

## Editorial vol. 39 n. 1

## **Contextualizing Platform Labor**

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Digital labor studies emerge in communication research in the early 2010s, especially with the book edited by Trebor Scholz (2012). At the end of March 2020, according to Google Scholar, there are 9430 articles with these expression in English (*digital labor* and *digital labour*). In the first half of the decade, the main discussions were about "free labor" of users on social media and in online games, as well as the relevance (or not) of exploitation as a category of analysis (Fuchs, 2014; Huws, 2014; Bolaño & Vieira, 2015).

Since then, the exponential increase in work and consumption on transportation and delivery platforms has led academics, activists and civil society to discuss phenomena called "uberization" or platformization of labor. Some of the emerging themes are work and artificial intelligence (including the workers behind AI), work conditions of platform workers, platform cooperativism and mechanisms to ensure decent work on platforms (Casilli, 2019; Van Doorn, 2017; Roberts, 2019; Cant, 2019; Woodcock & Graham, 2019).

Digital labor refers more to a wide area of studies than to a narrow category of analysis, because work is a human activity. In the literature, we observe two main approaches on digital labor. In a broader sense, there are many work activities in global value chains that have some digital components – from the mining work in Eastern Congo extracting precious minerals to Chinese assembly-line labor at Foxconn for mobile phone production to the work of high-tech designers in the Silicon Valley. According to Fuchs (2014, p. 1), "there is a complex global division of digital labour that connects and articulates various forms of productive forces, modes of production, and variants within the dominant capitalist mode of production". Thus, there are many workers who relate to digital contexts throughout the circuits of labor (Qiu, Gregg & Crawford, 2014). Fuchs and Sandoval (2014) created a typology of 1728 possibilities of digital labor activities.

The second definition is complementary, but more closed: labor organized and governed by digital platforms, in the sense of Van Doorn (2017) and Casilli (2019). This makes it possible to understand what are the work activities that are mediated by digital platforms and how are the working conditions of these people. This is platform labor.

What, then, are platforms? These are digital infrastructures structured by data, organized by algorithms and governed by relations of property, with values and norms inscribed in their designs (Van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2018; Srnicek, 2016). The ways in which they work depend on data,

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algorithms, algorithmic management and surveillance (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017), each of which being reliant on various forms of living labor, with different ways of extracting value.

Casilli (2019), for instance, argues the importance of considering qualification value, monetization value and automation value. For Sadowski (2020), platforms are related to rentier capitalism from mechanisms such as data extraction (including as a form of capital), digital enclosure and capital convergence, reconfiguring processes of production, circulation and consumption. Thus, there are platform labor and the ways of platforms work and extract value, in a context of "Internet of Landlords" (Sadowski, 2020), that uses its mechanisms to make the workforce more flexible and offer scalable services (Srnicek, 2016).

And what does this matter for communication research? Firstly, there is no work without communication, considered as material practice (Fuchs, 2018; Figaro, 2018). Communication processes structure and organize labor relations. As Williams (2005, p. 50) states, "communication and its material means are intrinsic to all distinctively human forms of labour and social organization". Thus, following Williams (2005), platforms are, at the same time, means of production and means of communication. As digital infrastructures and basic conditions for platform labor (Woodcock & Graham, 2019), they are designed for certain forms of interaction. They can facilitate, for example, the consumer-worker relationship to the detriment of relations between workers. That is, platforms can be designed for the disorganization of workers, although we argue, through this special issue, that things can be otherwise; and that a better world of platforms is possible.

Thus, platforms are the means of organizing work and communication processes. They are "organizational forms", which are also political (Fenton, 2016). Platform mechanisms, such as algorithmic management, data extraction and automated surveillance are configured as communicational processes (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Andrejevic, 2019). As means of production and communication, platforms also contribute to the to the acceleration of capital production and circulation, as Marx (1973) wrote in *Grundrisse* regarding the role of the means of communication and transport, reinforcing the role of communication in the circulation of capital.

The increasing dependence on platforms – with their mechanisms and logics – to achieve and maintain work activities has been called platformization of labor (Casilli & Posada, 2019). With this dependence, the process results from other processes such as datafication (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Chen & Qiu, 2019) and financialization (Grohmann, 2019), structured by an entrepreneurial rationality (Dardot & Laval, 2013). As such, platformization reconfigures the world of work based on the increasing taskification of work activities, through the likes of Amazon Mechanical Turks. Some research questions can be asked: what changes happen in the lives of different workers when their work activities become more dependent on mechanisms and logics of digital platforms (such as algorithmic management, ranking, data extraction, among others)? How does the platformization of labor restructure production and communication processes?

Putting the platformization on the spotlight means there is not just one type of platforms. Following Woodcock and Graham (2019) and Schmidt (2017), we can classify labor platforms into three types: a) platforms that depend on a specific location, transporting people (like Uber) and things (like Deliveroo and iFood); b) microwork platforms, whose workers train data for artificial intelligence, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk and Appen, and perform commercial content moderation for social media enterprises; c) freelance or microwork platforms, such as 99Designs, WeDoLogos and GetNinjas. The first two are the best known for being frequently represented in the media coverage and are visible in urban spaces. Microwork platforms are more invisible and reflect "ghost work" (Gray & Suri, 2019) behind screens (Roberts, 2019) as the secret behind automation (Casilli, 2019). Freelance work platforms, on the other hand, reveal a generalization of platformization for most work



activities. On the Brazilian platform Helpie, for example, there is the possibility to request services from electricians, cleaning ladies, coders, designers, teachers, journalists, DJs and cosplays.

If there is a diversity of platforms, there is also a heterogeneity of workers who are at risk of being invisible under the same label "digital labor" (Abdelnour & Meda, 2019). There are markers of race, gender and class at work on digital platforms, which means that platformization does not affect everyone in the same way. According to Van Doorn (2017), inequality is a characteristic and not a bug of platform labor, remaining "thoroughly embedded in a world created by the capitalist value form, which hinges on the gendered and racialized subordination of low-income workers, the unemployed, and the unemployable" (Van Doorn, 2017, p. 908), despite the platforms' post-racial and genderneutral discourses.

This means that there is an intensification of inequalities from the platformization of labor. Some research that addresses issues of race at their intersections with class and gender in digital labor are Amrute (2016), Benjamin (2019) and Noble and Roberts (2019). Noble and Roberts' research, for instance, reveals how Silicon Valley's technological elites work to hide racist inscriptions on their products and on labor relations in their companies. Another research is Lukács' (2020), that investigates how the unpaid or underpaid work of women on platforms in Japan is what structures the digital economy in the country.

In addition to race, class and gender, there are other important dimensions of platform labor, such as the temporalities and spatiality of digital labor, which are factors that impact working conditions. Temporalities are marked in the design of platforms, as a crystallization of the culture of their creators, in search of acceleration of time and optimization of productivity (Wajcman, 2015; 2019), aided by a "gamification from above" (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017). This is also reflected in workers' perceptions and meanings of working time and lifetime.

Spatialities involve the multiple locations in which workers are inserted to perform their work activities. In one dimension, it is necessary to understand what are the concrete workspaces: around the whole city? At home? Under what conditions? Roberts (2019), for example, shows that commercial content moderators can work in call centers or a boutique arrangement, such as an advertising agency.

The spatial concreteness of platform labor is related to broader aspects, entangled in global geopolitics of digital labor (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2014; Graham & Anwar, 2019), involving demand and supply of work. According to the Online Labour Index (OLI) from the University of Oxford, the largest employer of online freelance tasks is the United States and most online freelance workers are from India, the majority (59.8%) in the technology and software sector. This means that there are different dynamics of platform labor in the North and in the Global South, which, in turn, are also affected by race, class and gender issues.

Contextualizing the geopolitics of platform labor also means understanding the different ways of working in local economies and that Europe and North America are not the "standard". In Brazil, for example, gig work is historically the norm, not the exception. Thus, there is also a geopolitics of digital labor studies, and it is necessary to understand the scenarios of countries like Brazil (Abílio, 2020), Philippines (Soriano & Cabanes, 2019), China (Chen & Qiu, 2019), India (Irani, 2019) and South Africa (Anwar & Graham, 2020).

So far there is insufficient attention to the analysis of platform labor in the majority world. The special issue of *Chinese Journal of Communication (CJC)* on "the Platformization of Chinese Society" (Volume 12, No. 3) might qualify as an exception, but the examination of labor is only one of several thematic concepts for that special issue along with infrastructure, business models, regulation, and gender. More importantly, China -- not its people or society as a whole, but its new breed of corporate



platforms -- have moved into the metropole, away from the Global South. Therefore, although labor is central to some articles (e.g., Sun, 2019; Chen & Qiu, 2019), overall it is a secondary concern for the *CJC* special issue.

The insufficiency of analyzing platform labor in the South means that patterns in the North are often erroneously assumed to have also existed in Latin America, Africa, and Asia's developing regions, as if labor precarity is a novel phenomenon, as if there was a stable working-middle-class that should be called more accurately a labor aristocracy. But in reality, the situation cannot be more different given the long-standing structures of global inequality between the metropole and the periphery, and deteriorating employment conditions within the Global South.

To contextualize this Contracampo special issue with our roots in the majority world, we'd like to highlight three basic characteristics that condition platform labor in the South. First is the legacies of informal economy (Portes, Castells & Benton, 1989) that are prevalent beyond government regulation, while also forming complex patron-client relationships with the state apparatus. From Southeast Asia to Africa to Latin America, the informal, unregulated sector often employs the majority of the workforce, for instance, 79 percent of Vietnam's workforce are informal, meaning their jobs are irregular, conditions poor, with fluctuating income. In the Global South, precarity was an ordinary state of work long before the spread of ICTs. Although with platformization we also see a resurgence of informal economy, for the working people in the majority world, precarity is nothing new and they are applying their long-standing strategies of resilience from the past, while adding to it new, digital tactics.

Writing in the middle of the COVID-19 outbreak, we are keenly aware that the world is facing tremendous economic disruption due to the pandemic. Preventive measures such as work from home and social distancing are devastating the economy, North or South, formal or informal. Although within platformized sectors the landscape is uneven, with certain types of work (e.g., food delivery) being temporarily less affected than others (e.g., ride hailing), the general conditions for platform labor in the foreseeable future will only deteriorate, especially in developing countries with high unemployment and broken social security. We, however, should not give up hope because, for the working people in the Global South, this latest challenge is not unprecedented. Nor is it the end of the world. Time-honored forms of collective resilience, embodied in families, communities, unions, cooperatives, and networks of workers on- or offline, are also being activated by the crisis. While confronting the gravity of recession and its socioeconomic damage, we believe it is likely that disrupted platform labor will find their routes to survival, strength, and solidarity, as during past crises, some of which being recorded in this special issue. This means, it's imperative that we see the informal economy not merely as historical contexts or impediments to workers' wellbeing, but also as a key strategic repertoire where platform labor can draw tangible resources and general lessons from past and ongoing struggles in the majority world.

Second, the Global South has itself become much more internally differentiated. A few selected countries like Brazil, China, and other BRICS countries, have more domestic capital formation and received more foreign direct investment (FDI) than all other developing countries combined. The cluster in East Asia is particularly noteworthy as Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese capital, along with FDI from the West, fused into the rise of Mainland China as a new "Al superpower" (Lee, 2018). Chinese tech giants such as TikTok, Huawei, and Didi can now serve as counterweights to YouTube, Cisco, and Uber, competing with Silicon Valley not only through trans-Pacific rivalry but also globally through investments and acquisitions in Latin America, Africa, and Europe as well. This is more than intercapitalist competition because China implements a strong statist model in the governance of its platforms and Beijing still carries the red flag of so-called "socialism with Chinese characteristics".



The labor-capital relationship inside China's tech giants remains volatile (Wen, forthcoming). Ditto for new corporate platforms in the South, with or without investment from China or the US.

Third, labor movements in the Global South draw directly from post-colonial, decolonial, and anti-imperialist struggles, which is much less the case for labor activism within the metropole. The revolutionary traditions, diverse as they are, provide fertile grounds for labor resistance and class consciousness in the new digital era, when workers need to imagine themselves as not merely neoliberal entrepreneurs or consumers, but as citizens of an independent nation, members of a cultural movement, or activists with class consciousness fighting for economic democracy and social justice. Here, however, also lurks the dangers of the post-colonial condition, when anti-imperialism is rebranded as nationalism, racism, religious or cultural conservatism, and justification for authoritarian rule. It is common to observe that Brazilian app drivers tend to support the Jair Bolsonaro administration, as is the case for Rodrigo Duterte, Narendra Modi, and Recep Erdogan to enjoy popularity among platform workers of their respective countries, despite their racist and autocratic policies.

Even alternatives to the current scenario of digital labor, such as regulatory mechanisms, platform workers' organization and platform cooperatives (Grohmann, 2020) need to be understood in the light of the conditions and contradictions of different places and their contexts. It is not enough to just apply a California law or implement preexisting models imported from the Global North. Workers' struggles are in circulation around the world, but within their different contexts. It is necessary, then, to think about platform labor "from below" (Englert, Woodcock & Cant, 2020).

The legacies and resurgence of informal economy, new capital formations, and contradictions within the post-colonial condition -- these are foundational to our understanding of platform labor in the Global South that must be historicized and rooted in the continuous struggles of the dispossessed, with their revolutionary potentials as well as regressive pitfalls, not only in the realms of the market and capital, but also in relation to the state, civil society, labor movements, and cultural politics on the ground. If we are right that the majority of struggles among platform labor around the world will mainly occur in the South, then -- *lotta continua!* -- the success of our analysis in this Contracampo special issue hinges upon our capacity to re-contextualize the past and present from Southern perspectives, and to work towards a new "Southern theory" (Connell, 2007) as organic praxis toward diverse and dynamic ways of labor resistance under conditions of platformization.

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The special edition will have two volumes and reinforces the place of communication research as the protagonist of the debate on digital labor. In this first volume, there are six papers. In the first article, Ludmila Costhek Abílio, the first researcher who wrote about uberization in Brazil, argues that uberization is a productive and monopolized appropriation by digital platforms of the ways of life in the global margins. Then, Vitor Filgueiras and Ricardo Antunes wrote that platform labor is the form of capitalism regulation in favor of platform companies and argue the struggle for the regulation around platform labor is political. The authors emphasize that precariousness is always a process, not a static one.

The next two papers address the struggles of workers for collective organization. Bruno Moreschi, Gabriel Pereira and Fábio Cozman outline a profile of Brazilian workers at Amazon Mechanical Turk, a micro-work platform to train data for artificial intelligence. They show the mixture of "ghost work" with the intensification of the gig in the Global South context. The article reveals that digital media are central to the communication and organization of workers. Platform cooperativism



and unions are the subject of the article by Aina Fernandez and Maria Soliña Barreiro on the Riders x Derechos and Mensakas cases in Barcelona. The authors emphasize media strategies for organizing workers in the context of platforms. The paper also shows the possibilities of technological appropriations to spread alternative discourses to Silicon Valley ideology.

The volume ends with two contributions on the centrality of communication in the platform labor. Claudia Nociolini Rebechi and Geraldo Augusto Pinto debate the role of communication as a prescription in work organization from lean manufacturing to smart factory. Roseli Figaro and Ana Flávia Marques analyze communication as work in platform capitalism based on research with journalists of alternative media in Brazil, emphasizing the workspaces on digital platforms.

The other articles address topics such as digital activism, including LGBT, right-wing social movements in Brazil and their presence in digital media, emphasizing struggles for recognition and political disputes. Legacy media has also played a key role in Brazilian political manifestations in recent years and is the central topic of a paper. Finally, the last piece is about chronicles published in El País and its complexity in Brazilian cultural production.



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