

Platform Work in Brazil as a Synonym for Precariousness is Classist Discourse

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Abstract

This article starts from the assertion that in Brazil, classifying platform work as necessarily precarious is part of a classist discourse that is prevalent among national scientists for two reasons: the uncritical incorporation of academic research on the world of work developed in the Global North and the lack of attention paid to the voices of platform workers themselves. First, a literature review is conducted to explore the prevailing ideology about informal work and digital work in Brazil, showing how this ideology is not based in facts or concepts specific to the Global South. Next, data and theoretical constructions from research with platform workers from Brazil are presented and problematized. These platforms are programmed architectures that organize interactions between users; in this text, platforms are characterized as mediations of productive forces and production relations. We then present data collected through exploratory research conducted in São Paulo with nine platform workers, the results of which suggest a heterogeneity of meanings and social meanings attributed to this type of occupation. Platform workers do not necessarily see themselves as engaged in precarious work. It is worth considering that their work may not indeed be precarious when their context is compared with realities that are sometimes unimaginable in the Global North, in which the fullness of employment was experienced during the 20th century.

Keywords

Platform Work; Global South; Epistemology of Communication; Reception Studies.

Introduction

This dossier addresses the timely question, 'What contributions has communication research made to the understanding of platform/digital work or the platformization of work?'. In Brazil, the epistemological basis regarding this subject has been established (Fíguro, 2008, p. 2-3) by Roseli Fíguro, the only communication researcher indexed at *Scielo* who has examined binomial communication/work, curiously in a journal that is not technically within the communication area (FÍGARO, 2008). Fíguro defended her doctorate (1999) on the subject, as well as her *livre docência* (2012), a title granted in Brazil by higher education institutions to those who hold doctorate degrees, and which attests to a higher quality in teaching and research. Since 2009, she has also worked at the University of São Paulo supervising researchers whose dissertations and theses concern communication in the world of work or the understanding of the world of work as a mediator between recipients and media.

The school of thought led by Fíguro is organized around the Communication and Work Research Centre - CPCT, which was founded in 2003. The approach utilised by this school is based in social science theory, especially in connections between sociology, discourse analysis, and philosophy, and also in the ergological approach created by Yves Schwartz (2010, p. 37) as 'a project to better know and, above all, to better intervene on work situations in order to transform them'. The foundation of the ergological approach involves listening to workers to record their own understanding of their work activities. Fíguro's is the only school in Brazil that has attempted to systematically problematize work/communication. The study of reception is essential and guides the work of the group, including its latest publications (i.e., Fíguro, 2018; Grohmann et al., 2019; Lima, 2018).

Therefore, when this edition of *Contracampo* asks 'What contributions has communication research made to the understanding of platform/digital work or the platformization of work?', it must be stated that communication researchers in Brazil understand the necessity of giving space to the voices, values, and affections of workers involved in platformization in response to work that pits formal knowledge against workers' informal knowledge (Schwartz; Di Fanti; Barbosa, 2016, p. 223-224).

It is necessary to communicate directly with digital workers in order to write about them. Further, it is necessary to work with such workers to problematize the socially constructed reception 'from the daily life of the world of work in order to demonstrate how the mediations of this reality compose the universe of the reception of workers, acting on the meanings and ways of seeing and understanding the communicational process of which they are part' (Fíguro, 2000, pp. 38-39).

Thus, this issue presents an opportunity to test the following hypothesis, which is organized in three thematic axes. In Brazil, discussions in the field of communication based on ergological assumptions indicate that the idea that work mediated by a platform necessarily involves precarious labour relations can be interpreted as 1) classist discourse. Class is a moving concept that 'accompanies the dialectical movement of history' (Grohmann, 2017, p. 96) and is simplified in this work by Haddad's note (1997, p. 98): 'strictly speaking, the concept of social class in the full sense is defined, within Marx's discourse, by the relations of distribution that are the immediate expression of the relations of production'. Production refers to the creation of consumer goods that correspond to human needs; distribution refers to the sharing of such goods according to social laws (Marx, 1983, p.207).

Following the definitions presented above, the term 'classist discourse' points to the way in which groups, organized through different social places created by production relations, construct systems of representation to define, conceive, and explain the world through language, concepts, and the elaboration of categories and images of thought (Hall, 2003, p. 267). Such discourses produce for their subjects, placed in their social classes, positions of identity and knowledge that allow them to express truths as if they were their genuine authors (Larrain, 1996, p. 49), something that, besides a 'stratum', denotes a category inscribed in the communicational processes (Grohmann, 2018). This perspective formed the background

of communication studies in Brazil and was replaced in research on reception by the concept of 'cultural identities', notably starting in the 1990s (Grohmann, 2018, p. 231-232). In this article, however, the basis of the first thematic axis of the hypothesis of labour starts from the following premise: to describe platform work as precarious work is a discourse of the class of 'registered workers', a class which, as will be discussed later, is quite restrictive regarding the relations of production and distribution of the Global South, which is distant from the universalization of formal labour experienced by the Global North.

Thus, the classist discourse that characterizes digital work as necessarily precarious reveals: 2) the uncritical, or even lazy, manner in which some human sciences researchers (e.g. Fontes, 2017; Venco, 2019) have examined literature on the subject that is not consistent with the Brazilian reality, mostly concerning the seminal works of Western authors such as Friedmann (1972), Hardt and Negri (2002; 2005), Gorz (2005), or more recently, Srnicek (2016). The direct association of digital work with precariousness also points to: 3) the need to listen, as suggested by the epistemology developed by Fíguro and her group, to Brazilians, who do not share the Western concept of worker/employee, who have been hired under the Consolidation of Labour Laws (CLT) of Brazil with low wages and in precarious conditions despite the legislation, and for whom the mediation of work through digital platforms might lead to an improved quality of life, or for their own lack of civil and economic rights to become the reality for all. Thus, this article presents the primary data obtained from semi-structured exploratory interviews collected between September and October 2019 in São Paulo with nine platform workers alongside a general discussion of platform work in the Global South..

Precarious work and classist discourse (uncritical)

The excellent 'Digital workers: The new occupations in informational work' (Lima & Oliveira, 2016, p. 119-120) presents a premise that can be applied to discussions about digital work in Brazilian - or Latin American - scenarios:

If we leave the restricted club of the countries where the welfare state was/is in place, we can see that most workers never had access to social rights, or when they did, they were restricted to the most qualified workers or with greater organizational capacity linked to dynamic economic sectors. Latin America is emblematic of this situation. Formal workers have rarely exceeded 50% of occupied workers, with the majority involved in 'informal jobs', in the 'grey zone' of an intermittent salary, of a 'turnover' into informality; many of them have never entered the formal labour market.

Many of these workers have always been far from what the International Labour Organization, the ILO (1999), has called 'decent work', in which there is respect for rights at work, the promotion of productive and quality employment, the expansion of social protection, and the strengthening of social dialogue. In other words, although 'decent work' is the agenda and object of paper commitments assumed by Mercosur countries, little has been done to meet these promises. This includes Brazil, in which an agreement was signed between former President Lula and the Director General of the ILO in June of 2003 to promote actions to generate more numerous and better jobs or eradicate slave labour (Silva & Mandalozzo, 2013, p. 125-128). Although some of the social inequalities that were organized around formal work at the beginning of this century in the Brazilian State have seen changes (cf. Leite; Salas, 2014), 'decent work' is still defined on the terms of gender, geography, race, and above all, class (cf. Araujo; Lombardi, 2013; Sousa; Guedes, 2016; Madeira; Gomes, 2018; Silva, Freitas, 2016).

When Rifkin (1996, p. 8-9) discusses a society threatened by technological unemployment, taking the reports from the 'International Metalworkers Federation of Geneva' as the object of his study, he is talking about advanced capitalist countries that, after years of democratized social welfare derived from formal work, began to experience the progressive increase of unemployment in the mid-1970's and

especially since the 1980's. This scenario is obviously far from what was experienced in the Global South (Rogan et al., 2017), which was sometimes closer to the deregulated European capitalism of the 19th Century. When talking about 'work', therefore, we must consider the plurality of meanings attributed to the word, which are not always synonymous with stability or social rights:

Sacrifice, privacy, progress, objectivity, estrangement, rationalization and emancipation. They are antagonistic views, but they can only be reconciled in the praxis of work. In turn, the capitalist society has left such visions behind by considering labour only as wage labour. Therefore, one of the first conclusions is that the sociology of labour must perceive and unveil the relations that permeate wage labour, defining the structural, evaluative and symbolic relations that directly relate the social classes and their respective stratifications (Costa & Almada, 2018, p. 171).

In contexts such as that of Brazil, formal, regulated, decent wage work itself is frequently confused with class stratification. It is fundamental here to differentiate work from employment. The latter configures the model by which the capitalism of the Global North began to remunerate labour, converting it into an element of socialization, or of access to the public sphere and to citizenship (Costa & Almada, 2018). In advanced capitalist countries in which employment has been universalized, correlating work with employment and consequently the reduction of employment to the loss of social rights makes perfect sense. In geographies like Brazil, however, this articulation is problematic and classist. Many workers have never been employed. In most cases, employees were and are from the elite classes. Thus, instead of pointing to the depletion of social power and material advantages, the end of employment represents the dissolution of a class difference not through greater access to welfare through formal work, which is undergoing extinction even in advanced capitalism, but by its opposite: the universalization of social insecurity created by unregulated work, which was the only reality known by a considerable portion of the inhabitants of the Global South during the 20th Century, while European or North American workers enjoyed their petty bourgeois parallel/proletarian welfare world.

Several scholars suggest that the focus of most discussions on precarious employment in Europe and the United States leads us to miss the global nature of this phenomenon and its variations in the regions of the world. For example, Ronaldo Munck suggests that the focus on the standard employment relationship as something that should be regained through political action emanates from the European experience, but it may not be applicable to post-colonial societies where 'standard' employment was not the norm in the post-war era. In the Global South, it may be historically inaccurate to demand a 'return' to standard employment relationships that did not prevail in the past (Mosoetsa et al., 2016, p. 11).

Thus, the 'construction of a class model based on the structure of employment provides a delimitation that is realistic, socially identifiable, and accessible to existing sources of social power and material advantages' (Santos & Ribeiro, 2016, p. 90). Further, the very structural distinction between employment and work reveals an important class bifurcation marked by the way in which the national labour market has been modernized through the expansion of 'its excluding and concentrating characteristic, which is well within the style of the underdeveloped and dependent capitalism, besides the qualitatively diverse characteristic of the wage societies of the developed countries, where it was possible to establish a collective labour statute, at least until 1980' (Barbosa, 2016, p. 26). This way, platform or digital capitalism seems to represent the end of employment – not the end of work, which precedes employment and on which the extraction of surplus value rests (Fontes, 2017, p. 63).

There was never in any capitalist society a right to work, and if there was any illusion, it was defeated in 1848. There is indeed an obligation to sell labour power, and this obligation doesn't even have to be legal, since it is based on the 'nature of things' for this expropriatory society. In capitalist societies, manuals of economy call 'full employment' the situations where unemployment rates are below 5% of the population! In the so-

called full employment of the 'golden years' (1945-1975) for the core countries, the data were truncated, since the workers without rights (immigrants) who lived in those countries were not counted, neither the peasants of other countries who were being expropriated by the imperialist advance of the capital of those metropolises, nor the precarious working conditions that the imperialist companies imposed in the so-called 'Third World' (Fontes, 2017, p. 52).

It is strange, therefore, that academics from the Global South frequently incorporate discourse that links outsourced or flexible work, including digital work, to precariousness, especially considering that informal workers from places like South Africa, Mexico, China, Brazil, or India have historically managed to subvert the lack of rights of informality and organize themselves collectively to pressure the State and companies, including in scenarios of digital capitalism (Braga, 2019; Mosoetsa et al., 2016). That being said, in November of 2019, a total of 22 articles dedicated to the 'precariousness of work' were identified through a search of *Scielo* using the terms. Among the results found, we highlight those in which the discourse represents an uncritical reading of the world of work in the Global South in general, and in Brazil in particular.

Mello et al. (2009, pp. 320-321) use the work of two French researchers, Robert Castel and Jean-François Chanlat, to discuss the consequences of excessive technology in companies and a precariousness no longer generated by strenuous journeys or repetitive effort, but by underemployment, from the informality that demands goals from the worker. Druck et al. (2019) problematize the recent approval of Labour Reform in Brazil, calling on the British geographer David Harvey, or other Europeans, such as the French thinkers Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, to discuss a neoliberal agenda of global flexible accumulation in which the reformulation of the Consolidation of Labour Laws (CLT) is inserted, the expression of the capital against the working class, which makes outsourcing a rule by challenging 'the protective paradigm of the workers, developed because of their condition of hypo-sufficiency and putting at risk the ontological aspect of the Labour Law' (Duck et al., 2019, p.294). Now, the end of CLT is not against the workers; the attack is against the employee class. Franco (2011, p. 180), in an article from the beginning of the decade, claims that most of the analyses and empirical studies of the sociology of work,

has demonstrated that outsourcing has been adopted as a flexible labour management policy, among others, which has led to social precariousness. It is a multidimensional process that affects the worker - as an individual, family, collective work and citizen - by fragmenting the social structure by weakening or degrading: (i) work bonds and contractual relations; (ii) the organization and working conditions; (iii) health and safety at work; (iv) the recognition and symbolic valorisation in the construction of individual and collective identity; (v) the representation and collective organization, weakening workers as social actors.

These perspectives are erected in a surprisingly natural dialogue with European and American thinkers, whose claims are valid for the Global North but need to be reformulated for the Brazilian context. This trend is repeated in Araújo (2013) and Lima (2003). Digital workers in particular are discussed in the texts of Ricardo Antunes (2009) in a dialogue with authors like Ursula Huws through her *cyberproletariat* concept that exacerbates precariousness, which breaks with the dominant taylorist-fordist model throughout the 20th century (Antunes, 2011, p. 406). Certainly, this dominant model to which Antunes (2011, p. 406) refers expressed in the Global South the reality of the dominant classes, and not the majority of the population.

Antunes' long production of the last decade, which was greatly committed to the agenda of labour precariousness and sometimes correlated to digital work, was recently synthesized in the book 'The privilege of servitude: The new service proletariat in the digital age' (2018). This volume opens with complimentary *cover letters* written in the European Union: there are words of exaltation to Antunes written by Michael Löwy, who was born in Brazil as son of Austrian Jews, but made his career in France,

where he was even the director of the prestigious *Centre national de la recherche scientifique*, CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research); the already mentioned British researcher Ursula Huws; and finally, a note from Pietro Basso, professor at the Ca'Foscari University in Venice. The enthusiastic prelude of the three European researchers suggests that Antunes's robust book (2018) may have a profound dialogue with advanced capitalist countries and Brazilian elites who, in an irresistible parody, lived the privilege of employment. However, its dialogue with the Global South, with more than 50% of the Latin population and 'involved in informal "jobs", in the "grey zone" of an intermittent salary, of a "turnover" into informality' (Lima; Oliveira, 2016, p. 119-120), a number that reaches 80% of the workers in India (Aneja et al., 2019), is inadequate. Further, it is a classist discourse.

Some talk of missing the good times of decent work (Antunes, 2018), in which employment was the reality – of some. It has been stated with irony that digital work would take humanity to paradise, a Eurocentric myth that was destroyed by the uncertain reality of platform work. This kind of work can indeed represent a life improvement for those who have never had a job and face barriers to entering the formal market due to issues such as race, gender, or schooling, and now experience, in regions such as Mexico City, wages up to eleven times greater than the average daily minimum wage of other occupations. These wage increases have been created by the possibilities brought by Uber, a transportation application (Eisenmeier, p. 12-13). To state, like Scholz (2016), that Uber's work or the 'economy of sharing' as a whole is underpaid depends on the ruler used to define low-paid work. As Ursula Huws (2014, p. 24) admits,

It would be too simplistic to suggest a single universal tendency - a global race to the bottom without the mediation of any contrary tendency. Such contradictions can be found in the work on many levels: between states-nation, between companies, between states and companies, between companies and workers, and within each of these constituents.

Huws (2014), however, excludes the contradiction that was historically built in the Global South between employers and workers. Without this class contradiction, it is impossible to discuss digital labour outside the scope of the countries of advanced capitalism, since it involves more than the social stratification delimited by occupation (2014, pp. 47-48), pointing to the one that comes from the division of decent labour, the source of rights and voice in the public sphere, as opposed to precarious labour. Returning to the work of Antunes (2018), Grohmann (2018, p. 155) observes: 'As it is in the book, the digital, although important throughout the explanation, appears only as an appendix in the theoretical sense', when it must be the foundation. As a matter of fact, the most recent book published by Antunes' research group (2019), 'Wealth and Misery of Work in Brazil v. IV', promises to discuss 'digital work, self-management and expropriation of life', a subtitle of the volume, in order to address phenomena that are completely out of place in this proposal, such as the port sector and the sugarcane agroindustry, or even 'self-management in cooperatives'. In fact, there is nothing that would seriously problematize the crossing of platforms and thus communication in the world of work, which would be necessary according to Antunes himself (2019, position 246), according to whom 'it is decisive to offer an updated intellection about the role of work in the services for the creation of surplus value'.

The first and second axes of the hypothesis proposed in this article are deepened below in the problematization of platform work in the Global South.

Platformization of work in the Global South

Platforms can be understood as programmable architectures designed to organize interactions between users (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Today, digital work primarily takes place in such environments (Fuchs; Sevignani, 2013, p. 255; Woodcoc; Graham, 2019, p. 1) and is commonly called platform work. This semantic difference points to the mediation of work due to the prevalence of the Internet, which was

privatized in the 1990s, through the 'walled gardens' of companies such as Google and Facebook (Dantas, 2014).

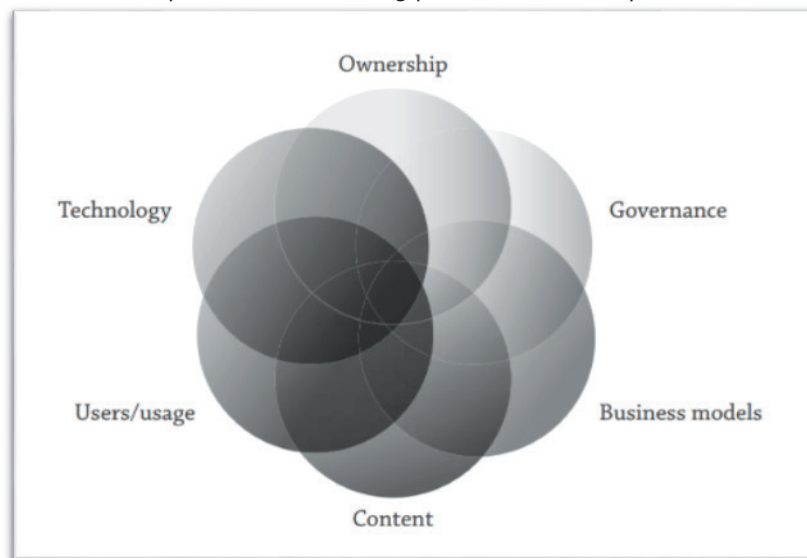
The spread of computing [through platforms] in most sectors of the economy, combined with the almost universal use of telecommunications, means that few economic activities do not involve some element of digital work, whether in farms, factories, warehouses, offices, shops, homes or moving vehicles (Huws, 2014, p. 164).

In order to understand the world of contemporary work, it is necessary to evaluate digital platforms, in which more than 50 million people are already directly involved globally (Kuek et al., 2015). Media are socially and materially produced, constituting indispensable elements of productive forces and production relations (Williams 2011, p. 69-74), and platform capitalism has tangible bases:

The increasing visibility of the apparently dematerialised work, which is dependent on information and communication technologies, sometimes served to cloud the reality that this 'virtual' activity depends on a highly material base of physical infrastructure and manufactured commodities, mostly produced far from the view of observers in developed economies, in mines of Africa and Latin America, in factories in China and elsewhere in the developing world. Without the generation of power, cables, satellites, computers, switches, mobile phones and thousands of other material products, the extraction of the raw materials that compose these goods, the launching of satellites into space to transmit their signals, the construction of buildings in which they were designed and assembled and from which they are commercialized, and the manufacture and operation of vehicles in which they are distributed, the Internet could not be accessed by anyone (Huws, 2014, p. 157).

The productive forces and material/digital production relations in platforms are synthesized by Van Dijck (2013):

Graphic 1- Disassembling platforms as microsystems



Extracted from Van Dijck, (2013, p. 28)

1. Technology: The platform, a computational architecture model.
2. Users and Usage: The human actors.
3. Content: Is it produced in the platform? Is it only shared?
4. Ownership: Denotes a Production System model.
5. Governance: How is the data exchange managed - by whom and for what purposes?
6. Business Models: They mediate certain types of interactions and seek profit through different methods, such as advertising, data collection, etc.

Van Dijck (2013, p. 26) suggests that this general model, which is not designed exclusively for

the world of work but is applicable to it, should be sustained by actor-network theory, through which the coevolution of people and technologies or human and non-human agents with the political economy can be identified. Actor-network theory places emphasis on economic infrastructure and political-legal governance as conditions for the evolution of digital social networking sites and platforms. This proposal seems successful in many ways. First, it brings up the aforementioned link proposed by Williams (2011, p. 69) between media and productive forces/production relations, which refers to a specific historical moment when considering ownership, data governance, and business models. Second, it helps to understand the six main problems that need to be articulated for a discussion that, instead of deforming the communication processes mediated by platforms with inappropriate theories, argues these processes on their own terms. Third: the diagram introduced above allows visualizations of the problems that are primarily related to each other, even tangentially. For example, 'content' is directly linked to 'users' and 'business models'. Concerning this last topic, important discussions have been conducted in the field of communication since the beginning of the decade using concepts such as 'surplus value 2.0' (Dantas, 2014) or 'the like economy' (Primo, 2014), which refers to the free work of the platform users, who are led by business models designed to persuade human actors to stay as long as possible in places like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, consuming and creating content supposedly free-of-charge.

However, a discussion of these unpaid workers is not within the scope of this article. The objects of this research are users who seek paid work on platforms, users that, as indicated in the previous section, are sometimes confused with precarious workers in the Global North. Thus, following the third axis of the hypothesis, this may not be used as a premise for the Global South, including Brazil. As Casilli (2018, p. 29) points out, 'the panorama of the platform economy is irregular, polarized, with discernible centres specialized in the purchase and sale of labour. These geographical relations replicate political and historical patterns of domination that affect users in different ways, depending on their location'. Nations such as Nigeria, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and large organizations such as the World Bank, see platform work as a mechanism to help some of the poorest countries escape the restrictive opportunities for economic growth in their local contexts (Graham et al., 2019), contrary to the Pasquale premise (2017, p.311) according to which 'platforms strengthen inequalities and promote precariousness by reducing workers' bargaining power and employment stability'.

When analysing the economy of the Global South, it is necessary to remember that a considerable part of its workforce has been concentrated on informality for centuries. Thus, without neglecting potential risks such as prioritizing the needs of the platform and the client over the needs of the worker, it should be considered that 'the platform economy can contribute to the formalisation of work, allow access to new markets and create flexible work opportunities, which is particularly relevant for women' (Aneja et al., 2019, p. 2). Qiu (2009, p. 5) identifies a class formation process in China based on the progressive social mediation offered by communication and information technologies.

It is argued that poor and marginalized communities, like some in the Global South, perpetuate their poverty through closed networks and low levels of trust in weak social ties, which limit the people's ability to negotiate, form new business connections and access useful markets in formation. However, the increasing use of the internet associated with liberalising economies has been seen as a way for people to participate in networks that are relevant to employment that would be inaccessible through traditional networks (Mann, 2014, p. 293)

In a study that examined 152 interviews, a survey of 456 platform workers from the Global South, and data from one of the largest online work platforms in the world, Graham et al. (2018) found the following results:

- 68% of survey participants described platforms as important or very important for family income, seeing digital work as one of their main sources of income in local labour markets

that only offer low-income jobs or no jobs at all;

- 53% of the interviewees strongly agreed that their work involved solving complex tasks;
- Many platform workers experience job insecurity, with 43% of interviewees feeling easily replaceable;
- Some workers think they have few opportunities to interact: 74% of interviewees of the study said that they rarely or never communicated face-to-face with other platform workers.

As can be seen, even platform workers in the Global South recognize problems with their working conditions; they are not alienated or resigned. At the same time, it is impossible to deny the improvements in income and social empowerment provided by such work, as revealed by the testimony given by a Nigerian interviewee to Graham et al. (2018, p. 8): 'You have the freedom of choice. With whom you want to work, when you want to work and how you want to work'. This claim is supported by a robust ethnographic study conducted by the Indian social scientists Surie and Koduganti (2016, p. 3) in the city of Bengaluru with 45 Uber and Ola drivers who had already worked as drivers before joining digital platforms. The researchers concluded that these platform workers do not have the same experiences with precariousness, risk, and insecurity observed in a wide range of other informal sector workers in urban India, in which 'landscapes of insecurity and precariousness are based in terms that are unfamiliar to the imagination of developed economies' (Surie; Koduganti, 2016, p. 29).

One of the interviewees stated that 'With Uber, if you work, you get money. There is a lot of freedom in this' (Surie; Koduganti, 2016, p. 20). Another said, '[With Uber] I know that I can go home and rest one day if I am sick; I'll feel better the next day and there will be work the next day. I can sleep because I know that I will have work when I wake up' (Surie; Koduganti, 2016, p. 21), implying that before platform work, taking time off on account of an illness posed the risk of being left without work after recovering from the illness. Some workers compared the payment system used by the platforms to the types of payment they had previously experienced:

The money here is good because if you work Monday to Sunday, you will get money in your account on Tuesday, don't worry. If you work hard, you will get good money.

(...)

I worked in a big corporation here in Bengaluru. I drove seven days a week for them. Their finance department only released money to people like me every three months. And even then we had to fill out the invoices; we lost two days of work just doing that, going through their offices. How can I survive on a salary that I receive only a few times a year? (Surie; Koduganti, 2016, p.25).

The interviewees also vocalized criticisms of platform work (Surie; Koduganti, 2016, p. 28) with statements like, 'There is no future here. I don't like that. There is no personal growth'. However, it is clear that many of the interviewees saw advantages in platform work. The beginning of this article outlined the relevance of the epistemological proposal of the ergology-based Fígaro group, according to which workers must be heard so that 'proposals for intervention make sense to the users [platform workers], meeting their needs and desires' (Mann, 2014, p. 297).

Data on the reality of platform workers in the Global South, when placed in tension with the Van Dijck graph (2013), allow us to understand the central position of social media in the subversion of some noticeably degrading historical aspects related to work in regions such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia before the arrival of the Internet. The worker, a platform user, must use a technology that is often owned by a large global conglomerate, which typically ignores the class relations of the worker's local context, usually impeding social mobility. Thus, the platform user/worker of the Global South may be able to

deliver their work with some autonomy and dignity, when one makes a comparison with the 'landscapes of insecurity and precariousness [that] are based in terms that are unfamiliar to the imagination of developed economies' (Surie; Koduganti, 2016, p. 29). The platforms, the new productive forces, therefore create new relations of production, far from Fordism but not necessarily synonymous with precariousness and necessarily impossible to improve in order to promote decent work.

These digital architectures alone will not solve problems such as low education levels, racism, misogyny, homophobia, or even low income, nor will they necessarily produce better working relationships. However, like all technologies, the platforms are a basket of values (Feenberg, 2013), and instead of hastily indexing them as the fourth trumpet of the neo-liberal apocalypse, it seems wise to consider which principles that regulate the programming of these media could be removed to protect social welfare, and which norms should be incorporated to potentialize decent work and socially empower platform workers.

In this sense, it is appropriate to refer to the volume *'Digital labour platforms and the future of work: Towards decent work in the online world'* (2018, p. 105-109), published by the International Labour Organization, which includes the chapter 'Towards decent work in the online world' and presents 18 proposals, such as: 'Workers should not be misclassified as self-employed if they are employees in practice' and 'Workers should have a legally binding way to make their needs and desires heard to platform operators, through union membership and collective bargaining'. The ideas proposed by the ILO meet five points raised by Graham et al. (2018, p. 11):

1. Where should we regulate online work? The greatest demand for online work is generated by a few high-income countries. Is there any reason why a US employer who hires a Kenyan worker should avoid adhering to local labour laws in both countries? Imposing minimum standards in the point of purchase of 'freelance work' may be an effective way to improve work conditions for workers in low-income countries.
2. Can we limit the monopolies of the online freelance platform-based work? Online work platforms benefit from the positive effects of the network, where each additional user increases the value of the platform for everyone. This creates a monopoly opportunity if new platforms cannot compete with established ones. Workers may get stuck on specific platforms, but allowing them to carry their reputational capital would allow the movement between platforms, discouraging the monopolistic behaviour.
3. Will platform workers receive formal employment contracts? People defined as 'self-employed workers' are usually understood as equal parties to those with whom they sign contracts (conversely, 'employees' are seen as in need of special protections such as minimum wage, notice period and sick pay). If workers are wrongly classified as hired, this can put them in a precarious position. One way to correct this would be for the platforms to develop a variety of contract types to suit different categories of workers, helping clients to correctly classify their workers.
4. Can we encourage workers to express their problems? Online workers are more likely to compete than collaborate, but they will have more bargaining power against exploitative platforms or customers if they cooperate.
5. Can we create platforms to monitor poor working conditions? Organizations like the Fairtrade Foundation inspect places of production of commodities like chocolate, coffee and tea. In the same model, a 'Fairwork Foundation' could press the platforms to ensure decent working conditions and take responsibility for their online production chains. Platforms that provide workers with conditions above the minimum found in the market can benefit from a seal of approval, helping workers to choose platforms that offer fair working conditions.

Digital work does not only occur online; it always has a physical counterpart, which are specific locations and people involved in particular cultural contexts that can be the source of a range of responses

and solutions (Graham et al., 2018, p. 11). This is the understanding of ergology, here taken more as an epistemology than as a method, which will be discussed later in the paper. The following problematizations addressed in this article are addressed in the exploratory research analysis developed in São Paulo between September and October 2019 with nine platform workers: three from Uber, three from iFood, and three from Rappi. acy.

The contribution of communication to the understanding of the world of work: Platform mediation through the voices of nine workers

The introduction of this article explained that communication considers the need for reception in order to build an understanding of media's mediating function in the world of work. The research group led by Fígaro is based in ergology, which utilises the method of the Three-Pole Dynamic Device (3PDD). It does not provide strict protocols to guide the meeting between researchers and research subjects, but indicates that such a meeting must be a dialogue, with the researcher responsible for recognizing the equivalent importance of participants' voices, although they are different from the researcher's own, for the construction of knowledge (Bessa & Franzoi, 2017, p. 127). This text is not exactly based on 3PDD or on ergological notions such as 'double anticipation', but it attempts to preserve the epistemic aspect of non-authoritarian interactions with the research subjects.

In this sense, ideas developed in a previous work were used (Santos et al., 2016), when it was discussed how the semiotic potential of words, images, videos, music, and other languages is affected by the socio-cultural context of people or audiences. The hypothesis was then constructed regarding the possibility of a semiotic gap in Brazil between the meanings attributed to 'platform work' by scientists, influenced by the social place of employment and the comfort - or fetish - of the literature of the Global North, and the meaning elaborated by platform workers, whose identities in the Global South have always been separated from the social place of the 'employee'.

The researcher collected statements in an exploratory manner through semi-structured interviews with workers using three platforms: Uber, iFood, and Rappi. The decision to interview workers using the last two platforms was motivated by the observation of the massive presence of black or mixed race men carrying backpacks with the brands of these platforms in shopping centres, restaurants, and high-end stores in São Paulo. The researchers wanted to know how these platform workers came to occupy these spaces, perhaps for the first time. Uber was chosen because in 2017, the São Paulo City Hall declared that the number of taxi drivers in the city had been overtaken by the number of transport platform drivers, with Uber leading the group (Diógenes, 2017). This shows Uber's social importance and its impact on the daily life of the city and its inhabitants, both as consumers and as workers. During the final draft of the article, in order to respect both the number of characters allowed by the journal and the deadline of the dossier, the data from Uber workers was prioritized. The data from Rappi and iFood workers were not fully transcribed in time, but some general learnings from their data are presented at the end of the section.

According to its official website, Uber is a technology company created in 2010 that connects 'partner drivers', meaning autonomous professional drivers, and consumers through an application designed for mobile media. The company is present in more than 700 cities in the world¹ and has twenty thousand employees and an amazing three million registered drivers, of which approximately 600 thousand operate in Brazil. Although Uber does not define itself as a transportation company, but rather as a technology company, certainly in order to avoid legal proceedings from the 'partners' and to be exempt for the service rendered by them, Uber requires drivers to submit a driver's license with authorization

¹ Global data updated in May, 2019; Brazil data is from September, 2018.

to perform paid activities. Prices are not negotiated directly between passengers and drivers, but are determined through a combination of the base price established by the time and distance of the trip, the difference between supply and demand of cars and something called fixed cost, defined as ‘a fixed fee’ that is ‘added to each trip to help with operational, regulatory and security costs’ (Uber, 2019). Thus, Uber’s official website does not provide much clarity about the company’s ownership and governance of data. The business model, however, can be understood without much effort: Uber is a transportation company that calls itself a technology company and uses unclear criteria for drivers and passengers when defining the value of trips.

There is no doubt that this type of technological mediation indicates precariousness when compared to employment. But does it lead to worse working conditions compared with other types of informality, especially those organized by mediations that precede digital work? An answer to this question may be formulated from conversations with Uber drivers. Three such drivers shared their perspectives in semi-structured interviews organized in the following manner:

Table 1 - Question script for Uber drivers

DIAGRAM AXES VAN DIJCK, 2013, p.28	QUESTION
Users/Usage	Do you like working at Uber?
Ownership	Who is your boss?
Ownership	Do you know or have you ever wondered who owns Uber?
Governance	What do you think that the platform does with the data it collects from you and the passengers?
Business model	How do you rate Uber's business model, in which it intermediates the contact between you and the customers? Is it a clear model? Is it an advantageous model for you? Do you feel well-paid for the work you do?
Users/Usage	Was it easy to sign up to start driving on the platform? Does the platform work well? Do you think the platform should remove some features? Should the platform add features that do not exist?
Content	Describe what is like to drive for Uber.

Source: Elaborated by the author

The subjects had the following profiles. 1) Married woman, 37 years old, paying a mortgage, with two children and whose husband is also an Uber driver. 2) Unemployed production engineer, 61 years old, father of two adult children living outside Brazil, divorced, shares an apartment with his girlfriend. 3) Young physical education student at a private university in São Paulo, 19 years old, lives with his parents and has a girlfriend. The most important facts identified in the interviews are provided below, first with the data that were repeated in all cases:

- It was easy to become a platform worker, even though one of the interviewees does not consider what he does at Uber a job, but an odd job, as we will discuss below;
- Nobody knew or seemed to want to know who the owner of the company was, but everyone was aware that it was a North American company with global operations. They had no problem with this;
- All interviewees thought they were adequately remunerated for the type of work they

performed;

- The three interviewees reported feeling some degree of control and autonomy over their work journey.

The only woman interviewed stated that she and her husband share the same car. She drives in the morning and he drives in the afternoon. He sometimes also drives at night. The two earn an average income, after expenses, of R\$7,000.00, according to their own report. This income is enough 'to live well. You can even travel to the beach once in a while, even because you can drive there if you want'. Uber came into the couple's lives after the interviewee was dismissed upon returning from her second maternity leave in 2017. She has a complete second degree and was a receptionist in a clinical examination laboratory. Five months later, her husband, an administration technician, was also dismissed from his position as an office assistant. She says that their income from Uber is higher than their previous income, which was around R\$3,500.00, not counting benefits such as basic food, vacation pay, and a thirteenth salary. The car they use for work is rented for R\$1,400.00.

In the interviewee's perception, she and her husband are 'owners of their own business'. She says that if they need more money, they just drive more. When one of them gets sick, he or she stays at home with the children and the other works double. When asked if she or her husband were thinking of returning to the formal market, she replied that it would not be worthwhile because wages are low and 'you have to put up with a lot of humiliation. So [Uber] is better'. She said she was very afraid to drive to 'certain neighbourhoods in São Paulo and places in the metropolitan region, like Diadema'. However, Uber now 'warns the driver about the area where the passenger is going, and I can choose whether or not to take the trip'. This makes the interviewee feel empowered, less insecure in a country with high crime and femicide rates, without the need of problematizing any prejudice for choosing passengers by separating them between 'upscale regions' and 'peripheral regions' of the city.

The second interviewee, a production engineer, stated that in addition to driving on Uber, he used a national application of a competitor for a while, called '99', sold in 2018 to the Chinese Didi Chuxing, which is China's largest transportation platform. According to the interviewee, he left '99' because 'if the passenger doesn't pay, it's my problem, unlike Uber. Uber covers the bad payers. We get paid and Uber charges the passenger'. He said he started driving when he was unemployed at the beginning of 2019. He had two job offers as a 'juridical worker, with no rights, no work record, to work 10 hours far from home and earn R\$5,000. It doesn't pay off. Here I make this much or more'. This interviewee said he believes Uber is terrible when compared to his experience of '12 years in a multinational corporation'. He remembered with nostalgia the holidays, the profit sharing plans, and the laughter with his co-workers, 'quality people'. He said, 'Passengers come and go. Many are rude. They make the car dirty, they curse, they want us to perform miracles in the traffic of the Marginal [a group of avenues and highways considered the expressway of the city of São Paulo]. There are a lot of clueless people. I don't like this contact so much. You never know who's getting in the car'. Interestingly, he stated, 'This is not a profession. It is an odd job. For an odd job, it's great. I pay the bills without too much headache. But there's no future here... The person wanting to make a living on this in the long term... You can survive, not live'.

It is worth noting this interviewee's statement that he does not miss his precarious formal job and his choice to stay at Uber instead of returning to work as an engineer, if the income is the same as that he can obtain using Uber. It can then be said that for this interviewee, platform work represents some precariousness, but it is paradoxically more worthwhile than accepting juridical work for a salary that is considered low. Again, as in the previous interview, this interviewee mentioned the vulnerability of driving a car in São Paulo, a city that registers 10.9 homicides for every 100,000 inhabitants according to the Atlas of Violence of 2018: 'There is no security. The security I have is this rosary tied to the rear-view mirror. But that's not Uber. It's living in this country. I'm thinking of selling my apartment and moving with my kids to Canada. There's security there'.

The third interviewee, a 19-year-old college student, reported that he, his father, and his brother share the family car, 'which is always on the road', to work for the application. Asked whether this hurt his family life, he replied that 'On Sunday, nobody works. It's barbecue day, beer day, day to talk shit'. This was the first interview in which the interviewee presented some class consciousness. The interviewee said that he, his father, and his brother participate in 'many WhatsApp groups exclusive to Uber drivers'. In these groups, topics are discussed such as 'standstills, places to avoid because it causes B.O. [literally meaning police reports, while the slang means dangerous places that are likely to get you into trouble], police checkpoints, where it's good to eat at a good price, trip readjustments, better times for dynamics [when the value of the trip increases]'. He said there are petrol stations where drivers gather to chat, as well as some restaurants with low prices where drivers talk 'about everything, from bullshit to tricks to get more [money] out of driving'. When asked what these tricks were, the interviewee changed the subject, but his statement had indicated that drivers use collective – not only competitive – strategies to improve their earnings. This interviewee also did not want to reveal how much he made or how much his family makes as a whole. When asked who his father and brother's boss was, the young man replied, 'Ourselves. If you want to work, you work. If you don't want to work, you don't work'. He was then asked if he does not feel as though he has no control of his own work, since the prices of the trips and passengers are set by Uber. His response was the following:

Sort of, you see, we often take the phone, the zap [WhatsApp] of the passenger, and do it outside of the app. For example, there is a lady from Alphaville [high-end home condominium] that I just dropped off who became our customer. She is a company director and her husband has a construction company that works in the Northeast. Their house is worth R\$ 12 million. We have authorization to pick up her children at school [he opens the glove compartment and shows me the paper inside a transparent folder]. The boys love my father and me. I've already even been invited into her house. There are trips that would cost R\$50.00 and she pays R\$100.00, and tells us to keep the change.

This reveals how the workers of the platform sometimes cheat the mediation imposed by the application. This serves as an initial and formal contact, marked by all the advantages and disadvantages inherent to the digital architecture in question, which can then be subverted through the creation of (re) mediated consumption practices, in which Uber's business model is abandoned for a more advantageous model for the drivers, in which no commission is paid to the platform and prices and working hours are freely negotiated with clients. This brings to the foreground actions developed outside formal regulatory systems that are therefore difficult to measure and may be deeply linked to the deregulated past of Global South economies. Are similar arrangements created in places like the United States, France, or Germany?

A few brief notes will now be presented regarding Rappi and iFood employees. Rappi is a Colombian start-up founded in 2015 with operations in Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay. Rappi's business is an application that connects delivery people to customers who want to get anything, from meals and purchases made remotely in supermarkets to toys, erotic items, or beer in the middle of the night. iFood is a Brazilian company founded in 2011 and is the Latin American market leader in food delivery applications. The conversation scripts for the three workers from these platforms followed the same logic used with the Uber drivers, that is, they were elaborated based on the Van Dijck diagram (2013). Below, we summarize the findings that were most relevant to the discussions in this article:

- All the interviewees were men. Five of them were black or of mixed race. They work on motorcycles or bicycles, which offer little physical protection. Perhaps this is why women, who are constantly violated in Brazilian society, do not feel safe working for these platforms.
- Two of the iFood interviewees and one of the Rappi interviewees said that the work mediated by the applications allowed them to enter 'places for rich people', 'chic stores', and 'downtown shopping centres' for the first time. One iFood delivery person said that he

had never been to Paulista Avenue, a São Paulo landmark, before starting working for the application, 'because it wasn't my place. I thought it was too far away. Far away. I don't know.' They all stated that they felt that working for the platform allowed them to move around the city without arousing reproachful glances. 'I'm working. People know. Nobody comes to me to say anything, that I can't be there. I'm getting to know the city', reported an interviewee who works for Rappi.

- None of the six workers interviewed thought that they were underpaid for the type of activities they performed, but they all stated that it was necessary to have exhausting days to make the work worthwhile, which was already common in the lives of five of those interviewed before the platform work, with three of them being involved in construction and two with 'general services'.
- Only one of the interviewees refused to discuss earnings. The remuneration of the other five varied from R\$1,200.00 to R\$4,000.00 per month.
- All six interviewees stated that they would like to do something else like driving for Uber (three interviewees) or owning a small business (three interviewees) or a franchise (one interviewee). Two of these interviewees, who had once been formal workers, said they would like to return to their registered work regulated by the state.

The workers perceived that work at Rappi and iFood seemed to be more precarious than with Uber, as they pointed to working for Uber as a desire or goal. The interviews also supported the idea that those who have already experienced employment sometimes want to return to it, seeing digital work as worse, although this is not a rule (referring to the testimony of the Uber driver). It was also interesting to note that platform work gave some of the interviewees a social identity, marked by the issue of class, making them feel empowered to travel around the city without fear. Apparently, even an identity of a deregulated worker can provide not only visibility, but also, in the perception of the interviewed workers, some kind of security.

A few final notes. Or the beginning of a discussion.

This article has covered many complex issues. Certainly, the empiricism developed here forms more of a letter of intent than anything else. However, it seemed inappropriate to present the field data without problematizing the discussions on the particularities of the Global South when defining platform work, especially because some epistemological and theoretical deficiencies are the product of classist discourse on the part of scientists, who take the perspective of the employee, combined with a failure to listen to the people involved in platform work in the geographies of the Global South.

This exploratory research, although it is qualitative and preliminary, suggests a future for the hypothesis proposed. The bibliographic survey and the interview data show that the meaning of work mediated by companies such as Uber, Rappi, and iFood depends on each worker's life experience: 'freedom', 'odd job', 'exhaustion', 'security', 'identity', or 'precariousness'.

In the Global South, in which several distinct and sometimes antagonistic realities coexist, multiple meanings must necessarily be considered when approaching the subject of platform work. In this context, the correlation of 'precariousness' with digital work or platform work seems to come from a well-defined type of class: that of the few who experienced regulated work in the 20th century and early 21st century, occupying the place of workers with social rights as a productive force linked to the formalization of the work regulated by the State.

The scenario, however, is much more complex than this conception of classist discourse. It originates from the superposition of diverse productive forces that concomitantly occupied and occupy the same space in the Global South: the work that has always been deregulated, the employment introduced

for some in the 20th century, and recently, platform work. These productive forces and their arrangements create complex relations of production that cannot be defined by dualistic and simplistic explanations such as 'precarious labour vs. decent labour' without temporally and geographically positioning these categories and highlighting the productive arrangements and respective classes in which they are involved.

In this manner, the understanding that the platform worker of the Global South is exploited and held hostage by the giants of neoliberalism must be put on hold as a universal category. The platforms, which are communication technologies embodied in values based on business models, mediate a type of work that does not materialize uniformly throughout the world. Further, the Global South must be understood through its own terms and contradictions as well as its subversions, as in the aforementioned case of the Uber worker who uses the platform to get clients and then deals directly with them. In another sense, Casilli's (2018, pp.33-34) warning concerning the risk of hastily interpreting platform work as a type of colonialism should be considered valid, because "the Western world does not have a monopoly of the immaterial labour in the digital labour, and the countries of the developing world are not limited to provide material inputs and semi-finished products".

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