

## The Algorithm is not My Boss Anymore: Technological appropriation and (new) media strategies in *Riders x Derechos* and *Mensakas*

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## Abstract

This paper studies how a group of delivery workers in Barcelona were able to organize a successful traditional and a social media strategy in order to claim for their rights as waged workers. They created a union, *RidersxDerechos*, and they also decided to create a worker's cooperative, *Mensakas*, with their own application and algorithm. We will study how they were able to re-appropriate technology and to use digital communities to spread alternative discourses. We have used different methodologies: traditional content analysis in Media, debate analysis in Social Media, qualitative ethnography. We noticed that *RidersxDerechos* access to media was very successful (300 piece of news analyzed) thanks to strikes and court trials, facilitating a change of perspective in the treatment of platform economy in Media. Media were following up the digital entrepreneurship rhetoric until then. Along with the traditional media strategy they developed a diversified communicative pathway in social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Goteo) that helped them to establish alliances with riders from other cities and countries. We focused on more than 25.000 tweets. Finally, they proposed a new way to use technology by creating their own app and algorithms for their working cooperative, *Mensakas*. Crowdfunding was also used to fund it and to spread an alternative working storytelling from Silicon Valley's.

### Keywords

Technological reappropriation; Digital labour; Glovo; Worker's media representation; Union new communication strategies.

## Introduction

The transformation of the productive and communicative landscape in the past two decades synthesizes its phenomenology in digital technology and its new uses. New forms of “cool, flexible and innovative” labour, such as Glovo, Deliveroo, Uber, Cabify, have anchored their business in a logarithmic application, and have influenced the ideology of the worker as a consumer and the end of class struggle, by offering workers the possibility to become entrepreneurs. In fact, we have never before had millions of people around the world working synchronized within the same platform (Scholz, 2017).

This technological phenomenology of the end of wage labour and, occasionally, the end of professional information has led workers to modify their communicative strategies in contexts of conflict, deconstructing the idea of precarious workers becoming entrepreneurs and using new technologies for their own purposes. Because of this, union struggle has evolved at various levels: the material improvement of their labour conditions in conflictive situations by stating their identities as workers and not entrepreneurs, and the subversion of awareness through the partial re-appropriation of technologies.

This paper proposes a study of the narrative, economic, technological and communicative process performed by a group of delivery drivers (riders) who in July 2017 created *RidersxDerechos* in Barcelona, a trade union that defends their rights as workers and reports false self-employed status.

*RidersxDerechos* soon established a successful communication strategy in traditional media. At the same time, they enlarged their support through social media, union and social movement networks. The riders’ trade union took the conflict a step further by reshaping the technological instrument in a fairer labour context: they created *Mensakas*, a rider’s cooperative, with their own application. Thus, they can now also confront the rhetoric about the obsolescence of labour legislation or the assumption that technology must sweep away labour rights.

We are not against new technology, we use it and we welcome it; but labour rights –suitable workdays, public holidays, holidays, extra pay – can be perfectly combined (...) with technology. *Mensakas* will launch the application and everybody will be able to order. But users will know that the delivery person is working under fair conditions. Juanjo Lavergne (*RidersxDerechos*, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

It has nothing to do with modernization, that’s not the question, but public debate is oriented that way when taxi drivers opposed to VTC and you hear everywhere: ‘Modernize yourself!! Free competition!!’ Yes, we want competition, but fair competition. Núria Soto (*RidersxDerechos*, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

*Mensakas* is a new delivery project that can be listed with other global projects that are slowly appearing, in order to counter new digital working systems based on unfair and unilateral conditions: “Each form of digital work carries a different degree of violence; its own level of expropriation and cruelty; and it opens up new avenues for solidarity” (Scholz, 2017, p. 122). Founding a workers cooperative in the context of a deregulated digital economy is a kind of meaningful action in order to recover “the notion that labour is not a commodity, but rather it is part of the human being that, therefore, needs to be protected and differentiated from other trades and goods is not only an abstract principle – it also has and must have practical implications” (De Stefano, 2017, p. 11).

## Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of this research is to focus on the case study of *RidersxDerechos* and *Mensakas* as activist groups in order to study how they do to subvert the power (economical and ideological) of the logarithm of the delivery platforms (Glovo and Deliveroo), re-appropriating the technology and using

digital communities to spread alternative discourses and why they do that in the collaborative economy era. Our study case focuses on contemporary events and tries to solve the why and how research questions (Yin, 2009, p. 8). To do this, we will accomplish other secondary objectives:

- 1) Analyze the counter–discourse of workers against labour deregulation sponsored by ‘technology’ companies.
- 2) Study the use of new technologies and digital communities as an alternative.
- 3) Expose the alternative routes to an emancipatory use of technology, reshaping to turn it into means of production or using it to spread alternative ideological positions.

The study case methodology proposes that there are “many more variable of interest than data” and those data should “converge in a triangulating fashion” with “multiple sources of evidence” (Yin, 2009, p. 2). That is why we have chosen a multidisciplinary methodology of work that integrates different strategies; each one adapts to the specificity of the objectives of the research.

Traditional content analysis is applied to the press and media, based on the analysis of 302 news published in the Media in Spain, such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico*. The sample covers from 2015, with the first news about the new entrepreneurs of the so-called collaborative economy, to April of 2019, when the court sentences against some platforms practices have already appeared on media, by searching in each media all the news that used the keywords Deliveroo, Glovo, Mensakas or RidersxDerechos. In order to perform this task, we will apply the framing paradigm with 19 variables to analyze related to information production routines and political storytelling (i.e. sources, section, editorial responsibility etc.).

This analysis is enriched by using the Node XL tool to analyze conversational structures in social media around Glovo and Deliveroo. With Node XL, two samples of tweets have been analyzed: the first one with the key words Glovo and Deliveroo gives a sample of 24.564 tweets. The second one is a sample with the key words *RidersxDerechos* and *Mensakas* and it contains 986 tweets. NodeXL provides aleatory significative samples used in various investigations (Smith et al., 2014). The topics are discussed, as well as mapping hub relations between vertex and nodes (digital actors). This is a way to determine the importance of *RidersxDerechos* in the debate on alternative discourses and track the scope of the campaigns being launched. In addition, it will facilitate the establishment of spatial relationships with initiatives in other parts of Spain.

Qualitative methodology has been useful in conducting interviews in–depth to the groups and actors involved, and some participant observation approaches have been fulfilled in to–be riders meetings organized by Glovo in Barcelona.

In general, the method allowing the unification of the various methodologies is the Critical Theory, understanding the analysis of technologies as part of a dual approach: technological re–appropriation of *Mensakas* by reshaping the delivery application and its logarithm through a workers cooperative, and the ideological deconstruction of the neoliberal rhetoric applied to the ‘sharing economy’ by reframing it as a workers’ collaboration.

## Technology and Work

Relations between technology and work have been employed throughout history as a Trojan horse for the deregulation of labour relations and the reduction of the autonomy of the workers. The technological element proved not to be essential in the transformation of the production model, but in the model of labour relations.

Just as the *luddites* did not destroy the machinery just due to its introduction in the production process – they did when there was an excuse to lower wages or to dismiss workers (Thompson, 2012) –,

neither the riders were opposed to the introduction of a tool that facilitates organization of work.

The recurrent idea that change in labour model happens just through the act of including a computer tool cannot stand as if it is observed that firms are not mere intermediaries. They hierarchically coordinate work and press with various strategies in order to cover all delivery schedules. Furthermore, delivery work can be flexibly developed without the decline of rights, as it is proved by the previous delivery organizations before digital platforms appeared. In fact, in Spain delivery workers have recently been included in the general labour agreement of trade and services (hospitality). In a recent court decision, delivery riders work “on foot or by any type of vehicle not requiring administrative authorization established by the regulation of transportation, as provision of service settlement or on behalf of another company, including digital or through the same platforms” (BOE 29/03/2019, 32704).

Technology design is a political act, and the algorithms act as a black box, impervious to the labour regulation; a black box that decides “objectively” and removes collective bargaining from the map, bringing the myth of technical efficiency to the extreme, while acting out of the distance and with alleged objectivity. Algorithm decisions are seen as neutral and trustworthy, dismissing the social power of the technical systems (Beer, 2017).

In the case of Uber, the changes in the algorithm resulting from the manipulation of the company are presented to the workers as “errors”, “glitches” or “bugs in the system” hiding the real motives (changes in the rates, non-payment of gratuities, default for no client showing) a technology error that cannot be tackled, which is superior to the human will and avoids taking responsibility for these alleged failures.

Obscurantism on the mechanism of functioning of the algorithm, together with the unilateral changes in its operation implies uncertainty for the workers when it comes to regulate their behaviour. The union *Free Riders* have come to report the manipulation of the geolocation records of the distribution application to avoid paying overtime. In relation to the trials held against Glovo riders have been recommended “to download an app that registers your geolocation to credit the extra hours of the 12 and 13 hours a day that we hit”.<sup>1</sup>

Temporality, according to Sun (2019) is an important source of value that has an increasing relevance in the platform economy. Speed and efficiency are calculated and re-calculated so far that create a huge pressure to workers, and as a result there was, since 2017, an increasing number of traffic accidents in China affecting delivery workers. In Spain the first tragic accident that finished with death happened on 2019 May 25th<sup>2</sup>, when a Glovo delivery worker was knocked down by a truck.

Algorithms act as a true surveillance economy (Warin and McCann, 2018), where the level of control is almost total throughout the endless working days. Mobile devices are acting as panoptic: pauses, geolocation, or any other input the rider generates.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the only work review comes from both customers and associated restaurants, which may include elements not controllable by the rider, plunging the worker into a sense of inability to control his own working performance.

The production relationship in the so-called new sharing economies directly makes the customer become a worker controller, which is backed by the qualifications that receives once the service is completed (Batista-Dominguez, 2018), a gamified process in which workers perceive themselves to be involved in an algorithmic game that includes ratings and evaluations (Sun, 2019):

What companies have done is to lead the customers to rate you. Now it is the client

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<sup>1</sup> Tweet of @Free Riders 18/04/19 made at 17:54.

<sup>2</sup> Agencias (2019, April 5): Muere un repartidor de Glovo tras ser arrollado por un camión de la basura. Diario Público. Retrieved from <https://www.publico.es/sociedad/muere-repartidor-glovo-arroyado-camion-basura.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Uber does track driver behaviour (...) Uber management practices borrow heavily from how Silicon Valley platforms manage and manipulate their users (...) Uber applies these same principles to the world of employment (...) Big Data smartphones are basically ubiquitous sensors”. (Rosenblat 2018, p.139-141)

that is examining you, and then what happens? Through this test your scores can go up or down so you can access or not access some working schedules. So that's where labour autonomy is, that's where it starts to collide Juanjo Lavergne (*RidersxDerechos*, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

The control through the app replaces the direct guardianship of the company, that is hidden behind the algorithm because “a policy guide or employee handbook, could produce accusations that *Uber* is directly supervising drivers (signifying an employment relationship)” (Rosenblat, 2018, p. 150).

All elements that constitute the labour relation dominated by an algorithm lead to the central element of the lack of counterweight of the workers: neither collective negotiation, nor control of the strategies of labour safety, nor transparency in the rates. Under the idea that the algorithm is neutral and more effective than the human management, it is repeated, as since the 1920's denounced Kracauer, Adorno or Horkheimer, a domain of instrumental reason: the formalization of reason is far removed from the thought, taking away the real object from us and closing in on appearances of rational processes.

The Enlightenment has dismissed the classical requirement of thinking (...) because such a requirement distracts from the imperative to govern praxis (...). The mathematical mode of procedure became, as it were, a ritual of thought. Despite the axiomatic self-limiting, this procedure is established as necessary and objective: it transforms thinking into something, as it is called (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2006, p. 79).

This situation is significant, not so much because of the number of workers involved, but because of the ideological gap that starts and because these new workers are joining the almost “twenty percent of the workforce [who] is now in no-man's land in terms of trade union representation” (Pérez-Chirinos, 2017, p. 129).

For this reason, it is essential to study the narrative strategies of technology-based transport companies from the communicative point of view supported by David Harvey according to the dialectical role of technology in neo-liberalism:

In manufacturing, labour was disempowered by tech change. Also, offshoring with tech change is much more important (...), and it can't be said that only with his appropriation it can be subverted as there's no such thing as good and emancipate technology that cannot be co-opted and perverted into a power of capital (Harvey in Jipson, Jitheesh 2019, n.d.)

## Narratives of entrepreneurship: Silicon Valley and labour deregulation

Technology ethnographer Alex Rosenblat argues how *Uber* has performed the notion of work. The essay *Uberland – How algorithms are rewriting the rules of work* (2018) exposes how Silicon Valley has been allowed to transform the rhetoric of work into rhetoric of consumption, equating passengers and drivers presenting both as “users” in the application. The fallacy of the end of work hides different key elements: the disempowerment of workers and services (the boss is no longer responsible for their affiliations to social security, occupational health, or adequate provision of services); the supposedly objective algorithms whose sanctions are indisputable and their errors are practically unprovable; also the creation of a new ideological post labour universe in which technology organizes efficiently while language is emptied of its content to avoid the law (workers are entrepreneurs and schedules are replaced by flexibility and freedom), while they are more like traditional employers that they can admit but “they attempt to strike a regulatory sweet spot between legislative protections that benefit them and obligations that do not” (Gillespie, 2010, p.2). As Wyatt (2004) argues, as the technology becomes opaque

and increasingly black-boxed, language and metaphors used in economical terms influence our views of its potential.

“Uber confuses categories such as innovation and lawlessness, work and consumption, algorithms and managers, neutrality and control, sharing and employment” (Rosenblat, 2018, p. 9). When Silicon Valley launched the idea of a ‘sharing economy’ as a cover-up for deregulated work, it was a perfect moment for its acceptance: the great economic crisis of 2007 favoured this type of work and speech to be accepted by unemployed workers and media willing for solutions. Despite the alleged end of the crisis, temporality, instability and precariousness of employment remained and these jobs began to settle as a quick employment alternative. Likewise, these companies were building a good image of themselves by ensuring that they created jobs in a time of recession, a strategy that has been called “economic populism”: “As the gig economy continues to grow, it functions sometimes as a social safety net for workers with high income volatility or gaps in employment (...) This is partly why sharing technology has been reframed as an engine of economic populism” (Rosenblat, 2018, p. 29).

The ideological propaganda of the technological companies has counted on the voice of publicity, media and the institutions. We may remember how the press reacted to the taxi conflict in Barcelona, Valencia and Madrid against Uber, presenting headlines about taxi drivers as living in the “Pleistocene”, subtitles with threats from taxi drivers “burning the *Generalitat*”, or columnists telling the taxi drivers that “the world is advancing and that’s the progress”. Rosenblat describes similar attitudes in Austin or Vancouver. “By losing Uber, Austin is no longer a tech capital” or “Why has Vancouver been so slow to join the sharing economy?”, technological and innovative companies are often welcomed in a very compromising way, understanding the end of the production economy as the mass worker has been completed, flattening the ideological path for its expansion. “The technology industry has operated with low regulation oversight because it has successfully persuaded the regulator, and society, that low regulation is essential to innovation” (Rosenblat, 2018, p. 171).

In addition to the idea of the worker as an entrepreneur, the sharing economy and technological exceptionality, these companies have launched a new image that replaces the working class with the image of a free, narcissistic, consumer and glamorous Millennial. The images that technology companies generate through their workers are powerful ideological incentives for the sense of social success because “on-demand platforms project a higher social status onto work that has long been associated with lower status workers” (Rosenblat, 2018, p. 37). They are no longer blue collar anchored for 14 hours at the wheel or the delivery bike but people who have made a lifestyle choice<sup>4</sup>, modern and outside-of-old-precepts such as labour rights. The rhetoric of choice goes further and aims to present its workers as app consumers.

Labour deregulation and the impact of the evils of capitalism in the so-called “self-employment” is a figure of what some have called “Postmodern Slave” (Guerra, 2018) or “Digital Neofeudalism” (Morozov, 2018), obviating a historical abyss by which the feudal lord, however, offered military protection. Following the simile, none of these platforms offers protection to their workers, eluding any legislation on occupational hazards.

Trebor Scholz uses the concept of “crowd fleeing” to describe the exploitation of workers in the context of the platform economy. Despite being a clear continuation of the traditional forms of exploitation, Scholz wants to highlight certain discontinuities in the new forms of exploitation, arisen by three new factors: the scale, real time and the business concentration (Scholz, 2018).

Uber is the first great successful experiment of this new labour context. It was founded in March 2009 and eleven years later it has more than three million active drivers around the world. Its operating dynamics were quickly emulated by other firms with similar underemployment strategies and with almost

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<sup>4</sup> Inuit CEO assured “We know the gig economy is real. It’s here. It’s a secular trend. It didn’t just start with Uber and Lyft. It started years ago. It’s a lifestyle choice for millenials” (Rosenblat, 2018, p. 35).

identical narratives, as is the case of Deliveroo and its local imitator developed in Barcelona, Glovo. In Europe, France and the United Kingdom are the countries with the most platforms of this type, followed by Germany, the Netherlands and Spain (Rocha 2018, p. 81). Its rapid extension has been facilitated by the globalized neoliberal economy that builds on the “digital colonialism” described by Olivia Solon in relation to the monopoly and lack of neutrality of *Facebook*. It does this by introducing its logarithmic opaque principles and its Silicon Valley–ideology in the productive sphere.

Despite a speech focused on flexibility and freedom, which only appeals to these values in terms of the company’s “liquid” responsibility for its workers, the control and monitoring of work is stronger than ever (De Stefano, 2017).

## The context: Glovo and Deliveroo in Spain

Deliveroo is a British food delivery company founded in 2013 by Will Shu and Greg Orlowski. It has operations in more than 12 countries, mainly in Europe but also in Singapore, the Arab Emirates and Hong Kong. Glovo was founded in 2015 in Barcelona by Oscar Pierre, and now has 400 employees (in addition to 7.000 riders that operate as false freelancers). It is expanding in Latin America, in some important cities in Peru, Argentina, Ecuador, but it has left Chile and Brazil after two months operating there. Pierre embodies the narrative of Silicon Valley: as young, engineer, believes that “we are a solution, and this excites us very much, because we believe that we are changing the world”.

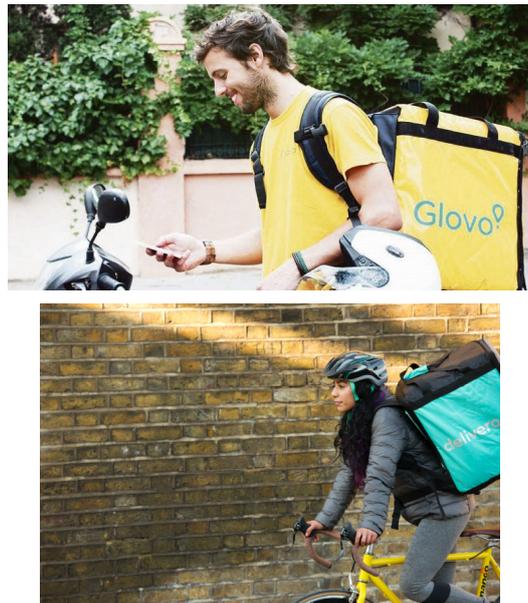
The creation of a modern and sophisticated image is a well–defined feature by Deliveroo and Glovo. Companies insist on introducing riders as the urban youth of the 21st century, which are thus detached from the “old” concepts of timetables, boring work, order and discipline, and embrace the new imaginary of the no-collars (Ross, 2002): Passionate young people with their work, that venerate values such as freedom, flexibility and creativity. In short, they insist on conveying the riders with their own self-image of young successful entrepreneurs:

Society is changing. The issue of flexibility is underestimated but it is very important. Being able to decide when, how and where you work is fundamental. I am sure that more and more people will say that they do not want to have bosses, do not want to have schedules, and will have different ways of income: will teach, work as *Glover*, and put their apartment in *Airbnb*... This is the trend of the future. In addition, it is very positive the amount of talent and wealth that these platforms generate in the technological level.

The recurring ideas of talent and technology aim to contribute to the dissolution of the concept of worker, whose imaginary results in concepts of labour relation and verticality. The platform “gamifies work with an ever–changing platter of incentives” (Rosenblat, 2018, p. 78). This is demonstrated by the initiative of Deliveroo, in May 2018, of “converting its workers into shareholders”, a more cosmetic than real initiative (the distribution among the total of workers among which, of course, riders are not included is equivalent to about 5,000 Euros per worker, in exchange for having people highly committed to the idea of “being part” of the company.

The rhetoric of Deliveroo and Glovo, as we see, runs practically identical at a visual and the semantic level: “Be your own boss”, “flexible work” and “freedom” are the most used concepts and replicate the mantra of happiness linked to the consumer society: “Our deliverymen share good energy and joy, always with a smile”. This story connects symbolically with the elaborated by Uber and its slogans “Freedom Pays Weekly”.

Picture 1 – Deliveroo and Glovo riders advertising images



From: [www.deliveroo.es](http://www.deliveroo.es) and [www.glovo.es](http://www.glovo.es)

The rhetoric that relies on the materials of the two companies also extends in their strategy of corporate communication in the media. The idealization of the riders as an extension of the technological and enterprising culture of the *start-ups* has its top expression in the Deliveroo's campaign "for charity" where Agatha Ruiz de la Prada personalizes five riders' work jackets. The idea is deeply ingrained in the consumer society, as evidenced by the *Glamour's* fashion editorial where models combine a Glovo backpack with Paco Rabanne, Prada or Gucci's garments, of more than 1000 Euros each, or the fact that Deliveroo's uniform becomes fashionable among British hipster.

Picture 2 – 'Tour is yours'



From: *Glamour*, March 2019.

The image of workers that Deliveroo and Glovo want to convey in their rhetoric is the one of young workers, who complement their studies with "flexible" part-time work with which they can access

the consumer market or travel. However, the high turnover of workers has radically changed the profile of employees in Deliveroo and Glovo:

Initially they promote the job as adequate to young people who like riding bikes but it is not, it's a lie, because they are fast growing companies and there are not many people who endure working there a lot of time. The companies don't have filters to hire (...), as a consequence, there are very different profiles of people but also there are people with difficulties to find any other type of work. These people know that they are only requested to present themselves with a self-employed certificate and a bike, hence, they end up working there. Núria Soto, (*RidersxDerechos spokelerson*, personal communication, March 14, 2019)

“Using the language of entrepreneurship, flexibility, autonomy, and choice, the burden of the biggest risks of life – unemployment, illness, and old age– have been lifted onto the shoulders of the workers” (Scholtz, 2017, p. 160). The use of meaningless words is a capital strategy for Deliveroo; they have produced an internal document, the “trainer’s guide”, which gives specific instructions to their trainers in order to avoid some words qualified as “wrong or illegal”. They constraint to use “mission or delivery” instead of “shifts”, “pay for service” instead of “salary/income”, “availability” instead of “work shift”, “delivery dress” instead of “uniform”, “collaboration” instead of “recruitment”. They are not allowed to use words such as “compulsory” to force people to work on weekends or peak hours; they are required to use “availability for the weekend” or “flexibility”.

By letting go of the language of labour we would lose association with the history of organized labour and related struggles and movements. Not talking about labour depoliticizes the discussion by disconnecting it from traditional labour practices as well as the accomplishments, sacrifices, and lessons learned from this history (Scholtz, 2017, p. 6).

Media built an entrepreneurial ideology hegemony that gave advantage to Glovo and Deliveroo in order to convince their collaborators (aka workers) of social success just for working precariously for them:

It was really curious because, in general, people wanted to be self employed. It was really odd because when you talked to them they presented their situation as ideal. That didn't happen to the more politicized workers but the others told you that it was a good situation, freer and with labour flexibility and easier ways to organize their lives and work. They had interiorized the companies' speech because it is obvious that they do not have any freedom. That's not freedom but they were convinced (...): being a worker is obsolete. The new thing, the modern is being a rider, a freelance Nacho Parra (*Col·lectiu Ronda* labour attorney, personal communication, March 20, 2019).

The most complicated things in our rights struggle are the difficult to organize and that kind of mentality. It was a really intelligent corporation strategy, wasn't it? Because in the past the people knew what they were fighting for, and they did demonstrations and so, but nowadays, they make you believe that you are your own boss, and then, you miss a big amount of people in demonstrations. So, it is complicated Núria Soto (*RidersxDerechos spokelerson*, personal communication, March 14, 2019)

## Riders x Derechos<sup>5</sup>

### Classic strategies: legal action and union action

In 2017 a group of Deliveroo riders of Barcelona expressed disagreement with their working conditions. This is the origin of *RidersxDerechos*. This small union is associated with a larger one, Intersindical Alternativa de Catalunya (IAC) that counts on the legal support of a famous labour attorney cooperative, Col·lectiu Ronda, in order to start the riders' legal action as a trade union:

I think that the more politicized people—some of them were already unionized—acted really intelligent because they had the foresight to avoid being too political by yelling mottos such as: 'honour and working class, comrades!' They were clever and things were evolving naturally. It was a process and 6 months later, the entire workforce agreed: not only did they want to be self-employed; but they also felt misled by the company. Nacho Parra (*Col·lectiu Ronda* labour attorney, personal communication, March 20, 2019)

Sharing real space is a key element to succeed in social and union organization, claims *RidersxDerechos*. Physical spaces devoted to informal meeting allowed *Deliveroo* workers in Barcelona to get in touch and develop their struggle awareness and strategy. In fact, after the first protests, the company closed the centroids, warehouses where the deliveries were organized, and in which the riders could meet:

When you finish an order, you have to go to the *centroids* and, at the end of the day, it would make the movement stronger because you are not asking to demonstrate to a stranger but to a workmate, to the people that you already meet and that allows you to build a network (...) Now you are always running into new stranger people. They decided to change our contract from a minimum guaranteed one to a contact by each order, and then they began to introduce a lot of new people because the company was not committed to pay a minimum and they were impoverishing conditions and increasing the number of riders. This happened along the elimination of the *centroids*. A high amount of new people came in, and these workers don't meet Núria Soto (*RidersxDerechos* spokesperson, personal communication, March 14, 2019)

Even if physical space is claimed as a capital organizing resource, social media is considered as useful for these digital workers in order to organize their struggle: "Today's digital labourers cannot be reached in cafés during lunch break, or outside the gates of the factory" (Scholtz, 2017, p.167). *RidersxDerechos* also tried to create a network of riders using a whatsapp group, nevertheless, without the previous physical access, mobilization, exclusively through the digital realm is really complicated.

In the United States of America, legal actions against "digital platform companies" began with claims against false advertising – the Federal Trade Commission imposed a 20 million dollars fine to Uber because they claimed higher benefits than real from the drivers– and against unilateral and unreasonable tax changes<sup>6</sup>. In Europe, each country is issuing sentences separately and the European Commission has established in 2019 vague recommendations in order to define a labour relation in the era of mobile apps (Urzi Brancati, Pesole & Fernandez-Macías, 2019). In the case of Spain, the legal action is clearly focused on labour rights.

*RidersxDerechos* quickly spread from Barcelona to all Spain. In June 2018 the court nº6 in Valencia dictated the first sentence (nº244/2018) recognizing a working dependence relation between a rider and

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<sup>5</sup> Riders for their Rights.

<sup>6</sup> *uberBlack* drivers in Dallas and New York refused a price reduction in 2015, which levelled them to *uberX* prices. They organised a demonstration in front of the *Uber* headquarters.

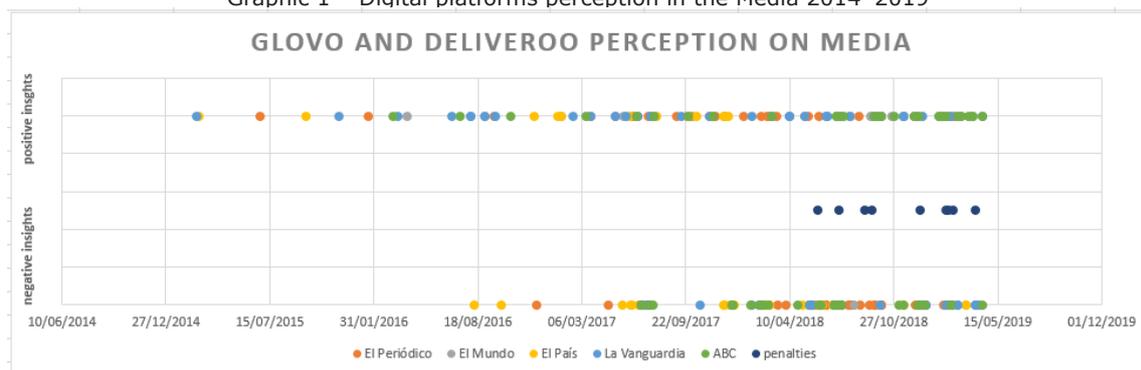
Deliveroo. This was the first one but there were others such as the 53/2019 11<sup>th</sup> February in Madrid or the 61/2019 20<sup>th</sup> February in Gijón. Not every sentence has been positive for the riders until now; there were two negative sentences (September the 3rd, nº 284/2018 in Madrid and 9<sup>th</sup> February, nº12/2019 also in Madrid). In this process, conducting to dismantle the “illegality–as–innovation” (Rosenblat, 2018, 174), Labour Inspection played an important role: it claimed more than 160.000 euros of nonpaid workers insurance to the State just in Valencia and the general labour inspection has engaged in a specific section in its *Strategic Labour Inspection Plan 2018–2020* related to companies that operate through digital platforms.

This legal strategy has produced an interesting effect on media, changing the discourse of entrepreneurial praise. *RidersxDerechos* is aware of how important the communication of these legal actions to the media is. Media praised young entrepreneurs who came back to Spain with a new app developed in the United States; but after the negative sentences Media have also contributed to spread the doubt on the rider’s self–employed condition, a condition that had been sponsored before.

There are two legal elements to discuss. The first one is if they are free or not to manage their own workday. The second being if they own the means of production or not. In short, those sentences that recognize *Deliveroo* proposal state that workers can chose the shifts and their bike is a means of production. Traditional differentiation between self–employed and wage–earning workers is based on two concepts: dependence (are they subject to manager’s disciplinary orders?) and otherness (are you keeping for yourself the work results or is it going to others?) (...) We proposed that this activity can only be developed if you have the app. That’s all. If you have, by one side the app and the clients by the other. Who owns the app and the clients? The company can deliver without a bike? Yes. Can you deliver without the app? No. At the end of the day, these are the parameters to discuss during the trials. Nacho Parra (*Col·lectiu Ronda* labour attorney, personal communication, March 20, 2019)

*RidersXDerechos* legal strategy has revealed effective in terms of media repercussion, even if we take into account the ideological difference among media and their different tendencies to inform about labour conflicts or not. After the first sentences, media coverage in relation to “platform economy” changed, conflict appeared in the agenda breaking the previous discourse of innovative and revolutionary companies who had come to change the world for good.

Graphic 1 – Digital platforms perception in the Media 2014–2019



From: Authors’ own elaboration

We have analysed 302 pieces of news related to Glovo or Deliveroo which have been published in the top five Spanish newspapers in 2017 (OJD classification<sup>7</sup>). Riders’ strikes and sentences related to the conflict have appeared in these five media. Nevertheless, there exist some differences in the

<sup>7</sup> Spanish Circulation Audit Office.

news approaches between media. *El País* and *El Periódico* stress on labour precariousness – after having entrenched the “technological success” of some Spanish start-ups like Glovo. *La Vanguardia*, *El Mundo* and *ABC* counteract this negative news by publishing misleading advertisements of digital platform companies. They do this by covering their territorial expansion, their positive impact on restaurant business or giving voice to entrepreneurs who victimize themselves about the negative impact of labour regulation in their business.

It can be stated that after the first trials, media storytelling about Deliveroo and Glovo has changed, especially in progressive media. While in early stages (2015-2017) Media assumed the Silicon Valley narrative, from 2017 onward, the early demonstrations and the creation of *RidersxDerechos* media have changed their frame, from entrepreneurship and digital labour as flexibility to labour dispute, labour rights and work inspection requests. Nevertheless, this is not an absolute victory of *RidersxDerechos* media policy. We have detected that many media have just published directly the media agencies news with no changes, neither new sources. It can be guessed that media crisis and massive journalist firing (specially in *El País* and *El Periódico*) have weakened the gatekeeper and, in consequence, have weakened the ideological function of media, easing the dialectical function of media.

## Building their own narrative in social media

The social media strategy is highly linked to legal and Union strategy. The use of media to emphasize the struggle is accompanied by the use of social media as Twitter. Through the NodeXL tool Twitter conversations have been analysed between March 25th and April 5<sup>th</sup> 2019. As a relevant aspect, in April 3rd a new court ruling from Work Inspection forces Glovo to register workers as employed for Social Security, who will be able to benefit the labour agreement in Hospitality.

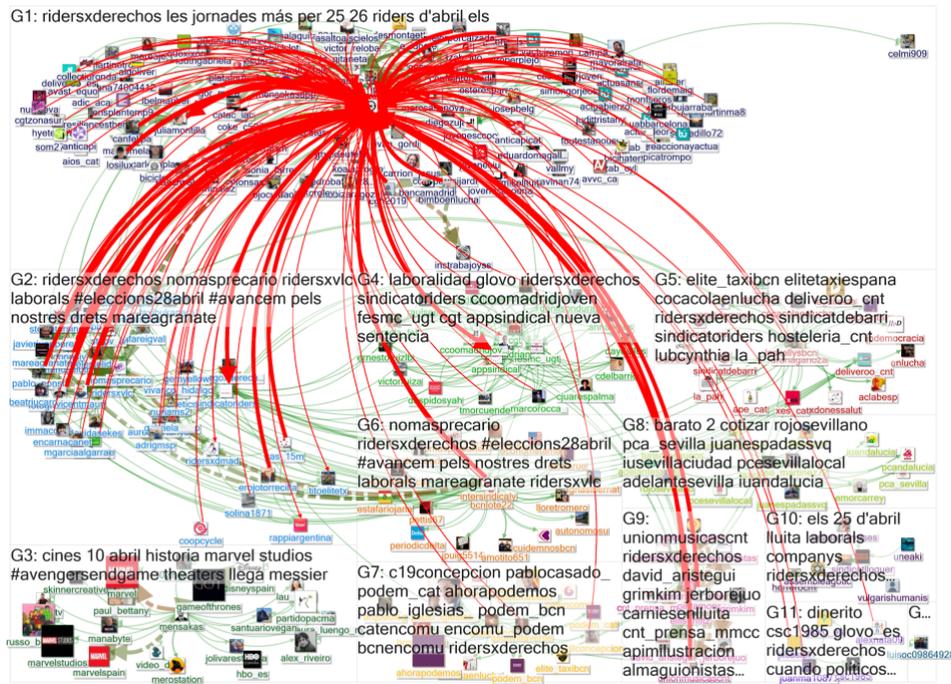
Two samples have been obtained through *NodeXL*: one set of 24.564 tweets from all around the world containing as key words “Glovo OR Deliveroo”, and another one of 986 tweets containing “*RidersxDerechos* OR *Mensakas*”, in order to analyse its action network. From the clustering of the first sample, it can be observed that *RidersxDerechos* is placed in the 11<sup>th</sup> position in relation to its centrality (that has the capacity to articulate relations between nodes or vertex). This means that *RidersxDerechos* is one of the central elements in the social media global conversation. In addition to the official global accounts of Glovo and Deliveroo, as well as those from Spain, Chile and Italy, *RidersxDerechos* is becoming one of the organized groups in the global conversation (G6 on figure 4). This makes a contrast with individual users who do not participate in the structured conversation.

The conversation in this sample is led by the hashtag #Mothersdaydeliveroo, a Deliveroo challenge for Mother’s Day in the UK with a £100 prize contest, but *RidersxDerechos* and its activist network are able to place on the social media agenda concepts such as false self-employed, trial and labour rights.

Canvas 1 – Users of the Twitter conversation in relation to Glovo and Deliveroo, clusterized by NodeXL between 25<sup>th</sup> March and 5<sup>th</sup> April 2019



Social media network connections among Twitter users



Created with NodeXL (http://nodexl.codeplex.com) from the Social Media Research Foundation (http://www.smrffoundation.org)

From: Authors' own elaboration

The rhetoric of *RidersxDerechos* in social media follows two different arguments: on one hand it highlights the struggles (sentences, rights, labour, collective agreement, exploitation) and on the other hand it adopts a propositive tone (alternative, improvement, activists, rethink). This speech transcends social media and is consistent with the *RidersxDerechos* global strategy. On 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> April 2019, the riders union organized a conference with the title ‘My boss is not an algorithm’. The main issues were the international alliance among riders; a local alliance among workers in conflict; and sociological scholar support from lawyers, computer programmers and researchers.

This propositive tone is materialized mainly in the proposal of an alternative to digital platforms: *Mensakas*.

## *Mensakas*: re-appropriating technology

In May 2018, a group of people that came from *RidersxDerechos* union launched a crowdfunding campaign to fund a new initiative: *Mensakas App*, a rider’s cooperative that is presented as an alternative to conventional digital platforms.

It’s not an isolated initiative. In other economic sectors it is a phenomenon – although still in early stages– that is being developed in different countries, such as the United States (*Loconomics*, *Coopity*) or Germany (*Fairmondo*). In Spain, we can find *La pájara en bici* in Madrid, a delivery cooperative that is part of *Coopcycle*, an European federation of bike delivery actors. This European cooperative has been created to improve and share an open source software among almost 20 food delivery cooperatives. *Mensakas* began to develop its own digital platform before creating the association and nowadays is also working with this project. Scholz (2017) calls “platform co-operativism” these new business models that are cloning the technological heart of Uber, Task Rabbit, Airbnb or UpWork: these platforms embrace, adapt and reshape technologies of the sharing economy, putting them to work with different ownership models.

These models are re-thinking the concepts of innovation and efficiency from the perspective of common benefit, not the benefit of the few: “platform cooperatives can offer a clear alternative to the

individualist ethos of the ‘sharing economy’ (Scholtz, 2017, p. 2).

Within three months of the eventual initial contract, the worker has to become a partner. So you are not working anymore for others, you now belong to the project meaning you may want to do a better job. Building something together, participating in an assembly, methods that guarantees your rights and allows you to be comfortable, I think it is important and also notice the partners because the way of working is already different. Núria Soto (*RidersxDerechos and Mensakas cooperativist*, personal communication, March 14, 2019)

*Mensakas* proposes a different framework for its project, where they highlight concepts as dignified work, labour contract, social economy, feminism (5% higher wage to women) and ecological and sustainable work.

**Picture 3 – *Mensakas* crowdfunding’s resource image: a worker and a unionist (identified by their shirts) shake their hands**



From: [www.goteo.org](http://www.goteo.org)

*Mensakas* and platform cooperatives pick up the tradition of the p2p culture, the origins of Internet and the culture of collaboration that had been given a new meaning by Silicon Valley. They deconstruct again the rhetoric to come back to their origins. Real “sharing economy” abandons its technological solutions to switch to solid labour structures that, however, do not renounce the opportunities the digitization provides.

Scholz feels optimistic about the “common-based peer production” and platform cooperatives, as realistic ways to a more democratic and fair culture. In his 10 Principles for Platform Cooperativism, he highlights significant elements from these alternatives in the digital economy, such as ownership, income security, a protective legal framework, and the most relevant ones: rejection of excessive workplace surveillance and the right to log off.

That is the proposal of *Mensakas*, an app that must be competitive on current digital platforms, but without surveillance algorithms, nor customers ratings. The main difference: “Employment contract. Contract means you have the right to unemployment, holidays, right to motherhood... nowadays we are charging 7 euros, women charge 5% more as a symbolic act...” (Núria Soto, *RidersxDerechos and Mensakas cooperativist*). *Mensakas* is operating now in a traditional way, with personal organizing shifts in order to achieve compromises, but fully operative application will be launched by the end of Spring 2019.

## Conclusions

A few but aware delivery drivers, with communication skills, managed to develop an integral strategy against the algorithm dictatorship. They created the union *RidersxDerechos* (an independent union but supported by IAC). They organized strikes and were able to clarify and unify their collective claims. Their access to media was successful thanks to strikes and court trials, facilitating a change of perspective in the treatment of platform economy. Media had been following the digital entrepreneurship rhetoric until then. *RidersxDerechos* has made a key work in order to change the neoliberal working storytelling on Media.

Along with the traditional media strategy – which they consider the most successful – *RidersxDerechos* developed a diversified communicative pathway in social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Goteo). This digital strategy has allowed them to establish alliances with other riders even from other countries and cities. In addition, they have been able to communicate and spread their working cooperative, *Mensakas*, and they have achieved gaining crowdfunding for their app. The findings of this investigation suggest that the possibility to reach general public and be set in the media agenda is still loose in social media, while news production routines weakness have created gaps in traditional media that can be brightly used by trade unions and social movements. *RidersxDerechos* show clearly that traditional union struggle is still useful as a tool for defending labour rights and news media cannot remain absolutely deaf when court trials are involved, specially when digital economy is affecting also the news industry and this creates gaps from which workers can take advantage of.

All this communicative strategy would not have been powerful enough without the previous union work (meetings in the working places). It would have been impossible without the legal work in achieving dismissal complaints (disconnections) concerning the workers fired for their engagement in strikes, and without the participation of general labour commissions. All this union work made the delivery workers newsworthy, due to the legal struggle. This suggests that traditional struggle is still useful in new digital economy contradicting all the liberal narratives that state a disrupting context in digital and platform economy. The re-appropriation and use of technology have favoured the *RidersxDerechos* and *Mensakas* pathway. The basis of the project is not about an emancipatory technology, but labour and social organization. The cooperative also has other objectives but uses technology in an appropriate way to meet their needs for a working life with rights.

Technology is not politics by itself as it requires political mediation as confirmed by the Barcelona taxis vs. Uber conflict, when the direct political action achieved certain success with VTC licenses. In this same way, riders require an institutional action on behalf of city councils, with the regulation of transport licenses in the sector.

“We are not against new technology, we use and welcome it”. The discursive pretension of converting the claim to labour rights in a kind of *neoluddism* is not a new strategy of capitalism. Never did the Luddites protest themselves against progress, but against the use of technology to destroy their right to work.

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