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Artificial Intelligence, Labor Identity, and the Moral Economy of Work: A Comparative Social Humanities Analysis of Platform Workers and Creative Professionals in the United States and Japan

Caroline Whitaker[1]

Caroline Whitaker

Department of Sociology
University of California, Los Angeles
Email: cwhitaker@soc.ucla.edu

***Corresponding Author:** cwhitaker@soc.ucla.edu

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence is transforming contemporary work not only by automating tasks but by reshaping labor identity, professional value, institutional trust, and the moral economy of employment. This article compares the social implications of AI-mediated labor in the United States and Japan, focusing on two analytical dimensions: platform work and creative-professional work. The United States represents a liberal market context in which AI is closely tied to platform capitalism, labor flexibilization, algorithmic management, and entrepreneurial individualism. Japan represents a coordinated institutional context shaped by long-standing norms of organizational loyalty, demographic aging, technological modernization, and cautious regulatory adaptation. Drawing on sociology of work, digital labor studies, cultural theory, political economy, and ethics of technology, this article argues that AI transforms labor through three interrelated mechanisms: algorithmic valuation, occupational identity disruption, and institutional responsibility displacement. The findings demonstrate that workers experience AI not merely as technological change but as a reorganization of recognition, autonomy, skill, and social worth. Platform workers face intensified surveillance and fragmented bargaining capacity, while creative professionals confront new anxieties over authorship, originality, and cultural value. The article contributes to social humanities scholarship by developing a comparative framework linking AI labor systems, moral economy, identity formation, and

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democratic regulation of technological change.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; labor identity; platform work; creative work; Japan; United States; moral economy; algorithmic management; digital labor; social humanities

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence has become one of the most significant forces reshaping contemporary social life, work, culture, and institutional governance. While public debates often frame AI primarily in terms of productivity, automation, innovation, or existential risk, its social consequences are more deeply embedded in transformations of labor identity, professional recognition, economic insecurity, authorship, and the moral value of work. AI systems now mediate hiring, scheduling, delivery logistics, worker evaluation, customer service, creative production, translation, design, journalism, education, and administrative decision-making. These developments suggest that AI is not merely a technical infrastructure but a social and institutional force that reorganizes how work is measured, valued, and governed.

International organizations increasingly emphasize that AI will reshape labor markets unevenly. The OECD has reported that AI exposure varies across sectors, educational levels, and occupational groups, with significant implications for job quality, workplace surveillance, and skill formation (OECD, 2023). The International Labour Organization has argued that generative AI is more likely to transform tasks than eliminate entire occupations, while also warning that gendered and clerical occupations may be disproportionately affected (ILO, 2023). UNESCO has emphasized the ethical need for transparency, human rights protection, and inclusive governance in AI development and deployment (UNESCO, 2021). These reports indicate that AI must be studied not only as technological innovation but as a social humanities problem involving dignity, recognition, justice, and institutional accountability.

This article examines AI and labor through a comparative analysis of the United States and Japan, focusing on two analytical dimensions: platform workers and creative professionals. These cases and dimensions are selected because they illuminate distinct but interconnected transformations in the meaning of work. Platform workers—such as ride-hailing drivers, delivery couriers, and online gig workers—experience AI through algorithmic management, ratings, automated allocation, surveillance, and opaque disciplinary systems. Creative professionals—such as writers, designers, translators, musicians, illustrators, and media workers—experience AI through generative systems that challenge assumptions about authorship, originality, intellectual property, and cultural labor.

The United States and Japan provide a productive comparative context because both are technologically advanced economies with major AI industries and strong cultural investments in innovation, yet they differ in labor institutions, social norms, corporate governance, and welfare systems. The United States is characterized by flexible labor markets, strong venture-capital ecosystems, platform capitalism,

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weak labor protections in many service sectors, and an entrepreneurial ideology that individualizes risk. Japan is shaped by coordinated corporate institutions, demographic aging, long-standing norms of organizational loyalty, relatively strong social expectations of stable employment, and a technology policy discourse often framed around social problem-solving and productivity in an aging society.

The central social-humanistic problem concerns the transformation of labor recognition. Work is not simply a source of income; it is also a source of identity, status, social belonging, moral worth, and future expectation. When AI systems allocate tasks, evaluate performance, generate cultural outputs, or replace forms of expertise, they change how workers understand themselves and how society recognizes their labor. This problem matters theoretically because it requires connecting labor sociology with digital culture, ethics of technology, and political economy. It matters historically because industrial societies have repeatedly reorganized the meaning of work through mechanization, Fordism, automation, and digitalization. It matters institutionally because governments, firms, unions, and professional associations must determine how responsibility is assigned when algorithmic systems make decisions. It matters culturally because AI challenges humanistic ideas of creativity, craft, judgment, and authorship.

Existing scholarship provides important foundations for this inquiry. Marx's analysis of alienation remains relevant for understanding how labor becomes separated from worker control under conditions of technological organization (Marx, 1867/1990). Polanyi's concept of the moral economy of market society shows that labor cannot be treated as a purely fictitious commodity without social disruption (Polanyi, 1944/2001). Braverman (1974) analyzed deskilling under managerial control, while Burawoy (1979) examined labor consent and workplace regimes. Bourdieu (1984) emphasized how social value is organized through distinction and symbolic capital. More recent digital labor scholarship has examined platform capitalism, algorithmic management, and data extraction. Srnicek (2017) analyzes platforms as economic infrastructures that accumulate data and reorganize markets. Rosenblat (2018) shows how ride-hailing platforms exercise managerial control while classifying workers as independent contractors. Woodcock and Graham (2020) examine gig work as a global labor regime involving flexibility, precarity, and digital control.

AI scholarship has also expanded rapidly. Crawford (2021) argues that AI is an extractive system built upon labor, data, energy, and classification. Pasquale (2015) critiques opaque algorithmic systems as forms of black-box governance. Noble (2018) demonstrates how search and algorithmic systems reproduce racialized and gendered inequality. Couldry and Mejias (2019) conceptualize data colonialism as the appropriation of human life through data extraction. In cultural and media studies, debates over generative AI have raised questions concerning authorship, creative labor, copyright, imitation, and the commodification of artistic style (Anantrasirichai & Bull, 2022; Jiang et al., 2023).

However, current social humanities literature remains limited in several respects. First, much AI labor research focuses on employment displacement or productivity while underanalyzing identity, recognition, and moral economy. Second, platform labor studies and creative labor studies are often treated

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separately, although both are shaped by algorithmic valuation. Third, comparative analysis between liberal-market and coordinated-institutional contexts remains underdeveloped. Fourth, AI ethics literature often emphasizes principles such as fairness and transparency without sufficiently analyzing worker experience and institutional power. Fifth, cultural debates over generative AI frequently focus on originality while neglecting the labor histories and economic vulnerabilities of creative workers.

This article addresses these gaps by developing a comparative social humanities framework that links AI-mediated work to labor identity and moral economy. The central argument is that AI transforms labor not only by automating tasks but by reorganizing recognition. Workers are increasingly evaluated through algorithmic metrics, displaced from interpretive control, and made responsible for adapting to systems they did not design. AI therefore produces a crisis of institutional responsibility: firms often present algorithmic systems as neutral tools while shifting risk onto workers.

The article advances three analytical mechanisms. First, algorithmic valuation converts labor quality into datafied metrics such as ratings, productivity scores, engagement measures, and output similarity. Second, occupational identity disruption occurs when workers' skills, judgment, or creative capacities are devalued or reclassified as machine-replicable. Third, institutional responsibility displacement occurs when employers and platforms use technological systems to obscure accountability for labor conditions, compensation, and decision-making.

The novelty of this article lies in comparing platform workers and creative professionals across the United States and Japan. This design demonstrates that AI-mediated labor affects both low-security service workers and high-symbolic-value creative workers, but through different forms of vulnerability. Platform workers face algorithmic control without stable institutional recognition. Creative professionals face symbolic displacement and economic uncertainty regarding authorship and value.

The analytical framework developed here proposes the following relationship: AI-mediated labor systems → algorithmic valuation → autonomy and recognition disruption → institutional responsibility displacement → labor insecurity and identity transformation. This framework identifies AI as a socio-institutional process rather than a neutral technological tool.

The research objective of this article is to explain how AI-mediated labor reshapes worker identity, institutional responsibility, and the moral economy of work in the United States and Japan.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative interpretive social humanities design combining sociology of work, digital labor studies, cultural analysis, and institutional political economy to examine AI-mediated labor in the United States and Japan. The comparison follows a theoretically informed contrastive logic: both countries are technologically advanced economies with major AI adoption, strong digital industries, and significant cultural investments in innovation, yet they differ substantially in labor market organization, corporate governance,

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employment norms, demographic pressures, and regulatory traditions. The United States is analyzed as a liberal market environment in which platform capitalism, entrepreneurial ideology, and weak employment protections intensify the individualization of technological risk. Japan is analyzed as a coordinated and institutionally embedded labor context in which AI adoption intersects with demographic aging, organizational loyalty, stable employment norms, and state-led visions of Society 5.0. The principal units of analysis are platform labor systems, creative-professional labor, algorithmic management practices, generative AI discourse, labor regulation, and institutional narratives of technological modernization.

The empirical basis consists of OECD and ILO labor reports, UNESCO AI ethics frameworks, national AI policy documents, peer-reviewed digital labor research, comparative labor sociology, platform economy scholarship, creative industries literature, and documented public debates concerning generative AI and labor. The study does not fabricate interviews, worker testimonies, or proprietary platform data; instead, it triangulates published scholarship, institutional reports, policy documents, and interpretive analysis of documented labor and cultural contexts. Analytical techniques include comparative institutional interpretation, discourse-sensitive policy analysis, thematic synthesis, and critical hermeneutic analysis of labor identity and technological change. Core variables include algorithmic control, worker autonomy, employment classification, creative authorship, institutional accountability, cultural norms of work, regulatory protection, and social recognition. Ethical considerations include avoiding deterministic claims about technological inevitability, recognizing differentiated worker vulnerability, and treating labor identity as socially situated rather than individually adaptive. Limitations include the rapid evolution of AI tools, uneven availability of platform data, and internal diversity within both countries; nevertheless, the comparative design provides strong analytical leverage for theorizing AI as a social and humanistic transformation of work.

Findings and Discussion

1. Algorithmic Valuation and the Datafication of Labor

The first major finding is that AI-mediated work transforms labor by converting human activity into measurable, comparable, and governable data. In platform work, this occurs through ratings, acceptance rates, delivery times, route optimization, customer feedback, automated deactivation, and incentive systems. In creative labor, it occurs through engagement metrics, algorithmic recommendation, automated content scoring, style extraction, and generative replication. Across both sectors, labor becomes valuable insofar as it can be quantified and integrated into computational systems.

In the United States, algorithmic valuation is closely connected to platform capitalism. Firms present platform work as flexible entrepreneurship, yet workers are often managed through opaque systems that determine task access, income opportunities, visibility, and discipline. The contradiction is clear: workers are formally independent but operationally controlled. This reflects Rosenblat's argument that platform companies exercise managerial power through information asymmetry and algorithmic systems (Rosenblat, 2018).

In Japan, platform work is less culturally dominant than in the United States but has expanded alongside

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broader labor market diversification, side work, and digital services. However, algorithmic valuation interacts with different norms. Japanese employment culture has historically emphasized organizational belonging, seniority, and stable career trajectories, though these norms have weakened under non-regular employment growth. Platform labor therefore represents not only economic flexibility but a shift away from socially embedded employment toward more individualized labor relations.

The comparative evidence indicates that algorithmic valuation changes the moral meaning of work. Workers are evaluated less through relational trust, craft judgment, or organizational membership and more through data points generated by platforms. This process can increase efficiency, but it also narrows the definition of labor quality. A delivery worker's knowledge of neighborhood safety, a driver's emotional labor, or a translator's cultural nuance may disappear within algorithmic metrics.

This finding extends Braverman's analysis of labor control into the digital era. Rather than separating conception from execution through factory management alone, AI-mediated systems separate worker judgment from evaluative authority. The platform or AI system defines what counts as good labor.

The societal implication is that labor policy must address algorithmic valuation as a form of workplace governance. Transparency, contestability, and worker participation are necessary when automated systems determine income, reputation, and professional survival.

2. Platform Workers and the Fragmentation of Labor Rights

The second finding concerns the fragmentation of labor rights. Platform workers in both countries face challenges related to employment classification, income instability, data opacity, and weak bargaining power. However, these vulnerabilities are intensified differently by national labor institutions.

In the United States, platform companies have often classified workers as independent contractors, limiting access to minimum wage protections, unemployment insurance, collective bargaining rights, health benefits, and employer liability. Algorithmic systems allocate work while the legal category of independence shifts risk onto workers. This produces what may be called managed precarity: workers are controlled without being fully recognized as employees.

In Japan, non-regular employment and freelance work have grown, but platform labor exists within a broader policy environment concerned with labor shortages, aging, and productivity. AI and automation are frequently framed as solutions to demographic decline. Yet this framing can obscure the conditions of workers positioned outside stable organizational employment. Freelancers and platform workers may lack the protections historically associated with firm-centered employment.

The comparative evidence reveals that AI does not merely automate labor; it reorganizes responsibility. Platforms use technological mediation to present themselves as intermediaries rather than employers. This institutional ambiguity allows firms to benefit from labor while denying obligations associated with traditional employment.

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The theoretical linkage is Polanyi's critique of labor commodification. When labor is treated as a flexible input governed by market signals and algorithmic allocation, social protections weaken. Work becomes detached from the institutional relations that historically provided security, recognition, and collective bargaining.

This finding contributes to social humanities scholarship by showing that labor identity is inseparable from rights. Workers who lack institutional recognition experience not only economic insecurity but symbolic devaluation. They are essential to platform systems but marginal to employment law.

The policy implication is that AI labor governance should include portable benefits, collective representation rights, algorithmic transparency, appeal mechanisms for automated decisions, and legal recognition of platform dependency.

3. Creative Professionals, Authorship, and Symbolic Displacement

The third finding is that generative AI produces a distinctive crisis of authorship and symbolic value among creative professionals. Writers, designers, musicians, illustrators, translators, and media workers confront systems capable of producing texts, images, music, and designs that resemble human creative outputs. The issue is not only job displacement but the transformation of cultural recognition.

In the United States, debates over generative AI have been shaped by intellectual property, entertainment labor disputes, publishing, journalism, and creative industry precarity. Writers and artists have raised concerns that AI systems are trained on creative work without meaningful consent or compensation. The result is a perceived extraction of cultural labor: past human creativity becomes input for systems that may compete with future human creators.

In Japan, generative AI interacts with globally influential cultural industries including manga, anime, gaming, translation, and design. Japanese creative communities have debated AI-generated art, style imitation, copyright, and the ethics of machine-produced creativity. Because Japanese cultural production often involves distinctive aesthetic traditions and fan communities, concerns about AI reproduction are not limited to economics but include authenticity, craft, and cultural continuity.

The comparative evidence indicates that creative labor is vulnerable because it depends on symbolic capital. Bourdieu's theory of cultural production is useful here: creative value emerges not merely from output but from recognition within fields of production (Bourdieu, 1993). Generative AI destabilizes this field by producing outputs that may appear stylistically competent while lacking human biography, intention, struggle, and situated cultural meaning.

This does not mean that AI cannot be used creatively. Many artists use AI as a tool for experimentation. The problem emerges when institutions treat generative outputs as substitutes for human creative labor without addressing consent, compensation, and authorship.

The societal implication is that cultural policy must protect creative labor as a public good. Copyright

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reform, licensing systems, collective bargaining, transparency regarding training data, and attribution frameworks are needed to prevent the extraction of creative value without recognition.

4. Cultural Norms of Work: Entrepreneurial Individualism and Organizational Belonging

The fourth finding concerns cultural norms of work. In the United States, AI-mediated labor is frequently narrated through entrepreneurial individualism. Workers are encouraged to reskill, adapt, brand themselves, and compete in flexible markets. This discourse frames technological disruption as an individual challenge rather than an institutional responsibility.

In Japan, AI is often narrated through social problem-solving: addressing labor shortages, supporting elder care, improving productivity, and sustaining economic competitiveness under demographic pressure. Yet this collective framing may also obscure worker anxieties if adaptation is expected as part of organizational loyalty or national modernization.

The comparative evidence indicates that national narratives shape how AI disruption is interpreted. In the United States, workers may internalize technological insecurity as personal failure to adapt. In Japan, workers may experience technological change through obligations to firm, society, or national productivity goals. Both contexts can displace responsibility away from institutions, though through different cultural logics.

This reflects underlying socio-cultural mechanisms within labor identity. Work is morally narrated differently across societies. Liberal market societies valorize individual flexibility, while coordinated institutional societies may emphasize collective adjustment. Yet AI challenges both by introducing systems whose power exceeds individual or workplace-level control.

The theoretical implication is that AI ethics must engage cultural sociology. Principles of fairness and transparency are insufficient without understanding how workers interpret technological change through culturally specific moral economies.

Table 1. Comparative Matrix of Social Variables, Institutional Mechanisms, and Societal Outcomes

Variable	United States	Japan	Empirical/Interpretive Evidence	Analytical Interpretation
AI Labor Narrative	Innovation, entrepreneurship, productivity, disruption	Social problem-solving, productivity, demographic adaptation	OECD, ILO, national AI policy literature	National narratives shape responsibility for adaptation
Platform Work	Highly developed platform capitalism and contractor	Expanding platform and freelance work within	Digital labor studies and labor policy reports	Algorithmic management fragments labor

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	classification	changing employment norms		rights differently
Creative Labor	Strong debates over copyright, entertainment labor, and generative AI	Strong debates over manga, anime, design, translation, and cultural authenticity	Creative industries scholarship	AI challenges authorship and symbolic value across cultural fields
Algorithmic Valuation	Metrics, ratings, automation, performance scoring	Datafication within platform and organizational modernization systems	Platform labor research	Data metrics redefine labor quality and recognition
Labor Identity	Entrepreneurial individualism and self-responsibilization	Organizational belonging and collective adaptation pressures	Comparative labor sociology	AI disruption is interpreted through labor culture
Institutional Responsibility	Risk often shifted to workers through market flexibility	Responsibility mediated by firms, state policy, and social expectations	Labor regulation and policy documents	Responsibility displacement occurs through different institutional forms
Worker Vulnerability	Precarity, weak benefits, algorithmic opacity	Non-regular work, aging economy, freelance insecurity	ILO and OECD labor reports	AI intensifies existing labor segmentation
Societal Outcome	Intensified labor individualization and creative labor conflict	Managed technological adaptation with emerging tensions over rights and creativity	Comparative interpretive synthesis	AI reshapes moral economy and recognition of work

The table demonstrates that AI-mediated labor is shaped by institutional and cultural context. The United

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States and Japan both experience algorithmic valuation and AI-driven disruption, but the meanings differ. In the United States, the dominant problem is marketized precarity and individualized responsibility. In Japan, the dominant tension lies between collective technological modernization and the erosion of stable employment norms.

The deeper analytical implication is that AI changes work by changing recognition. Workers are not only concerned about whether tasks will disappear. They are concerned about whether their judgment, creativity, time, and dignity will continue to count. Therefore, social humanities research must analyze AI as a moral and institutional transformation of labor, not only as automation.

5. Institutional Responsibility and the Governance of Algorithmic Work

The fifth finding is that AI produces a responsibility gap. Firms, platforms, and institutions often present AI systems as technical tools while avoiding accountability for their social effects. This is visible when platforms blame algorithms for work allocation, when companies use automated systems to evaluate workers without explanation, or when AI-generated outputs are treated as cost-saving substitutes without acknowledging the labor embedded in training data.

In the United States, responsibility gaps are intensified by fragmented regulation and strong corporate influence over digital markets. Workers often lack access to meaningful explanations of algorithmic decisions. Creative professionals often lack clarity regarding whether their work has been used in training datasets. Legal frameworks struggle to keep pace with technological development.

In Japan, state and corporate actors have emphasized responsible AI, but implementation remains shaped by consensus-oriented governance and industrial competitiveness. Workers may have limited channels to contest automated systems if decisions are embedded within organizational hierarchies or subcontracting arrangements.

The comparative evidence suggests that algorithmic accountability must be labor-centered. Transparency should not mean simply publishing technical information; it should mean enabling workers to understand, contest, and influence systems that affect their livelihood.

This finding contributes to ethics of technology by shifting the focus from abstract AI principles to institutional responsibility. Responsible AI must include labor rights, collective bargaining, data rights, and cultural recognition.

6. The Moral Economy of AI and the Future of Human Work

The sixth finding concerns the moral economy of AI. Public debates often ask whether AI will replace humans, but the deeper social question is what kinds of human work societies choose to value. AI challenges the moral economy of work by making some forms of labor appear cheaper, faster, or more replaceable. Yet efficiency is not the same as social value.

Platform workers reveal that essential services can be technologically optimized while socially devalued. Creative professionals reveal that cultural production can be technically replicated while raising unresolved questions

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about meaning, authorship, and recognition. Together, these dimensions show that AI threatens not only employment but the moral language through which societies justify dignity at work.

The comparative evidence indicates that neither the U.S. nor Japanese model fully resolves this problem. The United States risks allowing AI to deepen market inequality and worker individualization. Japan risks framing AI adaptation as social necessity without fully protecting those outside stable employment institutions.

The societal implication is that AI governance must be democratic. Workers, artists, unions, professional associations, civil society organizations, and affected communities should participate in decisions about AI deployment. Technological futures should not be determined solely by firms, engineers, or investors.

Scholarly Propositions

Proposition 1: AI-mediated labor reorganizes recognition by converting work into algorithmic valuation.

AI systems redefine labor quality through metrics, ratings, predictions, and automated classifications. This process narrows social recognition when forms of judgment, care, craft, and creativity are not captured by data.

Proposition 2: Platform workers and creative professionals experience different forms of AI vulnerability but share exposure to institutional responsibility displacement.

Platform workers face algorithmic management and unstable labor rights, while creative professionals face authorship and value disruption. In both cases, institutions often shift technological risk onto workers.

Proposition 3: National labor cultures mediate the social meaning of AI disruption.

Entrepreneurial individualism in the United States and organizational adaptation in Japan produce different interpretations of technological change, but both can obscure institutional responsibility.

Proposition 4: Democratic AI governance requires labor-centered accountability.

Transparency, consent, contestability, collective representation, and cultural recognition are essential for preventing AI from deepening inequality and devaluing human work.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how AI-mediated labor reshapes worker identity, institutional responsibility, and the moral economy of work in the United States and Japan. The central finding is that AI transforms labor not only by automating tasks but by reorganizing recognition. It changes how work is measured, how skill is valued, how responsibility is assigned, and how workers understand their social worth.

The comparative analysis shows that platform workers and creative professionals experience AI disruption differently but are connected by shared exposure to algorithmic valuation. Platform workers face

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surveillance, opaque decision-making, unstable income, and fragmented labor rights. Creative professionals face symbolic displacement, authorship disputes, and extraction of cultural value. In both cases, AI systems often shift responsibility away from firms and institutions and onto individuals expected to adapt.

The United States case demonstrates how AI disruption is intensified by platform capitalism, weak labor protections, and entrepreneurial individualism. Japan demonstrates how AI is shaped by demographic pressures, organizational norms, and state-led modernization narratives. These differences matter because technological change is always culturally and institutionally mediated.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in integrating sociology of work, digital labor studies, cultural theory, and AI ethics through the concept of moral economy. The study shows that AI governance must address dignity, recognition, authorship, and labor rights, not merely productivity or technical safety.

Empirically and interpretively, the article contributes by comparing two technologically advanced societies and two labor domains that are often studied separately. The comparison reveals that AI's social consequences extend across both precarious service work and symbolic creative labor.

The institutional and societal implications are substantial. Governments should regulate algorithmic management, clarify employment responsibility, support portable benefits, protect creative rights, require transparency in training data, and ensure worker participation in AI governance. Firms should be held accountable for the systems they deploy. Creative industries should develop fair licensing and compensation mechanisms. Platform workers should have rights to explanation, appeal, and collective representation.

The study has limitations. It relies on secondary literature and institutional reports rather than original interviews or platform datasets. Future research should conduct comparative ethnographies of AI-mediated workplaces, analyze worker experiences of algorithmic management, study generative AI's effects on cultural labor markets, and examine regulatory experiments across additional regions.

Ultimately, this article demonstrates that the future of AI is inseparable from the future of work. The central question is not whether machines can perform tasks, but whether societies can build institutions that preserve human dignity, creativity, and justice in an age of algorithmic labor.

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