



THEMATIC SECTION:
GLOBAL DIGITAL ECONOMY: ON THE CUSP OF
GREATNESS OR ALMOST CHECKMATE FOR HUMANITY?

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EDITORIAL



In “Before the Bridge”, Wilcox’s award-winning documentary from 2017, Prof. V. Wadhwa praises recent technological advancements that he contends are positioning humanity on “the cusp of greatness”. The same technological development is portrayed in another excellent documentary “Social Dilemma” – as meaning “checkmate for humanity” (Orlowski, 2020). The multidisciplinary articles selected for this special issue consider some of the promises and challenges of global economic development and reveal the Janus-faced logic underpinning the current trends of the technological and economic changes that are confronting us.

Scientific discoveries and technological developments throughout history have been altering the way we work and live along with how we think and perceive ourselves and the world around us. The introduction of new technologies has always held both positive and negative potential and consequences for human-friendly, healthy and safe work and life. This is also true when it comes to the latest developments in information and communication technology, automation and robotics. Accelerated digitalisation (especially the mass use of laptops, smartphones and widely available wi-fi) is encouraging reflections on the fundamental work-related issues of today: Who is a worker? Are we a worker only when we are ‘at work’, or also when we are working from home or elsewhere? What is (appropriate) working time? How should work be compensated? What are the (new?) standards of decent work? How will such changes affect the global economy? Which kinds of education and legal systems are developing with a view to serving the emerging system?

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¹ *God Janus (Source of the photo: Google Images) is a symbol of the liminal space of transitioning out of one period of time and into something new. His two faced head facing the past and the future speaks about the potentials and dangers of the moment and illustrates the duality in discussions on the technological and economic development that we are in.*

This special issue addresses some of changes, problems and possible solutions associated with the developing digital global economy. The issue presents the final selection of articles presented at the international conference “Global Digital Economy: Managing Challenges and Opportunities”, organised by the Birla School of Management, Birla Global University, India together with the Faculty of Social Sciences University of Ljubljana, Slovenia on 15–16 April 2021. When organising the conference, we presumed that digital transformations have reached the stage that may be called ‘business as usual’. An economy built on platforms (apps) and algorithms (bots) is taking the silhouette of processes that will not only generate revenue with strong ROI, but also create consumer touchpoints for better engagement and experience. The digital economy offers limitless opportunities for some, yet disruption and displacement for others. While companies like Kodak, Blockbuster, Sears and Blackberry proved unable to adapt, Uber, Netflix, Amazon and Airbnb brought out disruptive platforms for businesses of the new age. MIT Sloan research shows that companies which have started adapting to the digital world are 26% more profitable than their industry peers. The digital economy accounted for 6.9% of United States GDP in 2017, while, for India, it is expected to account for 20% of the country’s GDP by 2025. In the European Union, over 40 million people are anticipated to be working through digital labour platforms by 2025. Still, there are many challenges like regulatory frameworks, the digital divide, and poor connectivity in developing countries, coupled with the unequal distribution of power among different economic actors associated with this change. In this context, the international conference brought together eminent academic scientists, research scholars, and industry practitioners from across the globe to participate in a virtual platform to share their experiences and research outcomes with respect to various aspects of the global digital economy.

In the selection of articles that follows, the authors consider the challenges as well as the potential of the economic order, which continues to evolve.

Kanjuo Mrčela’s article contributes to the debate on the current state and development of the global economic system and the implications it holds for the (re)distribution of social and economic power. The article explains the rise of platform capitalism and points to its negative consequences: the more precarious employment status and life of working people globally. In the next article on virtual learning, P. Nayak provides insight into the international discussion on technology-mediated virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic while also presenting research results for a sample of Indian students and faculty members. His study reveals that the majority of students find virtual learning not to be particularly effective and that it also

creates self-perceived mental health problems (87% of students felt stressed, irritated, restless, bored and/or fatigued; 91% frustrated; 56% depressed; 84% unproductive). The study shows gender differences among students and differences in desired modes of study among students and teachers.

Ellerman and Gonza's article proposes an alternative way of overcoming and resolving problems related to platform work, thereby limiting the negative effects of platform capitalism. The article reviews two of the most common calls for action: regulation and platform cooperatives. The authors argue that the American ESOP mechanism for employee buyouts, redefined according to main co-operative values, could be applied to the platform economy while the network effects of platforms could be harnessed to provide greater benefits for platform workers.

Rus' article critically reviews achievements of one of the best-known and most successful hi-technology companies - Amazon Inc. The article confronts the commonly accepted thesis that Amazon's success is based on its development and use of new technology and propose an alternative hypothesis that Amazon has been successful largely based on its creation of a new monopoly. The article provides interesting insight into the history of retail development in the USA.

Bohinc's article "Legal aspects of digitalisation in EU company law" considers the EU's latest efforts to overcome the backlog of legislation with respect to technological development, with legal solutions in both the fields of the electronic formation and registration of companies as well as shareholders' communication with company board members.

Vanessa Gaffar's article reports on ways that micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in Indonesia are using social media as an instrument as they adapt and transform from conventional to digital business. The article shows the success and certain challenges in the use of social media, such as regulations to establish digital boundaries and the digital literacy of consumers.

In a debate over changes at the beginning of the century, Hutton and Giddens (2000) discussed globalisation and the communication revolution as sources of a weightless/knowledge economy but while also allowing more aggressive capitalism without much resistance to the growing inequalities and unequal division of power. After more than 20 years, we can see the continuation of changes in the organisation of work and economies globally that are related to technological changes and to enabling them. The decline of the economic and social order of the post-Second World War era is now being followed by different economic and political doctrines that bring diverse effects on the global capitalist system at both the centre and periphery of the system. The reality of the global digital economy may be seen as a social and economic situation characterised by a tension between

already (or still) existing expectations and possible solutions (enabled by technologies) on one side and actual living and working conditions on the other. The imagined futures we may expect follow Beck's (2000) scenarios structured on hope and despair in finding the most feasible and likely paths of social and economic development. We hope that the discussions presented in this special issue are informative and helpful while reflecting on some of the ongoing changes and will inspire further debate on topics associated with both social science and policymaking debates of today.

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