

“Digitalisation has led to an emancipation of marginalised groups”

Interview with **Prof. Felix Stalder**
By Valerie Zaslowski



Cultural and media scientist Felix Stalder describes how a new infrastructure for social processes could be created through digitalisation, enabling the alternative lifestyles of marginalised groups to be more broadly integrated into society. Solidarity, however, is at risk of being eroded by digitalisation. This is also evident in the healthcare sector.

Professor Stalder, how has digitalisation changed society?

Digitalisation has created a new infrastructure that reorganises communication and coordination processes. One of the key features of the new infrastructure is that it can process large amounts of information extremely flexibly. This reorganisation of processes first became apparent in the traditional media sector, but the processes are found in every aspect of social life. Society as a whole is changing.

Are there any areas not affected by digital transformation?

Perhaps the change is less pronounced in the private or personal sphere. But even areas that don't change take on new meaning in a changed environment. For example, I teach at the Zurich University of the Arts. Although we still meet for lectures and are physically present, this presence has taken on a different meaning because communication processes are more distributed. In the past, the lecturer transferred information from A to B. Today, the focus is no longer on bringing together information that can just as easily be found online. It's more about exchanging different life experiences. We therefore need to rethink the form that lectures take.

In your book “The digital condition” you write that the social change taking place now started before digitalisation. What triggered this change?

There is an open relationship between technological and social development. Rather than technology changing society unilaterally, social ideas evolve. Something has changed on the margins of society. For example, gay and lesbian movements arose because people were – and still are – dissatisfied with the way they are perceived in society. In other words, fringe groups have been emancipated.

And this made it more important to talk about value pluralism?

Exactly. But the traditional media were unable or unwilling to do so. For example, the Tagesschau TV news programme has a time slot of only 20 minutes to deal with no more than ten topics. The marginalised groups realised they needed their own channels. So they started to set up specialised publication media through which they sought to articulate other ideas and life concepts and thus create counter-public spheres: What does it mean to live in this society? And what can be done to make room for other ways of loving and living?

Wasn't it hard to reach beyond a niche audience?

It was, because for a long time they lacked the right infrastructure. It was only possible with the advent of digitalisation.

You mean social media?

Yes, because digital communication environments can represent a wider variety of viewpoints. Social media give us the opportunity to express personal opinions or communicate private messages to a mass audience. Everyone can build their own horizon on the basis of their own ideals and value judgements. In this way, digitalisation promotes individualisation.

Social media are also giving rise to greater numbers of “weak networks”, i.e. ties that are loose by comparison with the relations between family members or friends. Does this not also promote solidarity between individuals?

Solidarity in a political sense always depends on “weak ties”, as opposed to the “strong ties” within families or close friendships. However, this intra-family or intra-friendship solidarity has little bearing on solidarity in society. So, although “weak ties” do have a positive influence on solidarity, the problem is that these ties are created within commercial social mass media and are designed to create insecurity and competition instead of bringing people together: who has more likes and followers, who has the better holiday snaps?

Is the focus on the individual also the decisive point in which the cultural change we are experiencing now differs from previous change?

Yes, to a certain extent. But the classic idea of individualisation, which leads to the atomisation of society, falls short of the mark here. In fact, there’s a dual movement at work: individualisation always takes place in relation to community building. Regardless of the difference generated by individualisation – in the form of self-expression or by emphasising uniqueness – ultimately it’s always about the community. For the differentiation to be understood, we need a shared context in the first place.

And this commonality is not necessarily available today?

No, the commonality must be co-produced and, at the same time, is a prerequisite for the individual to be perceived as positive. The dual movement of differentiation and communitisation only came about as a result of the digital networks. The new communication technologies paved the way for this concurrence. As a result of digitalisation, people no longer see themselves primarily as part of a large group, but as individuals – as part of a community with a frame of reference.

And it used to be different?

In the past there was less context in which to articulate the various forms of differentiation. People were socialised differently. For example, they saw themselves as representatives of the farming community and less as organic farmers in the Mittelland region who produce Pro Specie Rara products for export to luxury restaurants in Paris. We see ourselves differently today. Society has become much more small-scale, differentiated and fragmented. You can no longer be sure about who the person you’re dealing with is, who will appreciate your form of differentiation. These days, not all farmers vote for the SVP just because the people’s party happens to be the body representing their occupation. This development also poses a challenge in political terms.

In such an individualised – and finely fragmented – society, is it still possible to live by the values of solidarity?

Within the diverse niches, shared experience – as a prerequisite for solidarity – is possible, because we need each other to build a common world. Solidarity within the niches comes about automatically as a result of the social micro-processes, without a lot of effort on our part. However, there is a risk that the niches will move further apart from one another and fail to see what they have in common. The question is, therefore, whether there are also moments when solidarity goes beyond this.

What do you think? Are there moments like this?

Historically, the improvement in working conditions was clearly one such moment. Someone in a factory can’t just say: “I need better working conditions!” It needs to be done collective-

ly. Similar situations are occurring in the Swiss system of direct democracy. For example, people have to get together in order to win referendums. Individuals hold no ground here.

What about the healthcare sector, which is founded on the principle of solidarity?

Of course, collective safeguards against health-related misfortunes can – still – be seen as instances of solidarity. No one knows whether they themselves will be dependent on someone else's solidarity one day.

Are these instances currently being eroded by digitalisation?

Digitalisation allows a high degree of individualisation, and the market has been working for quite some time on niche differentiation. This is increasingly spilling over to areas that aren't yet fully subject to the logic of the market, such as the healthcare sector. Our ability today to collect endless health data or create genetic profiles is eroding our belief in fate. There's an attempt to make predictions so we can optimise our own individual behaviour. We're told how likely we are to get cancer and can – or are supposed to – act according to our genetic make-up.

What happens when we lose our belief in fate?

The principle of solidarity in healthcare is based on the idea of fate. However, as soon as people know their genetic make-up and how likely they are to get cancer, fate moves into their own sphere of influence. Then it's their fault if they don't do anything about it. Fate can be controlled up to a certain point, which means that management should also become more of a general requirement. In other words, the more that fate can be broken down to an individual level, the more freedom each individual has to act. Or put another way, if you can foresee and optimise your own health yourself, you no longer have to rely on other people. This inevitably leads to de-solidarisation. So, the principle of solidarity could begin to disintegrate if we no longer have anything in common.

Are we likely to see the erosion of solidarity in the healthcare sector?

I fear that soon solidarity will no longer be seen as something important in healthcare. I believe that society is making a mistake in allowing this de-solidarisation. Although the promises of individualisation are economically attractive, they are not going to materialise, because fate can't be controlled, not even through digitalisation. This is an illusion, particularly in the healthcare sector. Ultimately, we are all embedded in a larger context, we're just losing sight of this more and more.

But you're still optimistic?

I'm confident that there will be more instances in the future where we realise that the fate of the individual cannot be separated from the fate of others. Climate change may be a new example of this. There's no point in giving up driving and living a carbon-neutral lifestyle if society doesn't do the same. Climate change cannot be solved through individual awareness, but must be solved through policy, both at national and international level. We have to reflect collectively on topics such as urban growth in conurbations and on how agriculture is organised. Instances like these, in which niche groups come together to focus on the same issue, will remain important in the future.



Felix Stalder is professor of digital culture and network theories at the Zurich University of the Arts and a member of the Institute for New Cultural Technologies in Vienna. His work focuses on the interaction between society, culture and technologies, and some of his areas of research include internet culture, copyright, commons, privacy, the control society and subjectivity.