The Alan Turing Institute

Precarity, Technology, Data, and AI

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What does ‘precarity’ mean for you?

Let’s do an exercise. On your own, write down responses to the following prompts:

- What is precarity?
- What comes to mind when you think about it?
- Where does it arise? If possible, give 2-3 examples.
- Write down 5 words you associate with precarity.

Share your answers here:

Introductions

About us:

- We are Yesim and Jamie, two researchers in the Alan Turing Institute's Accountability, Inclusion and Rights (AIR) team.
- We research a variety of issues relating to human rights, inequality, and technology.
- Our work on this project was conducted alongside Jat Singh and Jennifer Cobbe.

About you: in the chat, please post a little about yourself.

- Your name
- Your background
- Your interest in this topic
- The context of your work

Introducing INCLUDE+’s Precarity Theme

The Relationship Between Precarity, Technology, Data and AI

What is ‘precarity’?

We found that ‘precarity’ is a broad concept commonly used across the social sciences to discuss life circumstances characterised by uncertainty, instability and risk.

The term has been applied across many academic fields, including:

- Sociology
- Anthropology
- Geography
- Economics

Precarity is multi-faceted

Here are some examples of precariousness people can experience:

- Livelihood
- Housing
- Community ties
- Access to social support
- Access to utilities
- Access to basic infrastructure
- Access to resources
- Ecological environment

Cover art from Kath Weston's *Animate Planet: Making Visceral Sense of Living in a High-Tech Ecologically Damaged World* (2017)

Precarity is intersectional

Precariousness is not experienced equally: it disproportionately affects marginalised and vulnerable groups.

People are affected differentially based on:

- Race
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Class and socio-economic inequality
- Disability
- Citizenship status
- Age

And more.

Discussions

How do precarity and tech relate?

On your own, respond to the following prompts:

- Write a brief description of how precarity and technology relate.
- Describe an example of this from a context you know.
- Write a list of the 3 most important issues when it comes to precarity and technology.

If you can, please share your responses here:

Discussion: what are the most important issues?

- What are the most important issues when precarity and technology are concerned?
- What factors are driving precarity when it comes to tech (or vice versa)?
- What change would you like to see?

In breakout groups: outline a case study in need of more attention

As a group, discuss a real-world case of precarity and how it relates to technology. Your case should be one that you feel deserves more attention, discussion, or research.

The case could be:

- A case you have seen in the news, on social media, etc.
- A case you have discovered through your work.
- An area you believe lacks coverage and/or rigorous research.

Where next?

Current research on precarity and tech

Our survey of research and relevant case studies found a complex web of topics. They included:

- Gig work platforms (e.g., Uber; Deliveroo)
- Microtasking services (e.g., Amazon's Mechanical Turk)
- Data labelling in AI supply chains
- Hardware manufacturing
- Software production
- Algorithmically controlled government service provision
- Police surveillance and predictive policing
- 'Smart' borders and migration control

Social and political events

Recent years have seen many changes that directly relate to precarity and technology. These include:

- The rise in home working and flexible working during the COVID pandemic.
- The growth in platform and gig economy services, such as Uber, world over.
- The emergence of resistance to gig services, such as attempts to ban Uber and unionise gig workers.
- Efforts by workers in the tech sector, such as Amazon warehouse employees, to unionise.
- Protests and campaigns against uses of digital surveillance technology, e.g. in public spaces and at borders.
- Growth in governments attempting to automate public service and welfare provision.
- Rapid developments in generative AI, such as Chat GPT, sparking fears about job replacement.
- New legislation in the EU (the Digital Markets Act, Digital Services Act, and AI Act) which may affect other countries' approaches.

The importance of further work

Research and scrutiny is vital to enable us to understand the complex interplay between precarity, data, and technology (including AI):

- Communities, campaigners, and labour organisers can use it to advocate for better conditions.
- It can inform the development of effective interventions to alleviate the negative effects of precarity.
- It can assist policy interventions.
- It can influence the design and development of technology itself, to account for precarity (and other related) concerns.

Any final thoughts or questions?

You can contact us at:

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