



DYNAMICS OF VIRTUAL WORK

Platformization and Informality

Pathways of Change, Alteration, and Transformation

Edited by
Aditi Surie · Ursula Huws

Dynamics of Virtual Work

Series Editors

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Technological change has transformed where people work, when, and how. Digitization of information has altered labour processes out of all recognition whilst telecommunications have enabled jobs to be relocated globally. ICTs have also enabled the creation of entirely new types of 'digital' or 'virtual' labour, both paid and unpaid, shifting the borderline between 'play' and 'work,' and creating new types of unpaid labour connected with the consumption and co-creation of goods and services. This affects private life as well as transforming the nature of work and people experience the impacts differently depending on their gender, their age, where they live and what work they do. Aspects of these changes have been studied separately by many different academic experts however up till now a cohesive overarching analytical framework has been lacking. Drawing on a major, high-profile COST Action (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Dynamics of Virtual Work, this series will bring together leading international experts from a wide range of disciplines including political economy, labour sociology, economic geography, communications studies, technology, gender studies, social psychology, organization studies, industrial relations, and development studies to explore the transformation of work and labour in the Internet Age. The series will allow researchers to speak across disciplinary boundaries, national borders, theoretical and political vocabularies, and different languages to understand and make sense of contemporary transformations in work and social life more broadly. The book series will build on and extend this, offering a new, important, and intellectually exciting intervention into debates about work and labour, social theory, digital culture, gender, class, globalization, and economic, social, and political change.

Aditi Surie • Ursula Huws
Editors

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Platformization and Informality: Pathways of Change, Alteration, and Transformation

Aditi Surie and Ursula Huws

Introduction

Up till the 1970s, the notion that the Rest would follow in the footsteps of the West was intrinsic to the dominant development paradigm. Through industrialization and urbanization, the ‘underdeveloped world’ would replicate the experience of the advanced economies in the nineteenth century: growing employment in manufacturing, rising living standards, mass consumption... Now, it seems, it is the West that is following the Rest when it comes to the growing insecurity of work conditions. Part-time and short-contract work has been on the rise, along with that ambiguous category, self-employment. An extensive literature has now grown up around the issue of informal and precarious labour in the advanced economies. What

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relation does this bear to the condition of workers outside the OECD, where the vast mass of humanity is located? (Bremen, 2013: 131)

In 2013, Uber hadn't hit the global South. It had barely hit the streets of San Francisco where it was founded. Yet reading Bremen eight years later encapsulates where we stand in the contemporary history of platformization and digitization. The global South has become a hotbed for investment and experimentation for technology companies. The 'emerging markets' of the global South are seen as good, viable opportunities for investors and entrepreneurs to find ways to bring the 'next billion' online (Arora, 2019). Developing economies have acted as significant economic zones of interest for the key players of the digital economy (Rossotto et al., 2018; Tsao, 2018). Digital platforms involved in communications, finance and banking, physical services, and labour, in particular, have focused on—and succeeded in—bringing the 'next digital billion' online (Arora, 2019). In the process, social media platforms like Facebook and information platforms like Google have increasingly become a *de facto* soft internet infrastructure in countries such as India, Nigeria, and Brazil (Bonnin, 2019; Chen & Qiu, 2019; Singh, 2019).

For many first-time users in emerging markets, the internet is often synonymous with platform giants like Facebook (in relation to communications) and to forms of labour like those offered by platforms such as Cabify, Uber, or Didi Kuxing. It is telling that between 2009 and 2015 global internet bandwidth grew twentyfold, with mobile broadband supporting an estimated 3.8 million jobs in Africa (Kordunsky, 2017). Yet its arrival in emerging markets is experienced very differently from the libertarian, 'sharing' vision with which it was associated when it first emerged in California in the 1990s (Barbrook & Cameron, 2009).

Apart from the infrastructural power of platforms, little has been done to conceptualize and articulate what their impact has been on the large swathes of peoples and economies bucketed in the global South. Bremen's, 2013 article, points to a premise that this book starts with. Developing economies have long been characterized by informality, unorganized economic activity, and poverty. These categories are almost co-constituted in how they have been used together to develop economic theory and policy advice, and shape the geopolitical balance of powers between the global North and South. For many, they epitomize the poor conditions of work

that the global North is now experiencing under the current wave of platformization of work, employment, labour, and economic value creation. Preferring terms such as ‘precarization,’ many Northern academics have been slow to adopt or use the term ‘informality’ in the context of platformization. Indeed they have historically been slow to develop the conceptual frame of informality to understand employment in African and Asian ‘marginal economies.’ The term ‘informal economy’ can be viewed as arising from the slow recognition by Northern economists that non-white, non-industrial, unorganized, and localized services and production were, in fact, creating value and supporting livelihoods. Keith Hart’s gaze on the Ghanaian economy and later the Kenyan economy was powerful enough to force Western economists to grasp the reality that Africans, far from being merely unemployed and unproductive were in fact producing value through their self-organized economic work (Hart, 2009).

Breman’s ‘A Bogus Concept’ served as a reminder to the world of Northern academics and activists that the ‘rest of world’ has been living and working informally and precariously hitherto. It was written as a review and rejoinder to Guy Standing’s *Precariat* (2011) which presented precariousness as a new, destabilizing phenomenon, undermining the decent working conditions and fair wages that had been established across the world. It drew on his own extensive work at the International Labour Organization and a large body of research by scholars in the global North on the growth of zero-hour contracts, agency work, and other forms of short-term work, without recourse to stable occupational identities or careers, stable social protection or protective regulations relevant to them, against a backdrop of alarming rates of unemployment.

Breman’s article reminded Northern academics and activists that the majority of the ‘rest of world’ was already living and working informally and precariously. In doing so, it acted as a precursor to the ways in which the ‘Uberization of work’ would be conceptualized in the years to come.

Despite the fact that, for decades, feminist scholars (see for example Huws et al., 1989) had been pointing out that the twentieth century ‘standard employment model’ developed in the global North during the period sometimes termed the ‘post-war Keynesian welfare state’ (Jessop, 1995) or ‘the Golden Age of Capitalism’ (Marglin & Schor, 1992) was never universal but only applied to relatively privileged white male workers in a few countries, it was still regarded as a taken for granted

employment norm by the majority of policy makers as well as academics. The rise of precarious employment in the global North thus came as a shock. That the majority of workers in a global Northern country may now be faced with exploitative working conditions, for which the employer cannot easily be held to account, is seen as an 'unexpected outcome' of the digital revolution. This was exemplified in the World Bank's yearly World Development Report (2019) which flusteringly announced to world leaders and economists that the digital revolution, as seen through the meteoric rise of digital platforms in the world of work, could unravel the ways in which economic and political paradigms had hitherto been defined. The report failed to move on from this thesis, falling back on using the South as a vehicle to explore the grievances of the North.

There has in general been a failure, on the part of scholars and politicians, to look beneath the superficial similarities between the forms of precarization newly arriving in the global North and those that are a long-established feature of labour markets in the global South. What does the experience of precarity mean for a worker brought up in the expectation of a secure, permanent job, with a defined occupational identity, guaranteed benefits and the prospect of a pension at the end of working life? And how does this compare with the experience of precarity of a worker from a household in which informal work is the norm, embedded in a community where most other workers are also informally employed, shaped by long-established cultural traditions and social practices? Can the disruption introduced by digital platforms really be expected to be the same in both contexts? Whatever the surface similarities, as both are subjected to the standardized algorithmic governance of global corporations, might there not be profound differences, both in workers' perceptions and in the actual outcomes of platformization?

Breman, steeped in deep knowledge of economic and political informality in India based on years of research, begs the question what happens to the geopolitical balance of power if the West follows the Rest, rather than the Rest following the West's pathways of industrialization and modernization. If digital platforms contribute to the rise of informal and precarious labour in advanced economies then what are developing countries even trying to achieve when the majority of their working populations are already informally and precariously employed? Conversely,

what strategies might reverse these trends, given that they were never universal?

To address such questions, this edited volume brings together accounts of what is happening in the global South in the context of platformization. In doing so, it attempts to rebalance some of the debates in the current literature by drawing attention to those aspects of the platform economy which tend to be neglected in discussions dominated by a few large platforms based in the global North. In particular, several of the chapters stress the continuities with past forms of informal employment as well as the disruptions brought by the incursion of global platforms. The gendered dimensions of informality are also highlighted in a number of contributions, two of which focus on domestic labour, a form of platform work that has received much less attention from scholars than the more visible kinds of work carried out, mainly by male workers, in public spaces.

These contributions come from scholars who have had to contend with the blind spots in current theorizing around platforms because of the geographies they work in. Place matters. The acknowledgement of place delivers an honesty to empirical lifeworlds that are outside the normative structures of the global North. We offer these themes to our readers to provoke scholars into approaching the theorization of technology, platforms, and algorithmic systems from the global South. The first part of the collection is conceptual and thematic: descriptions of structural change along the pathways of platformization and informality. Here, we have two contributions that approach the platform and informality question from the macro level, to ask questions about how of globalized economies can be conceived within the paradigm of 'development.'

The book begins with a chapter by Alessio Bertolini, Mark Graham, Mounika Neerukonda, Sanna Ojanperä, Balaji Parthasarathy, Janaki Srinivasan, Pradyumna Taduri, and Funda Ustek-Spilda on 'Platformizing Inequality, One Gig at a Time' which draws on an extensive body of qualitative research in India and the UK, conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute, in order to identify the commonalities between the global South and North in relation to platform work. They conclude that it is a mistake to view the relationship between the formal and informal sectors as a dichotomy. Rather, they argue, they are connected to each

other and are in some ways mutually reinforcing. It is precisely those elements of platformization that appear to be ‘formalizing’ employment in the global South, such as the measurement of work and the standardization of communications, that are triggering ‘informal’ practices in response, as workers organize collectively and develop practices such as ‘multi-apping.’ They conclude by pointing to the increased social power of platforms vis-à-vis precarious workers in both contexts.

This is followed by another chapter which adopts a global perspective that provides a frame for comparing platform work in the global South and North, this time focusing on spatially-independent platform work, drawing on surveys conducted by the International Labour Organization. Uma Rani, Rishabh Kumar Dhir, and Nora Gobel, in ‘Work on Online Labour Platforms: Does Formal Education Matter?’, examine the skills and education of the global platform workforce, pointing out that most of these workers are highly educated, in a labour market that is geographically skewed, with a high proportion based in developing economies while the clients for whom they work are predominantly in advanced economies. Based on detailed analyses of education, skills, recruitment, reputation (including investment in reputation-building), and earnings, they identify serious inequalities and skills mismatches. By examining the relationship between formal educational qualifications and actual labour market outcomes, they point to an emerging trend whereby, contrary to the intentions of policy makers, reliance on platform work is contributing to the *informalization* of work for highly educated workers in the global South. When the local labour market cannot supply the flexibility sought by workers, especially women workers with care responsibilities, they turn to platform work, thus reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, there are cases where some types of platform are providing some students and workers with opportunities to develop skills that formal educational systems fail to provide. They conclude by summarizing some of the policy challenges raised by such contradictions.

The next set of contributions ground the ride hailing sectors within the geographies they operate in, countering the universal Uber model, and questioning how mobility platforms operate in non-Western contexts. Mumbai, Jakarta, Bali, and the Brazilian labour market form a context for mobility platform studies, and also anchor workers’ ontological

experiences of being and unbeing whether those experiences are steeped in workers groups, pre-existing occupations embedded in local economies or place-based neighbourhood-level organizing.

The contribution by Tobias Kuttler uses a more close-up lens to examine platform work in a specific national context in the global South. His focus is on taxi driving in the city of Mumbai which he examines in the round. In '(In)formality and the Janus face of the Platform: Production of the "space of taxi driving",' he places the development of ride-hailing platform in the larger historical context, in which taxi-driving has for decades constituted a variegated social space in which formality and informality have been reconstituted in shifting relationships between the state, firms, unorganized and organized workers and their unions. Drawing on interviews with drivers both of traditional metered taxis and platform-based ones, as well as the history of attempts to regulate it, he explores the changing conceptions of the city's taxi sector. He points out that this has produced a contradictory picture in which on the one hand 'modernization ambitions and the invocations of market rationality represent the platform firms' and state agencies endeavours to make the space of taxi driving appear as an orderly, homogenous space' while on the other 'the state itself is engaging elements of informality to substantiate certain narratives or to avoid conflict.' He concludes that these contradictory dynamics of formality and informality lead to profound asymmetries in the platform labour market, in which the platforms hold more and more information and power at the expense of workers and reflects on the implications of this, not just for platforms and workers but also for the state.

Moving from South Asia to Latin America, Ludmila Costhek Abílio, in 'Uberization: The Periphery as the Future of Work?' also places platform workers in a broader historical context, in this case the informal labour market in Brazil, where cycle couriers, known as 'bike boys' already had a strong presence before the arrival of online delivery platforms. Using a biographical approach, she carefully traces the differences 'uberization' has made to their lives over time, using a Marxist conceptual frame in which this term is understood as a new type of management and control of work. In the context of the global South, this process brings new meanings and definitions to the concept of informality, which,

instead of being seen as a marginal state, more or less synonymous with poverty, which can be overcome by the extension of labour laws and regulations as part of the economic development process, is reconstituted as a new norm: a form of subordination of a workforce 'that is not hired or formally selected, which has no defined working hours or even formal prescriptions about the use of work instruments and modes of execution.' She concludes that 'elements typically associated with the periphery are becoming globally generalised in labour relations.'

We next turn to South-east Asia, the setting for Onat Kiboroglu's chapter on 'Gojek as Labour Infrastructure: Platformization of Work in Indonesia.' Here, the focus is on 'ojek drivers,' who use motor scooters to transport passengers and goods through the dense traffic of Indonesia's cities, another pre-existing form of work which has recently been disrupted by platforms, in this case Gojek. Drawing on a wealth of ethnographic evidence, the author demonstrates the ways in which the experience of platform work is shaped by the specific local context and the ways in which such work has historically been socially controlled. For example, the strong resistance of taxi drivers to Gojek in Bali, which can be read as a protest against becoming urbanized and modernized, is contrasted with a very different experience in Jakarta where Gojek has been welcomed by some as an emancipatory tool. This has led to costs and benefits that are regionally variable, making it easier for newly arrived migrants to enter urban labour markets on the one hand, while deskilling and disempowering traditional ojek drivers on the other.

The final theme for this volume cuts across the theoretical and the sectoral, upending the investigation of the promises and perils of platform work by asking questions from the experiences of women. We begin with turning feminist lens to the design, power distribution, rulemaking, and structures of a digital labour platform. The domestic work sector has proven to be resistant to change, with platform firms having to contour their offerings to the ways in which this sector has been shaped by its history and legacy as women's work. Two contributions, from South Africa and India, provoke us to question what a platform is when it mimics so much of these traditional working conditions and experiences of mistrust and failure to deliver on promises of secure or better work.

The focus of the chapter by Pallavi Bansal and Payal Arora is on 'Feminist Approaches to Location-based Labour Platforms in India.' It takes a feminist lens to the literature on location-based digital labour platforms, highlighting their entrenched discrimination and exploitation while acknowledging that they also generate job opportunities for women. Pointing out that women suffer more than men from the precarity of informal labour markets, they argue that 'a design overhaul is required for location-based platforms in India that should not amplify precarity; rather, it would enable them to commit to equity, diversity, empowerment, and social justice to improve lives.' In what is essentially an optimistic vision of the liberatory potential of digital platforms, they conclude by summarizing the key principles that should inform a feminist design intervention 'in the architecture and algorithmic management of platforms that centres the voices of marginalized women workers, and eventually benefits all digital workers.'

Ambika Tandon and Aayushi Rathi are the authors of the next chapter, 'Metaphors of Work, from "Below"' which, turning the standard discourses of the literature on the platform economy on their heads, explores the ways that platforms are imagined and understood by workers. They too pay special attention to the voices of women workers, so often unheard in this literature, which primarily expresses the ways in which platforms are conceived by a few large 'disruptor' companies, based in the global North. The chapter draws particularly on in-depth interviews with domestic workers in New Delhi and Bengaluru, for many of whom online platforms represent just one of several ways in which work can be found. Their findings contrast strongly with most preconceived accounts, revealing diverse responses depending on the particular context. Some workers, who have encountered platforms through the intermediation of human recruiters, express deep mistrust and resentment at their failure to deliver what was originally promised. Others, who interact with them through anonymous and mystified technological interfaces, experience them as invisible bosses who cannot be answered back to, pointing to a need to 'pierce the technological veil.' What is clear from their analysis is that the view 'from below' must play an essential role in the development of a full understanding of platformization in the global South.

The final chapter in this volume, by Abigail Hunt and Emma Samman, also focuses on the topic of domestic work, hitherto so neglected in the literature on platform work. Entitled ‘(Re)conceptualising Gendered Structures of Informality for Domestic Workers in the Platform Economy,’ it places this in the broader context of how gendered structures of informality shape the emerging platform economy, in the process charting how domestic workers have been navigating these altering structures. Taking South Africa as its setting, the authors interrogate whether incremental improvements in working conditions, through traditional working relationships or new opportunities within the ‘platform economy,’ can achieve change in the broad structural conditions that restrict the availability and quality of work available to marginalized women or whether, instead, more radical changes are needed that upend existing power relationships and bring about transformative change. They conclude that, in the context of low- and middle-income countries, platforms offer mixed blessings. While offering work that is, broadly speaking, on a par with other casual or informal employment, it is also ‘indisputable that the platform model allows its clients to avoid the economic cost of guaranteeing employment for a set number of hours and providing the other benefits stipulated by South African labour law.’ The chapter ends with an assessment of policy solutions that might address the issues they have raised, in particular in the context of the Covid crisis—policy solutions that have a broader relevance not only in the global South but also globally.

This volume brings together the voices of workers from a range of cities in the global South—Bengaluru, New Delhi, Mumbai, Jakarta, Bali, Cape Town and Sao Paolo. These cities have been caught in the twists of modernization and developmentalism preventing their characteristics from being seen and acknowledged in knowledge creation and within industry. This volume is an offering to allow academics and makers to see these cities for what they are and to acknowledge their workers for their agency and their place within the algorithmic systems of power. To the academic community, we offer the following and final provocations: do our definitions of what platforms are change when we read about domestic workers platforms in South Africa? Why don’t we use Jakarta’s experiences with scaled digital platforms as a way to rethink the infrastructural

nature of platforms? What does the unique, and embedded nature of platform operations do to the ways in which we conceptualize algorithmic management? If the platform represents the possibility to dismantle economic hypotheses of progress and development, then what is the future of global power relations?

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