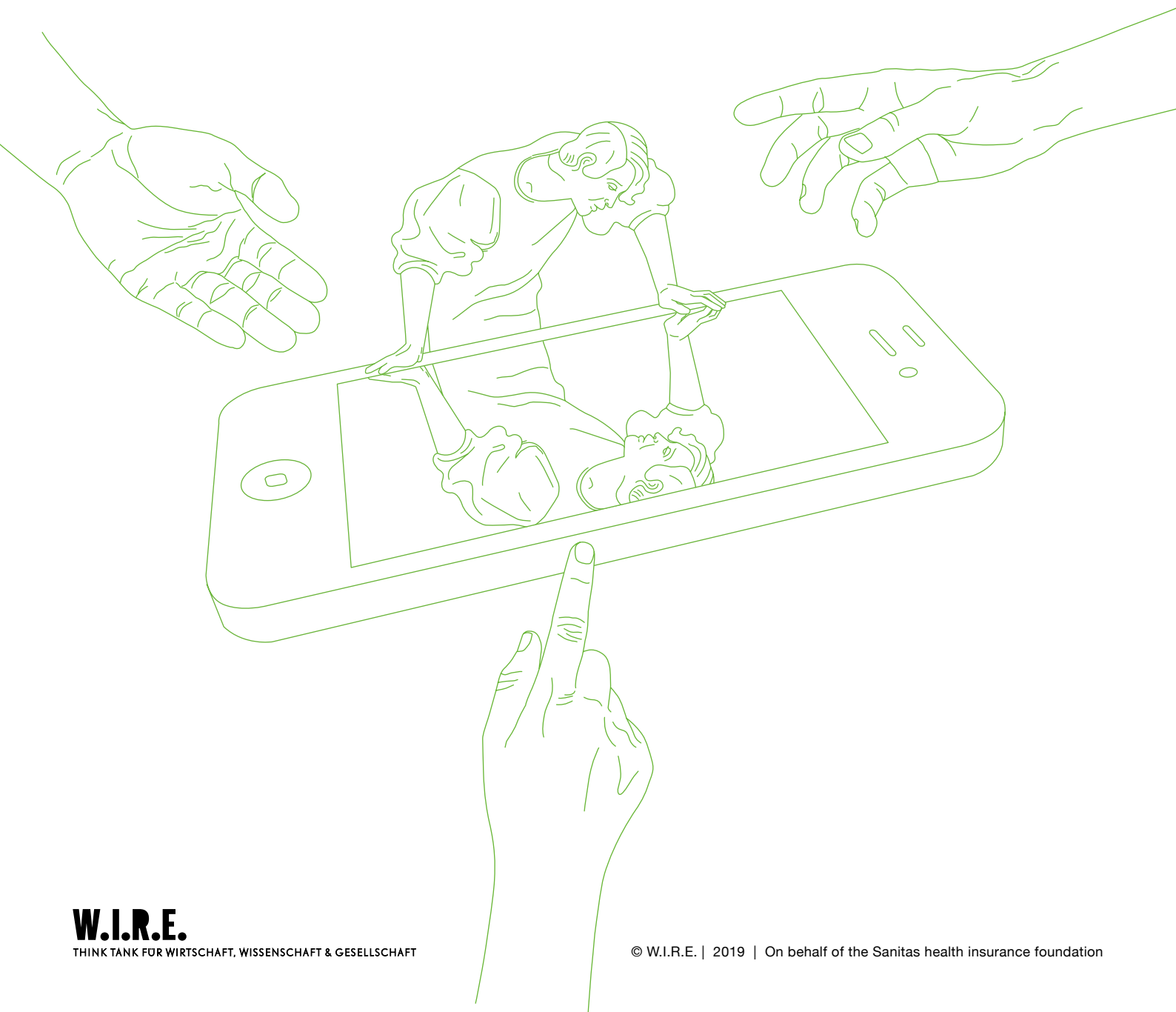


From individuality to community in a digital world: a tale of solidarity?

Text by Professor Petra Grimm



The story of digitalisation

Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre claims that humans are “essentially storytelling animals”.¹ It’s therefore not surprising that the abstract notion of “digitalisation” is usually told as a narrative. To be more precise, it’s about two opposing narratives, what I call the economic Hermes narrative and the pessimistic Pandora narrative. As the god of trade, merchants and communication, Hermes tells the story of digitalisation as one that is necessary for the sake of progress. If we fail to pursue digitalisation, we will fall behind other countries. Digitalisation promises innovation, efficiency and efficacy, particularly when it comes to maximising profit, but we don’t really have a clear understanding of digital technology or the extent to which it will improve our life. The Pandora narrative, by contrast, depicts digitalisation as a threat, with Pandora’s box in this story containing a multitude of risks. For example, this story suggests we may be overwhelmed as we struggle to cope with the increasing complexity of taking action and understanding the world. It also expresses a fear of artificial intelligence and becoming even more dependent on digital technology. This narrative often resonates with individuals’ feeling of resignation or even their defiance in the face of digital technology.

However, what we need is a new alternative narrative that defines the significance of digitalisation as a process geared towards the well-being of the community that we can all play a part in shaping: the Prometheus narrative, which depicts progress as technology oriented to values based on basic digital rights. At the core of this myth is Prometheus’s solidarity with humanity against the gods and the way he brought us fire, the driving force of civilisation, technology and socialisation. Prometheus is also said to have brought people knowledge of writing and mathematics. In other words, in ancient Greek mythology, numbers – a key component of digitalisation – are seen as a gift to humans, whom Prometheus saw as deserving of pity.

Digital and me

Stories about digitalisation also play a role in our everyday life. From the perspective of narrative ethics, these stories provide a platform for ethical questions and conflict, reflect various views and create room for manoeuvre. Given that digital ethics is a form of applied ethics, narratives are a valuable means to contemplate ethical questions. Let me tell you a story:

A short time ago I met a friend who was wearing a fitness wristband. I asked what he thought about it. He quickly showed me his fitness app, which records exactly how many steps he takes each day. It doesn’t only show his steps, but also how he ranks compared to other community members. He said that comparing himself to others both motivates and annoys him. He was particularly annoyed by the fact that the device doesn’t count his steps when he’s on his bike. To get around this problem, he now attaches the wristband to his thigh when he’s cycling.

1: MacIntyre, Alasdair (2007): *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. University of Notre Dame Press.

This story illustrates how, on the one hand, you don't have to submit entirely to the dictates of the self-tracking tool, but how, on the other, it's hard to resist the pull of constant comparison if you use such a wearable. There is still debate about whether humans are born with a competitive drive or whether it's taught and culturally conditioned. Comparing yourself to others is not a bad thing in itself. It can encourage you to reflect on your own behaviour, your values and ultimately your identity. However, it can also serve as a way of marginalising yourself, highlighting your inferiority because others seem to be more successful, more productive or simply better. In the digital age, comparing yourself with others has become something of a social practice thanks to, above all, social media.

This does not always have a positive effect on the individual. For example, empirical studies show that comparing yourself to others on social media is a sure-fire way of making you unhappy. A 2017 British study showed that using social media, particularly Instagram, has a negative effect on the mental health of young users.² Users displayed a lower sense of self-worth, a negative body image and depressive moods. According to the study, this is caused by people candy-coating their lives, giving viewers the feeling that they're missing out on something or living a worse life.

The trend towards self-tracking, which dates back to the quantified self movement founded in 2007 by journalists Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly in the USA, is just one of many phenomena emerging as individualism gathers pace in the post-modern age. In a society driven by efficiency and effectiveness, people today are expected to be able to measure their own performance and demonstrate their strengths and flexibility. However, this demand is not caused by digitalisation. It simply reinforces the demands that exist in our society and makes the requisite digital technology, e.g. self-tracking devices, available to everyone. When this becomes part of our daily routine, it in turn reinforces a life philosophy geared towards self-optimisation which individuals appear to adopt of their own accord. It involves a focus on the self: How can I improve myself? How can I make myself look good, e.g. instagramable? What should I eat? What kind of person am I? Am I kind to myself? These are all questions thrown up by the "every person is the architect of their own fortune" narrative. However, those who subscribe to this narrative forget that it's not actually possible to predict or control one's own biography. Even an active person who eats healthily can't get by without the community principle of solidarity if they suffer an unexpected illness or perhaps even a sport-related injury (e.g. a torn knee ligament). But is solidarity still a relevant moral value in the digital age? And if so, what purpose and goal should solidarity have?

Digital and us

"Solidarity" is a *genuinely* modern term because it refers to social or moral relations between individuals who in principle are *the same*.³ Originating in France (deriving from the French "solidarité"), the term began to be used widely in politics and society in the 19th century. According to its etymological roots, solidarity means togetherness, unity, a mutual willing-

2: See RSPH (2017): #StatusOfMind. Social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing. Internet: <https://www.rsph.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/62be270a-a55f-4719-ad668c2ec7a74c2a.pdf>.

3: Bayertz, Kurt/ Boshammer, Susanne (2008): Solidarität. In: Handbuch der Politischen Philosophie und Sozialphilosophie, ed. Stefan Goespath, Wilfried Hinsch, Beate Rössler. Vol.2. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 1197-1201.

ness to help.⁴ You can show solidarity with someone when you pursue common goals and interests or have a feeling of solidarity. You can also appeal to and call on the solidarity of a person or group of people. Solidarity can also serve as a binding maxim or ethical principle agreed upon by a community or society. This is then known as a principle of solidarity. In a healthcare system, the principle of solidarity is used to prevent the weak from being disadvantaged, while at the same time guaranteeing a certain level of security for everyone in case of illness in the future. The opposite would be a principle that relies solely on the narrative “every person is the architect of their own fortune”. Making self-tracking and self-improvement a must for everyone would not only rob the individual of their freedom and autonomy, but would also give rise to individual blame if a person were unwilling or unable to improve themselves. In this case, digital quantified self technologies can undermine the principle of solidarity.

However, as always, it depends on the purpose and function of the technology. Self-tracking tools can also be used for empowerment and to minimise risks. For example, patients who have to take medication regularly can benefit from appropriate devices that remind them to take it. For example, the individual management and medication which is necessary, for diabetes can also be supported by the digitised measurement of blood sugar levels, carbohydrate intake, sporting activity, etc. In addition, collaborative self-tracking systems that give chronically sick patients the opportunity to share their experiences of medicines on a platform can empower these patients by allowing them to question the promised claims of pharmaceutical companies or highlight problematic side effects.

Showing solidarity means caring for yourself as well as for others. Showing solidarity with others who need our help in a digital age means that you have to leverage the ethical Promethean potential of digitalisation and thus create a new narrative. By this I mean the idea that each of us has to show more of an interest in the situation, points of view and needs of other people, in other words the narrative “from individuality to community”. In daily life, this can be in the subway, where everyone stares at their mobile phones and hardly notices their fellow passengers, but it also applies to political issues, for example the ever increasing divide between the social elites and broad sections of the population.

In our post-modern age of constant consumption, where everyone wants to stand out from the crowd, live life on their own terms and be happy, solidarity seems to be in short supply. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of this, strong solidarity movements are also evident at various levels. These are either made possible or are organised by digital media, for example the global #MeToo movement or the *gilets jaunes* (yellow jacket) movement in France, which was mainly organised via Facebook. What these very different movements have in common is the fact that people who are far apart geographically with no previous connections are able to show solidarity with one another very quickly, something that was virtually impossible before the dawn of the digital age. However, solidarity isn't a value in itself. Even extreme right-wing groups whose values don't coincide with a constitution based on the principles of democracy and liberty can show solidarity. Solidarity therefore needs a sense of values, and its goal needs an ethical foundation.

4: Solidarität, Wolfgang Pfeifer et al.: Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen (1993), digitalisierte und von Wolfgang Pfeifer überarbeitete Version im Digitalen Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache. Online: <https://www.dwds.de/wb/Solidarit%C3%A4t#wb-1>, viewed on 10.12.2018.



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