

## **Towards a Fairer Platform Economy: Introducing the Fairwork Foundation**

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### **The Problem with Platform Work**

Increasingly greater numbers of people are now using apps, platforms, and websites to find and perform jobs.<sup>3</sup> There are at least seven million platform workers that live all over the world, doing work valued at US\$5 billion per year outsourced via platforms or apps (Kuek et al., 2015; Heeks, 2017). Eleven percent of the labour force in the United Kingdom have already earned income from digital labour platforms (Huws and Joyce, 2016), and it is predicted that by 2025, one third of all labour transactions will be mediated by digital platforms (Standing 2016).

The common feature of all digital labour platforms is that they offer tools to bring together the supply of, and demand for, labour. The functions fulfilled by digital labour platforms vary greatly. In some cases, they simply become new intermediaries for existing services. In others, they facilitate new jobs and skills (Drahokoupil and Fabo, 2016). And, in yet others, they fragment labour processes temporally and spatially in order to allow for fundamentally reconfigured economic geographies of work (Graham and Anwar, 2018).

Some platform work follows the broad trends of business process outsourcing, for example, the shift of call centre work from the UK to India (Taylor and Bain, 2004). However, platform work goes significantly further, involving the "act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call" (Howe, 2006, 1). This does not require the

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shifting of workplaces, equipment, or the management function, instead allowing this work to be distributed along digital supply chains. Without the formal workplace, Scholz (2015) has argued that work platforms have been able to use "the spectacle of innovation to conceal the worker." An example of the different kinds of possibilities this entails is the rise of professional content creators on platforms like *YouTube* and *Twitch*. New career paths are being forged by entrepreneurial creators who can make significant incomes from their activities. Millions of newly-connected potential workers in low- and middle-income countries are now seeking to escape their local labour markets and instead find work in what many now see a world-spanning global labour market (Graham and Anwar, 2018).

These emerging forms of work provide jobs and income to many, but are not without their problems. This article is not the place for a comprehensive overview; however, it is worth pointing to concerns that arise for a number of primary reasons. First, new practices harmful to digital worker are emerging. For instance, to ensure the operation of large content platforms like the ones mentioned above, an increasing number of "commercial content moderation" workers are employed to routinely check and remove offensive content (Roberts, 2016). This work can involve looking at traumatic content for extended periods of time, with subsequent stress and emotional strain.

A second reason that some have pointed to problems in the platform economy relates to the ways that platforms are transforming existing practices. De Stefano (2016), for instance, has argued that platforms undermine the standard employment relationship through fragmented work and increased casualisation. Activities that were previously considered to be a formal or standard job can be mediated through platforms in order to commodify and societally dissembled them, thus attempting to bypass rules, standards, and traditions that have protected working standards (Wood et al., 2017). An example of this is the new platform being proposed for the UK's National Health Service that would have nurses bid for shifts under the guise of offering flexibility rather than being provided with more stable contracts.

Thirdly, the spatially fragmented nature of some platforms means that workers from around the world are brought into competition with one another for the same jobs. As ever more people from low-income countries connect to the Internet, these workers are placed into fierce competition with one another (Graham et al., 2017a). Lacking the ability to collectively bargain, these workers have little ability to negotiate wages or working conditions with their employers

who are often on the other side of the world. As a result of this new global market for work, many workers have jobs characterized by long and irregular hours, low income, and high stress (Graham et al., 2017b). The international nature of much platform work means that it tends largely to be done outside of the purview of national governments, with very few employers paying attention to relevant existing regulation in either their home countries or the worker's home country. International digital labour platforms threaten to undermine workers' ability to defend existing jobs, liveable wages, and dignified working conditions, in both low- and high-income countries (Graham et al., 2017a).

Finally, in almost all types of platform-mediated work, workers themselves have found it extremely challenging to exert any sort of power to bargain with the platform itself, change policies, or articulate an effective voice. Part of the issue is because platforms tend to make it extremely hard for workers to collectively organise or bargain. On some platforms, workers are inherently encouraged to compete rather than collaborate. On others, they can be "delisted" (i.e., fired and not eligible for future contacts) for anything deemed threatening to the platform. The fact that platforms tend to see themselves as simple brokers between clients and suppliers of labour, rather than as employers in the traditional sense means that it is difficult for workers to even know who to bargain with in the first place when suffering from issues such as non-payment or poor working conditions.

A major problem with understanding the emergence of the online gig economy is due to asymmetries of information involved with platforms (Heeks, 2017). The information asymmetries facilitate and exacerbate existing inequalities in the digital workplace. In this article, we argue that these asymmetries need to be overcome, and outline a strategy for improving online gig work that builds on existing attempts, while formulating a response that can match the scale and complexity of the challenges these workers face. As a note, we use the term "worker" throughout the article, despite the differences in employment contracts, partly due to the problematic nature of these categorisations, but also to emphasise that all people involved in this kind of work should be afforded some basic work-related protections. Building on scholarship from the sociology of work and labour geographies, we outline a range of potential responses, and conclude with our own plans to develop a "Fairwork Foundation": a project that sits at the intersections of strategies from worker/consumer alliances, and radical transparency.

### What Strategies Could Work?

To clarify what we are discussing in this article, we distinguish between three types of “platform” work based on the labour process involved: firstly, location-specific labour platforms (Type A); secondly, crowdwork or “microtask” platforms (Type B); and finally, freelance or “macrotask” platforms (Type C).

The first distinction is the use of location-based apps requiring workers to be in a specific location. This form of platform work is therefore “geographically-sticky” (Type A). For example, Uber (with transport), Deliveroo (delivery), or TaskRabbit (doing handyman type tasks) which have location-specific requirements. The next two types are digitally-mediated in ways that are less location-specific, but differentiated in terms of the skill involved. Microtask platforms (Type B) involve short tasks distributed via crowdsourcing and require a relatively similar level of skill. The work is highly commodified and clients never interact directly with workers; e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk or Crowdfunder. Freelance platforms (Type C) involve more specific skills and facilitate a more direct relationship between client and worker, for example Upwork or Freelancer. Hence Type B and Type C are differentiated in terms of the scale from “microtask” to “macrotask.” It is important to distinguish between the different types of platform work on this basis because the technical differences in the labour process have important implications for workers. For example, workers on Type A platforms are more likely to have physical contact with other workers. Although this differs, for example with Deliveroo drivers coming into contact at meeting points, whereas Uber drivers may not have these direct interactions (Facility and Woodcock, 2017).

*Challenges for Intervention:* The composition of platform work across the different types creates serious strategic challenges for worker organising. At the most basic level, workers engage with digital platforms without necessarily having contact – either physical or via other communication methods - with other workers. This means that starting the process of collective organising is much harder than with forms of work in which workers regularly share space. As Gearhart (2017, 13) has explained, even where there are unions, they “cannot collectively bargain with an algorithm, they can’t appeal to a platform, and they can’t negotiate with an equation.” The structure of work includes a number of asymmetries, including those relating to “value”, “risk”, “resource”, “information”, and “power” (Heeks, 2017, 16-17). The asymmetry of information continues from the basic level of communication to many other aspects of the work. For example, the processes involved with the work can often be obscured from

workers themselves, with little or no access to the data they are producing. Scholz (2015) has captured this asymmetry by considering these platforms as “digital black boxes”, which Pasquale (2015, 3) also uses to refer to a “system whose workings are mysterious.” The potentially damaging consequences of these factors has “led to both calls for interventions and actual interventions by various stakeholders,” mostly coalescing around aspects of what could constitute ‘decent work’ (Heeks, 2017, 2).

*Interventions into the Platform Economy:* Within these different strategies it is worth considering the role of academic research at this point. Much research has “focused on optimizing ... these platform ecosystems,” yet Scholz (2015) argues that instead what is needed is research that focuses on the “building of alternatives, outrage, conflict, and worker organization.” Counter-hegemonic research and action is thus particularly needed to overcome the asymmetries and inequalities that are currently built into platforms. There have been attempts at regulatory or legal reform, but many of these are ongoing. For example, in the UK, both Uber and Deliveroo have been taken to tribunal for the use of the self-employed independent contractor status. Recently Transport for London threatened to remove Uber’s licence to operate, citing a range of reasons – none of which mention the treatment of workers by the platform (TfL, 2017). This act of regulatory change – if it goes through – would lead to 30,000 Uber drivers losing their work in London.

Uber, like Deliveroo, have seen the beginnings of worker self-organisation that could point in a different direction. As Dewhurst (2017, 23), an activist from the IWGB (Independent Workers Union of Great Britain), explains, “it is extremely difficult to unionise in this industry. Yet, what we are doing is a start, and we are welcoming new members every day” (Dewhurst, 2017, 23). However, as another activist from the union pointed out, both platforms are “refusing to recognise our union and refusing to negotiate ... and this needs to change before we can move forward” (McClenahan, 2017, 9).

In light of these structural and power inequalities it is worth considering what role academic research could play. After all, Silberman (2017, 16) reminds us that “worker rights in online labour platforms should be of interest for anyone concerned with the present and future of democracy.” An important example of what could be pursued is the London Living Wage campaign. The initiative, established by London Citizens, recommends a wage level above the minimum wage based on the costs of living in London. This involves independently calculating these figures and undertaking research.

However, the figure on its own is not going to transform workers' conditions. Since 2001, the campaign has spread from London and been formalised into the Living Wage Foundation, but has also become a common demand in workers' campaigns. It provides a benchmark for low-paid workers to aim for, and while successfully winning the increase would not solve all problems at work, it remains an important intervention that has resulted in significant pay rises for some of the lowest paid workers. Workers, unions, and activists can point to this research in their strategies to get wages to, or above, the living wage threshold. The combination of research and organising has clearly had a substantial and quantifiable effect on work in London and other parts of the United Kingdom.

Another important example of a different kind of strategy in online gig work can be found with the Turkopticon project. This focuses on Amazon Mechanical Turk, providing "a place for workers to help one another with information and their experiences about employers" (Turkopticon, 2017). This was achieved by developing a browser plugin to allow workers to review the work tasks, attempting to reverse the Panopticon-like surveillance of the platform (hence the name). In addition to this, there is a forum for workers to communicate. The project itself began from surveys of workers on the platform, and sought to build upon this, involving workers and their views in the strategy. This intervention provides one way to overcome the barriers between workers created by the platform organisation, while also foregrounding the activity of the workers involved (Irani and Silberman, 2013).

When considering the kinds of regulatory change needed in platform work, serious complications arise when that work is organised across national borders. As Graham (2017, 30) has noted elsewhere, there are two key problems when addressing these issues on a global scale: firstly, there is a "massive oversupply of labour power and ... intense competition for jobs"; and secondly, "there is little stopping that work from being re-outsourced." Clearly, the London Living Wage campaign is unable to intervene across national borders – neither would a single wage rate make sense due to the differences in costs of living along existing lines of global inequality. However, these two interventions provide important pointers towards what could constitute an effective strategy that utilises academic research. This is also not to discount the "more traditional strategies such as constructing (virtual) picket lines or collectively withdrawing their labour" that are available to workers (Graham, 2017, 30). All of these approaches have to contend with the asymmetries – particularly informational – discussed earlier.

### **The Fairwork Foundation**

The London Living Wage sought to bring together workers, businesses, and broader societal benefits as part of the campaign. A key part of this has been making visible the exploitative practices of low pay that are often invisible. In platform work, the practices are hidden in increasingly complex ways. For example, the "users of Facebook, Google, and other digital services, sites, apps, and algorithms currently have no idea if the workers that help to create and maintain those services are treated fairly or paid living wages" (Graham, 2017, 30). We increasingly rely on these global digital supply chains, yet at the same time seem to be increasingly detached from the realities of the work involved at different points. Any attempt to change work first needs to understand it, and digital technology also potentially lowers the barriers to inquiring into the conditions of work, particularly in relation to workers documenting their own experiences (Woodcock, 2014).

The clearest example of this articulation in terms of worker and consumer alliances can be found with Fairtrade (2017), which attempts to change "the way trade works through better prices, decent working conditions and a fair deal for farmers and workers in developing countries." This requires companies to open up their supply chains to independent inspections, the development of published standards, and the use of certification marks on products that consumers can identify. This method, albeit adapted, could follow the "same way that the Fairtrade Foundation highlights successes and makes lead firms concerned about unethical practices in their supply chains" and "could have a similar impact in the realm of digital work" (Graham, 2017, 30). An impetus for this can be found with the Frankfurt Declaration, which argues that "platform operators, workers, worker organizations, clients, researchers, and regulators must work together to bring democracy to these new digital workplaces" (FairCrowdWork, 2016). From the declaration, this has involved rating crowdwork platforms, including both assessments based on the terms of service offered to workers, but also workers own reviews of the platforms (FairCrowdWork, 2017). As Heeks (2017, 23) has argued, this is the only "existing code or standard of specific relevance to the digital gig economy."

It is from this context that we propose the establishing the Fairwork Foundation. This is a response to the challenges that are faced by platform workers, but also draws on ongoing empirical research to develop effective strategies to address those challenges. As has been suggested by Heeks (2017, 11), the ILO (2013) framework for "decent work" provides an important route into

analysing the conditions of platform work, particularly in relation to “employment context”, “employment”, and “work conditions.” This requires important distinctions between the three types of work discussed earlier: location-specific labour platforms, crowdwork “microtask” platforms, and freelance “macrotask” platforms. In order to differentiate between the different platforms a focus on the labour process involved provides a way to distinguish between the specificities of the work and challenges associated with it.

Central to making this effective will be the development of a set of certification schemes that are able to carefully distinguish between platforms that offer workers a fair deal and those that do not. However, the existing literature lacks focus on job quality in the emerging platform economy. As such, we propose an initial set of criteria for fair digital work. The criteria build directly on the fifteen criteria established for crowdwork by IG Metall, the German Metalworkers’ Union, which Silberman (2017, 16) has outlined. The criteria for the Fairwork Foundation covers:

1. *Minimum wage.* The platform ensures that workers are paid at least minimum wage in their location, regardless of employment classification.
2. *Non-payment.* The platform does not allow non-payment for completed work.
3. *Compliance with relevant laws.* The platform abides by all relevant laws in the worker’s location.
4. *Pay terms.* For crowdwork and freelance platforms, the time in which clients agree to review and pay for submitted work is stated up front, and is clear to the worker before accepting the task.
5. *Non-competition agreements.* The platform does not require workers to sign non-competition agreements.
6. *Non-disclosure agreements.* If the platform requires workers to sign non-disclosure agreements, the agreement prohibits disclosure only of data submitted by customers, not pay, work processes, or working conditions.
7. *Access to collected data.* The platform allows each worker access to all data collected about them by the platform at any time, including work history data and work evaluations or ratings.

8. *Contestation of work evaluations or qualifications.* The platform allows workers to contest work evaluations and qualification test outcomes. Such contestations are reviewed by a human employee of the platform.
9. *Communication.* The platform ensures that customers and platform operators respond promptly, respectfully, and substantively to work-related worker communications.
10. *Information about client and purpose of work.* The platform gives workers information about the client and use or purpose of their work.
11. *Psychologically stressful or damaging tasks.* Tasks that may be psychologically stressful or damaging (e.g., review of social media content for hate speech, violence, or pornography) are clearly marked. Workers completing such tasks have access to counselling or support paid for by the customer and/or platform.
12. *Account deactivation.* Worker account deactivations are reviewed by a human platform employee.
13. *The right to collective representation and bargaining.* Regardless of employment status, workers have a legally protected way of voicing their desires for improved working conditions to platform management.

This broad set of criteria cover a range of well-known and existing problems on platforms. Many of these have emerged from previous research with crowdsourcing workers, based on feedback from surveys. We recognise that many of these strategies will need to be contextualised to local environments (and, indeed, we will need to establish what a 'local environment is when clients, platforms, and workers might potentially all be in different countries). The criteria are instead intended as a starting point and will be refined and improved in a regular multi-stakeholder dialogue with workers, unions, platforms, and scholars.

Instead of simply certifying a variety of platforms remotely using desk research, we aim to establish deeper collaborations with the platforms themselves as well as with workers and unions. This will allow us to ensure that criteria are constantly attuned to the needs of digital workers and the practices of platforms.

## **Conclusion**

This proposal envisions a way of holding platforms accountable through a programme of research focused on fair work. It operates under a governing belief that core transparent production networks can lead to better working

conditions for digital workers around the world. The establishment of the Foundation and a certification scheme will provide demonstrable impact for digital workers, customers, and platforms. For digital workers, it addresses the twofold structural weakness that they face: first, the lack of ability to collectively bargain due to the fragmentation of the work process; and second, the asymmetry of information between workers and platforms. The certification process provides an important means to address these two challenges, along with building and developing connections between workers and institutions like trade unions and regulatory bodies. New kinds of work require innovations in organising techniques and regulations, and the Fairwork Foundation provides an important starting point for developing these in practice.<sup>4</sup>

As millions of people turn to platform work for their livelihoods, it is no longer good enough to imagine that there is nothing beyond the screen. Our clicks tie us to the lives and livelihoods of platform workers, as much as buying clothes tie us to the lives of sweatshop workers. And with that realisation of our interwoven digital positionalities comes the power to bring into being a fairer world of work.

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<sup>4</sup> We welcome collaboration from any readers who are interested in getting involved and participating.

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