and is not exposed to digitalization like to an inevitable natural force. Another perspective on the relation between society and digitalization within the economic field point to a possible overcome of a neoliberal-based economy: according to recent press reports, Joe Kaeser, the chief executive officer of Siemens, pleaded for the unconditional basic income:<sup>4</sup> This unconditional basic income would protect workers who would be displaced due to digital progress, artificial intelligence and automation. The unconditional basic income enables to mitigate the transformation of the labour market which is an effect of digitalization processes. As an effect the threat scenario of digitalization would be diminished. In a later tweet, Kaeser dissociates from the concept of an unconditional basic income.<sup>5</sup> From a discourse-analytical point of view, the crucial point is not, whether the CEO of Siemens actually pleads for the unconditional basic income or not. The crucial point is, that he could plead for the unconditional basic income: This example reveals the deep impact which the digital transformation of our society has on our self-understanding discourses and on the way, we think about the social structures of our society.

Summarizing, one could assume, that we are discursively on a critical turning point: Will the symbolic order of the internet be influenced by—neoliberal—narrations and thus provide space for a socio-economic precarity? If so, it is likely, that the development of precarious job situations will be accelerated via the unfolding of the internet and digitalization. On the other hand, there might be a possibility that the impact of the internet and the technological progress on social structures will affect a new discursive orientation. The thematization of the unconditional basic income could be an indication of such a discursive new

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<sup>4</sup>URL: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/sz-wirtschaftsgipfel-siemens-chef-plaedierte-ein-grundeinkommen-1.3257958#redirectedFromLandingpage> (last accessed: 21 January 2017).

<sup>5</sup>URL: <http://basicincome.org/news/2016/12/germany-siemens-ceo-calls-basic-income/> (last accessed: 12 December 2017).

orientation. From this point of view, the way, we organize societal and economical structures of the digital age is still open—which might cause a precarious relation to the challenges of digitalization.

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