

New Frontiers: The Origins and Content of New Work, 1940-2018

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Abstract:

Recent theory stresses the importance of new job types ('new work') that emerge as automation subsumes existing labor tasks. Comprehensive and representative empirical evidence on this phenomenon is lacking, however. We construct an inventory of new job titles linked to United States Census microdata over 1940-2018 and explore the emergence and evolution of new work—including its skill demands and wage levels. Comparing new to pre-existing ('old') work, our descriptive analysis detects sharp shifts across decades in the content of new work and the education and wage levels of those who perform it. In the first four post-War decades, new work emerges disproportionately in production and office occupations, and in professional specialties. Conversely, new work creation since 1980 has increasingly concentrated in high-education specialties and, for non-college workers, in low-education personal services and manual occupations. In both eras, new work emerges disproportionately in activities where old work is also growing. Leveraging these observations, we offer a high-level hypothesis for the sources of new work creation and present evidence on empirical tests of this hypothesis.