

(Spatial) Employment Effects of Online-Trade

The digitalisation of retail and its related supply chains is progressing; with a high level of dynamism emanating from large (mainly foreign) online retailers. In addition, 'hybrid' forms emerge between online and offline retail, which change the purchasing of goods, logistics, administration and IT along the value chain. This project examines the effects of these changes on local work, and how this can be changed by workers and their representatives.

Context

The digitalisation of German retail and its supply chains is proceeding within the context of fierce competition, driven to a large extent by large online retailers. New forms of retail, as already largely practiced in the US and China, now spread internationally; with online retailers (such as Amazon and Alibaba) increasingly dominating e.g. the German market. This changes employment patterns and threatens jobs in existing retail value chains. However, online retail does not simply take large market shares from traditional brick-and-mortar retail; 'hybrid' forms emerge that combine online and stationary retail. These processes also change the purchasing of goods, logistics, administration and IT along the retail value chain. This project examines how online retail and hybridisation affect local work and how workers and their representatives address such challenges.

Question

The central question of the project is: How does hybrid and online retail impact the field of local work in the international retail value chains, and what opportunities for work-related place-making exist for the involved actors?

The study investigates how dominant international companies set new trends, and how these changes local patterns of human work in Germany. In addition, 'place-making' is described in terms of already used potential for action, and still unused, but recognisable options (in the sense of pro-active, work orientated embedding), in which e.g. the lead firm in the value chain, local management, employees, works councils, trade unions and further regional actors participate.

Research methods

The methodology for this study comprises initial case studies in the pioneer countries, USA and China, and a secondary analysis of the overall situation in Germany. Subsequently, in-depth studies will be conducted in German cities of different sizes and situations of the labour market. Companies along the value chains of hybrid and online trade are examined on the basis of qualitative interviews with participants and experts. Three dynamic cities have been selected, which have already attracted various US and Chinese internet companies, and online trading headquarters, and which are also flagship locations for stationary stores of online retailers (Cologne, Berlin, Munich). In addition, further regions are being examined in order to include locations beyond the pioneer locations, and to map regions of different growth dynamics or shrinkage (Duisburg, Unna, Winsen/Luhe, Elbe-Elster).