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Monographic Section

## Professions Within, Between and Beyond. Varieties of Professionalism in a Globalising World

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**Abstract.** This article introduces the monographic section on the varieties of professionalism in a globalising world. The monographic section aims to explore new theoretical perspectives and analytical approaches in the field of the sociology of professions, by collecting both theoretical and empirical contributions focusing on different professions (either established or emerging ones) and topics, from various geographical regions. In the first part of this introductory article, we discuss professionalism as a concept that needs to be theoretically redefined in the context of post-industrial society after the crisis. For this purpose, we propose to refocus the discourse about professionalism on the process of *differentiation* and the *increasing heterogeneity* it is bringing about, within and between professional groups. Additionally, the changed societal conditions imply a changing role for professionals in society, beyond professionalism, which is an area worth being explored. Thus, we outline possible developments of the academic debate in three main analytical dimensions, labelled as *within*, *between* and *beyond*. The second part charts the nine contributions included in the monographic section, while trying to reconduct them to the dimensions mentioned above. Three orders of themes have thus been identified, concerning: (1) the redefinition of the concept of professionalism as a “practice”, highlighting the practicality of the wisdom used by professionals in performing their everyday tasks; (2) the analysis of regulation processes, focusing on what happens when institutions shape professionalism; and (3) the investigation of the dynamics of transnational mobility, in the context of globalisation processes.

**Keywords.** Professionalism; social change; inequality; market; technology; globalisation.

### INTRODUCTION

An important legacy of the global crisis of 2008 is the increased average level of qualifications among the labour force (Gallie 2013). The crisis

mostly impacted on low-skilled profiles, implying a decline in employment in manufacturing and construction. As a consequence, the composition of the labour force has changed: employment in advanced business services has grown, and a general upskilling of workers has occurred – although to a different extent in each country. However, the crisis of the last decade only magnified a trend that had already been present since the rise of the “knowledge society” (Machlup 1962; Drucker 1968; Bell 1973). The growth of business service sectors is a long-standing phenomenon, which has brought about a transformation of the labour market in the last three decades: while organisational hierarchies flatten, services – even of a high-skilled nature – once provided in-house by permanent employees, are now more and more outsourced to specialised firms or subcontracted to independent professionals (Leicht, Fennel 2001). The crisis accelerated this process, so that outsourcing is, nowadays, the dominant mode to meet the needs for professional services, hence determining a growth in employment in this sector.

*Expert labour*, thus, has gained new centrality, and professionals lie right at the heart of this change. At the same time, the post-industrial transition has changed the nature of professional work profoundly: first, because those who define themselves “professionals” are more numerous than ever; second, because not all expert labour is easy to acknowledge in a traditional professionalisation model, based on strong institutions and peer control; and, third, because professional jobs no longer ensure prestige and prerogatives like high salaries, interesting work, high levels of autonomy or job security. Even though this situation seems to fulfil the prophecy of Wilensky (1964), the recent rise in knowledge work has changed what we mean by professionalism, challenging its very conceptualisation.

## REDEFINING PROFESSIONALISM

It is not the intention of this introduction to draw a comprehensive history of the concept of professionalism (in this regard, see Evetts 2003; Saks 2010; 2012; 2016). We, however, believe that it would be useful to provide our readers with some theoretical tools for understanding the most significant trends and changes that have affected professions in relatively recent years, stemming from the current debate on professionalism.

Since the Seventies, several scholars have highlighted the declining centrality of the “classic” model of professionalism (to cite just a few, see Haug 1972; 1975; Oppenheimer 1973; McKinlay, Arches 1985; Navarro 1988), theorised as a separate logic from market and bureaucracy and defined by peer control (Freidson 2001), in favour of new conceptualisations that have progressively accepted the interpenetration of organisational logics with professionalism (Evetts 2004; Faulconbridge, Muzio 2007). This turn has resulted in lesser importance for the traditional loci of professional dominance (i.e. professional associations) in favour of a multiplication of professionalisms, defined by the reinterpretation of professionalism operated by the organisations in which professionals provide their services. The resulting hybridisation (Noordegraaf 2007; 2015) has led to a rise in new concepts like *commercialised professionalism* (Hanlon 1996; 1998) or *corporative professionalism* (Muzio *et alii* 2011), stressing the increasing role of the market as a form of professional regulation. Previously protected by the success of their professional projects (Sarfatti Larson 1977), professionals have been increasingly exposed to the market and affected by intra-professional competition and the loosening of regulative protections against inter-professional conflicts, with the consequential erosion of their privileged labour market position. On the one hand, professional dominance has been losing ground in traditional professions, although, in isolated cases, powerful professional groups have proven able to resist the erosion of their power by lobbying governments to obtain re-regulation, in order to combat their increasing labour insecurity and strengthen their threatened jurisdictions (as an example, see the case of Italian lawyers, in Bellini 2014; 2017). On the other hand, brand-new occupations with a new centrality in the post-industrial economy have set out with their own professionalisation projects, while privileging market success and the acknowledgement of specialised expertise, but rejecting peer control. *Emerging professionals* (Maestripieri, Cucca 2018) have assumed the market logic as naturally constituting their essence, while not perceiving the insecurity determined by exposure to the market as problematic in an era of hegemonic neoliberalism (Murgia *et alii* 2016).

Generally speaking, professionals have had to deal with a pervasive process of *differentiation*, affecting professional groups. At present, professions can hardly be considered homogeneous and cohesive groups, which calls

into question the feasibility of pursuing strong professional projects. As a natural consequence, less power implies a weaker association between professional status, social status and financial rewards. In fact, professions and professionals are increasingly exposed to processes of “marginalisation” (Butler *et alii* 2012). Despite their diversity, emerging and traditional professional groups have been joined by concomitant processes of differentiation among their members. Indeed, among traditional professionals, the differentiation has been determined by the loosening of professional power, while, in the case of emerging professions, the dominance of the market logic and the increasing competition to which professionals are exposed have brought about rising inequalities. This ongoing process has produced an *increasing heterogeneity* among professionals.

Our argument is that differentiation and heterogeneity are occurring in *multiple dimensions*, all of which are worth exploring. The aim of this introduction, indeed, is to conceptualise the processes of differentiation and indicate possible directions for future research, while the selection of articles included in this issue represents the vanguard of the growing interest of scholars in what lies behind the supposed privileged status of professions.

### THREE DIMENSIONS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY PROFESSIONALISM: A PROPOSAL

Given the above theoretical premises, three main analytical dimensions can be identified that delineate the loci of differentiation and heterogeneity in the field of the sociology of professions.

1. The first area of analysis is the *within* dimension: what types of process differentiate professionals within professions? The rise of a post-industrial society has implied not only a higher level of qualifications among the labour force, but also its increased diversity and mobility. The professions do not exclude women, minorities or the children of lower- and middle-class families anymore.

But, “differentiation within” also regards the positions in the labour market that each practitioner can access: while practitioners from marginal groups, like women and minorities, may find it easier to access the professions, this does not necessarily mean that they can access the same favourable conditions reserved for professionals with insider positions. There is a rising heterogeneity in the way professional work is contracted out, which also increases the degree of insecurity of expert labour (Murgia *et alii* 2016). Technological change has brought about a further opening of the professional labour markets: now, practitioners just need a personal computer and relatively easy-to-use software to be present and compete on the market. Being on the market, however, is not always sufficient to ensure adequate income levels and access to welfare (Maestriperi, Cucca 2018). Not all practitioners within a profession enjoy the same stability, income and centrality in their communities of peers (see Alacevich *et alii* 2017): professions are not immune to institutional power struggles and social inequalities, which structure gender-, generation- and race-based exclusions, affecting the broader labour market (Butler *et alii* 2012).

Additionally, neoliberal processes of deregulation have eroded the capacity of professional groups to secure their status: this process magnifies the insecurity experienced by practitioners in their careers (Maestriperi, Cucca 2018). Differentiation “within” can thus occur over time, when regulation intervenes to loosen the boundaries of a professional activity or to modify the terms by which social closure is put into practice. In this sense, institutional change can be seen as a form of change which shapes professionalism *from within*.

An unexplored field is the way technological change interacts with socio-professional stratification principles. New technologies, in effect, can reproduce or even increase the inequalities between those who have resources to invest in innovation or, in any case, have the capacity to keep pace with technological advancements, and those who have not. On the other hand, technological change offers those who are at the margins of the professional field new opportunities to promote their businesses or directly sell services, reaching a wider audience at a low cost. Among the so-called “disruptive” technologies (Christensen 1997) – namely innovative technologies that make it possible to offer low-cost, high-quality services and, thus, activate a latent demand for services – online work platforms take the externalisation trend to the extreme, so you can hire the expert you need, for a single, often simple

task, without even knowing who he or she is. In this sense, digitalisation exposes professional workers to a process of polarisation between bad and good jobs, with the consequence of putting them or, at least, some of them, in a precarious work situation. The growing quota of self-employed professionals without employees should be regarded as a possible warning signal as to the deterioration of their working conditions.

2. A fundamental feature that scholars have taken into consideration to distinguish professions from occupations is the capacity of specific occupational groups to secure social recognition and control association membership (Johnson 1972; Freidson 1994), thus ensuring their members stable and remunerative jobs by reducing the number of acknowledged practitioners and, as a consequence, internal competition. This takes us to the second dimension: professionalism changes *between* professional groups. These are indeed characterised by different degrees of protection against market risks, which depend on public regulation, but also on the capacity to organise collectively and exert control or influence over a certain field of expertise (Butler *et alii* 2012). Regulation provides differential advantages and/or disadvantages to those who benefit from public acknowledgement of their market closure and those who, instead, rely only on the market as the dominant regulatory mechanism.

This is a typical neo-Weberian analytical perspective, with its focus on the interactions between different occupational jurisdictions (Abbott 1988), in particular the dynamics of professional power (Johnson 1972) and the mechanisms of exclusionary social closure (Parkin 1979; Macdonald 1995) which determine the success of a “professional project” (Sarfatti Larson 1977). In this view, professions are depicted as hierarchically differentiated groups, and the analysis is centred on inequalities between professional groups (Saks 2015). That said, if we assume that professional groups are historically and locally situated – both enabled and constrained by nationally-based professional systems, and embedded in specific institutional and sociocultural contexts – we deem it convenient to extend the discourse on “differentiation between” to include the rising inequalities between professionals who belong to the same professional groups but to different professional systems, put under pressure by globalisation processes.

Globalisation (Dent *et alii* 2016), in effect, has changed the composition of the professional labour force and the size of professional service firms. It is now easy for professionals to travel outside their countries to provide their services: not only because services are increasingly supplied by global corporations dominating the markets in their home countries and abroad (Muzio, Kirkpatrick 2011), but also because individual careers are becoming boundaryless and globally mobile (Cohen, Mallon 1999). It is now common for professionals from different countries and educated within different systems of professions to provide professional services side by side in the same global professional service firm. This means that professionalism, as we traditionally know it, is performed under different regulations and various cultures. New “local” ways of interpreting what professionalism is therefore emerge: as such, the same regulative framework can have different outcomes, when “imported” from one country to another.

3. The third dimension concerns what lies *beyond* professionalism. The term “beyond”, it is worth noting, does not mean the denial of the value of professionalism as a heuristic category, nor the transition to any form of post-professional society. On the contrary, it implies the assumption of the persisting significance of professionalism as a conceptual tool that can be used to analyse and interpret social change. Furthermore, it indicates the necessity to shift the focus of the academic discourse from professionalism, in a strict sense, to the relationship between expert labour and society, that is, the way social change influences professionalism, and its implications for society as a whole.

This aspect has to do with the forms of “social control” already enumerated by Goode (1957), in particular the “indirect” control exerted by society on professionals through the clients’ choices. The same phenomenon can be observed from a different perspective, as a matter of power in the “social exchange” between professionals and clients, understood as the autonomy of the former from the latter (Forsyth, Danisiewicz 1985). In this case, the focus is on the changing relationship between professionals and clients, and the effects of change on trust relationships and the dynamics of social recognition. Indeed it is true that so far the academic debate has not been able to fully

take into account the extent to which professionalism has changed in the light of the decline in trust relationships and the public recognition of the value of professional work.

An influential factor to consider is, once again, technological change. It is a pervasive phenomenon that affects professionals as well as clients: on the one hand, it has created new channels to express the demand for professional services; on the other, it has offered professionals new instruments to respond, in a prompt and low-cost manner, to the demand for professional services, which has, in turn, become more sophisticated and sensitive to price variations. Furthermore, new technologies have changed the ways expert knowledge is produced and conveyed, impacting significantly on the power balances between professionals and clients. Technology has made “esoteric” knowledge more easily accessible, so that the relationship between professionals and clients is, by and large, mediated by technology. In this sense, technology is a vector of irreversible change, which involves the way expert knowledge is made available to the public, and new organisational models designed to increase the access to professional services (see Susskind R., Susskind D. 2015).

Taken all together, the trends described above reveal the need for further theoretical advancements and indicate new empirical research directions. In the special issue we are presenting here, we have collected some promising studies that go in the directions of research mentioned above.

## UNPACKING THE TOOLBOX: AN OUTLINE OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The issue we propose to our readers aims to illustrate the potential of a research agenda resting on three dimensions, *within*, *between* and *beyond*, as analytical tools to allow an overview of the complexity of contemporary professionalism. The nine articles included in this issue present investigations on both established and emerging professions, conducted in Western and non-Western countries. They can be ideally divided into three groups of three contributions each, as they focus on the three aspects of change that we consider crucial to understand the social and cultural transformations occurring in the field of professions.

### *Professionalism as a practice – “beyond” as a latent dimension*

The first three articles depart from the conception of professionalism as an “institution” to instead focus on professionalism as a “practice”, highlighting the practicality of the wisdom used by professionals in performing their everyday tasks.

In the first article, Florent Champy provides a valuable theoretical contribution which consists of an original attempt to redefine what we mean by professionalism. Champy borrows the concept of “prudentiality” from Aristotelian philosophy to reframe and better understand the current changes in professionalism. The author, it is to be noted, refers to a particular type of professionalism, which better adapts to those work activities undertaken in situations of “irreducible uncertainty”, which he, indeed, calls *prudential professionalism*. Such activities, he says, require a particular way of reasoning, namely “practical wisdom”, which enables the mistakes arising from uncertainty to be limited. Starting from an analysis of Abbott’s theory and taking the case of American medicine as an example, Champy shows the intrinsic vulnerability of work activities and the related weakness of professional domains. He then notices how the principles of New Public Management and organisational professionalism, which affirm the dominance of the value of objectivity and aim to reduce contingency, have affected the professions that rely on prudential practices, making them weaker. The contribution of Champy is of particular interest in the context of this issue, since it includes the “beyond” dimension as a latent – not focal – analytical dimension. The author, in effect, declares his intention to emphasise the connections between the developments in professionalism and wider social change, underlining that the valorisation of objectivity to the detriment of prudentiality impacts the whole of society.

Champy's conception of prudence is also used by Tatiana Saruis in her contribution, as a theoretical basis to show how alterations in discretionary power, in conditions of increasingly complex contexts and tasks, affect street-level workers in social welfare – their roles, responsibilities, working conditions and protection from risks. After defining the concept of “discretion” in relation to the institutional factors – laws and procedures – that define its spaces and influence its use, Saruis examines the conditions that make it a problematic issue in this policy field. These include inadequate resources, ambiguous and undefined aims, results that are difficult to measure, in addition to an inherent asymmetry of information between workers and users. She then shows how significant changes in welfare systems have produced multiple pressures on discretion, which has reflected on the professionalism of street-level workers. In this case too, it is easy to make out the tension between professions and society in the background of the article. As the author notices, indeed, the “spaces” of discretion have widened due to social change, namely with an increase in and diversification of the demand for welfare services. On the other hand, discretion is a constitutive element of the power relationships between street-level workers and citizens.

The contribution of Irmgard Steckdaub-Muller differs from the previous ones as it poses the question of redefining professionalism at its limits, beyond the comfortable boundaries of acknowledged professions. The author presents a case study on tattoo artists to show how this particular kind of practitioners, who suffer from an essential lack of social recognition and constantly fight against deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes, use professionalism as a “discursive” practice to conceptualise their work activity and construct a professional identity. Once again, the concept of prudence proves to be useful to capture the essence of working in complex and variable environments, in conditions of “irreducible uncertainty”. The comparison with medicine follows on naturally from the interview extracts reported in the text.

### *The “within” dimension*

The second ideal group of three articles explores the *within* dimension in relation to regulation dynamics, focusing on what happens when institutions shape professionalism.

The article written by Wang and Stewart investigates the reasons that impeded the British Association of Project Management (APM) from fully succeeding in raising the status and performance of project management in the UK. For this purpose, it adopts an original analytical approach. The authors apply the actor-network theory (ANT) to reframe the historical actions of professional associations. They identify a range of “human” – i.e. practitioners, clients, employers – and “non-human” actors – i.e. certifications, membership, tactics – which, when combined, can address and solve the concerns of the market. Then, they look at the process of professionalisation as a process of “value-translation”, structured in four phases: *problematisation*, *interesement*, *enrolment* and *mobilisation*. Wang and Stewart apply this approach to an analysis of the historical evolution of the cost accounting profession and its association (the Cost Accounting Professional Association, CIMA), and use this case study as a comparator for the case of project management and the APM. This way of proceeding allows the authors to identify the weaknesses of the process to professionalise project management in Britain, reframed in terms of a lack of recognition in the network of actors to which project managers belong.

Clementina Casula presents the singular case of Italian classical musicians. The classical music profession in Italy, the author observes, is undergoing profound changes. Adopting a neo-institutional perspective, she explores the processes that are reshaping the profession, focusing on two of them: neoliberal trends, bringing about the marketisation of the performing arts and reframing the idea of classical music as a productive factor in the rhetoric about the creative industries; and “cultural declassification”, that is, the weakening of the cultural authority of classical music. Casula argues that, in the light of these changes, the transformation of the institutions designated to train musicians – the Music Conservatories, promoted to the tertiary level of education – has produced the paradoxical effect of “deprofessionalising” classical musicians. She then examines the strategies pursued by both musicians and music teachers to cope with these changes.

In the following article, Bronzini and Spina challenge the notion of “transition” in teachers’ professionalism and try to identify possible emerging features of the teaching profession in Italy. For this purpose, they develop a theoretically-based analytical framework, which tries to combine different *phases* and *forms* of professionalism, by comparing the types already identified by Hargreaves and Noordegraaf. This approach sets out to enable the conduction of a systematic historical-processual analysis of professionalism in the field of teaching. The main aim of the article is to test this approach through a pilot case study, using mixed methods. The analysis provides significant indications on how the profession is changing, revealing different ways of understanding and practising the profession itself. As the authors demonstrate, the transition process is incomplete. Elements of “pure” professionalism persist, although generally hybridity seems to prevail.

### *The “between” dimension*

The last three articles explore the *between* dimension, with specific reference to the dynamics of transnational mobility that occur in the context of globalisation processes, also implied by the growing importance of the seemingly “peripheral” area of geography in the professional debate.

The contribution of Bédard and Massana investigates the phenomenon of transnational mobility – understood as mobility across nationally-based professional systems – and the related problems of the socio-professional integration of established professionals, such as engineers. The authors propose an in-depth analysis of the reasons and implications of the difficulties encountered by French engineers moving to Canada, against the backdrop of the functioning of the France-Quebec Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA). They thus focus on the interaction between two dimensions: a *structural* dimension, related to the mechanisms of regulation and governance of the professions; and a *cultural and relational* dimension, related to the processes of learning social and cultural codes and building networks of personal relationships. The article draws interesting conclusions. The MRA indeed facilitates the access of foreign engineers to the domestic professional labour market, but it does not provide mechanisms to support their social integration, nor to avoid potential professional deskilling. In this sense, it discloses the existence of processes of social closure owing to socio-cultural barriers, which make integration problematic even for highly qualified migrant professionals speaking the same language as the domestic workers.

Erwin Rafael instead calls attention to the outcomes resulting from the movement of institutions. His article shows what happens to professionalism when a regulative framework created for one country is imported to another. For this purpose, it reports the findings of a case study on accountancy in the Philippines, which the author indicates as a “peripheral” professional group in a globalised professional field aiming to strengthen its occupational authority by managing its knowledge standards. More precisely, Rafael conducts a historical reconstruction to show how Philippine accountancy ended up cutting off its post-colonial ties with US practice – which he defines as an “unsustainable reliance” – and decided to harmonise the Philippine Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) with the International Accounting Standards (IAS). He then interprets this strategic choice as the outcome of a complex mix of structural changes in the core of standards development, resource constraints on peripheral organisations such as the Accounting Standards Council (ASC) and the pursuit of a professional project by the local professional group.

Last but not least, the article authored by Esther Ruiz Ben investigates the global interstices in which professionalism sprawls, looking at the professional boundaries that emerge when professional activities are performed transnationally. Borrowing the concept of “linked ecologies” from Abbott, the author focuses on transnational IT workspaces as “inter-ecological” spaces where experts and employers belonging to different, nationally-based institutional settings interact within the framework of transnational projects. Ruiz Ben assumes that the struggle for professional boundaries takes place in three dimensions: in the linkages between tasks and organised action (jurisdiction), the mechanisms for legitimising work (control of work) and the search for professional identity. She then shows that, to deal with these problems, the IT managers working in transnational workspaces combine organisational rules and occupational knowledge, as a particular form of hybrid professionalism. They emerge, she says, as

“hinges” linking not only different organisations, but also bodies of knowledge, areas of expertise and geographical locations.

## VARIETIES OF PROFESSIONALISM: REFINING THE RESEARCH AGENDA

The collection of articles presented in this introductory contribution is intended to account for the *varieties of professionalism* emerging as an implication of pervasive globalisation processes which are increasingly connecting professionals, professional groups and professional systems from different world regions.

We have nevertheless taken this occasion to reflect on the status of the sociology of professions and the capacity of its heuristic categories to explain the changing social reality. In particular, we felt the necessity to try to broaden our consideration of the problem of professionalism as a concept that needs to be continuously redefined. For this purpose, we proposed to refocus the discourse about professionalism on the process of *differentiation* and the *increasing heterogeneity* it brings about, within and between professional groups. We then drew possible paths of development of the academic debate in three analytical dimensions, labelled as *within*, *between* and *beyond*. Finally, we outlined the nine articles, trying to reconduct them to these dimensions.

Three orders of themes have thus been identified. The first field deals with *the redefinition of the concept of professionalism as a “practice”*, highlighting the practicality of the wisdom used by professionals in performing their everyday tasks. The three contributions that deal with this problem, particularly those of Champy and Saruis, it is to be noted, show that assuming the idea of professionalism as a practice implies reflecting on the “beyond” dimension as well; professional practice and social change, in this view, are directly connected with each other. The second dimension concerns *the analysis of regulation processes*, focusing on what happens when institutions shape professionalism. In this regard, the collected articles present a variety of cases, pertaining to the role of key institutions, such as professional associations and training institutions, against the background of significant changes in the regulatory frameworks. The third area investigates *the dynamics of transnational mobility*, in the context of globalisation processes. Here, the contributions focus on the mobility of both practitioners and – in a figurative sense – of institutions, and on the way transnational workspaces shape professionalism.

A further remark must be made concerning the types of professions studied. As can be seen, four contributions out of nine deal with emerging, unprotected and unregulated professions (i.e. tattoo artists, classical musicians, project managers and IT experts). This should induce scholars in this disciplinary field to reflect on the convenience of loosening the requirements for defining what we mean by professionalism. In this respect, we argue that the notion of professionalism as a “discursive episteme” (Butler *et alii* 2012) may be a valid investigative tool to understand a higher number of occupations: not solely professions, strictly speaking, but all those occupations that use *expertise* as a way of distinguishing themselves on the labour market. If we were to stick to an institutional definition, in effect, we would run the risk of underestimating certain phenomena occurring outside a (historical and situated) model, based on established professions.

Despite introducing innovative elements to the debate, however, the collection of articles presented here leave some questions unresolved. As regards the *within* dimension, none of the articles deals with the precariousness of professional workers. This is still an unexplored issue, with few notable exceptions (see, for instance, Ballatore *et alii* 2014). In terms of *between*, none of them proposes a comparison between countries in the same professional field or between professions in the same country. However, comparative studies are the key to abstracting from country- and profession-specific trends and bringing to light the subterranean transformations affecting professionalism at a macro-global level. Lastly, none of the articles assumes the dynamics occurring *beyond* professionalism as a focal point of its analysis. Essential questions concerning the changing nature of the demand for professional services, its impact on the relationship between professionals and clients or users, and the consequences on the broader society therefore remain unanswered.



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