

Digitalisation, labour and the pandemic

Working life in the post-COVID-19 city

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ABSTRACT

Introducing this issue, this paper reflects on the role of peer-reviewed research in documenting and analysing the restructuring of labour under rapidly changing global conditions. It summarises the contents of the issue, placing it in the context not only of the 2020–2021 global COVID-19 pandemic, but also in relation to past theoretical debates in the pages of this journal about the dynamics of platform capitalism.

KEY WORDS

Platform labour, Pandemic, COVID-19, food delivery, Uber, precarisation, theory, digital capitalism, teleworking

In its 15 years of publication, *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* has charted in its pages many aspects of the complex restructuring of work that has been taking place around the globe. Our contributors have looked at the role of digital technologies in changing the character of skills, work and employment, and hence of occupational identities. They have documented the expansion, and tightening, of global value chains and the implications of this both for ‘virtual’ workers, linked via telecommunications to their global employers, clients and colleagues and for those workers who labour physically in the here and now, bringing raw materials to factories and then taking these components to other assembly plants and transporting the resulting commodities from factory to port to ship to road to warehouse and finally, in the ‘last mile’, to consumers. They have also plotted the impacts of these changes on workers’ status and security as well as looking at how restructuring has reconfigured the demographics of the workforce, reshuffling the divisions of labour between paid and unpaid work,

between women and men and between migrant and indigenous workers, in the process creating new gendered and racialised segmentations in the global geographies of labour. They have also made major contributions to theory, analysing the new business models of digital capitalism and the ways in which the new breed of global corporation can extract value from a workforce and control it, even when that workforce is not made up of employees.

It is clear that the global financial crisis of 2008 represented an important turning point, accelerating the speed of change and bringing to prominence a number of trends that had been hard to discern in preceding periods, ushering in a decade of major restructuring all around the globe. However, the very speed of change poses enormous challenges for academic publishers. With the need for careful anonymous peer review, often involving several iterations, immediate publication is out of the question, and there is danger that the contents may be outdated before they are even published. We are therefore constantly aware that, as well as making lasting contributions to scholarship, we are also posting bulletins on an ongoing story that continues to unfold.

This became acutely evident in 2020, when we published a special issue (Volume 14 No 1) on ‘The algorithm and the city: platform labour and the urban environment’.¹ As the revised articles came in and the editing began, it was obvious that many of the phenomena studied were undergoing rapid metamorphosis before our eyes. Platform labour was emerging as a key component of the reorganisation of daily life under lockdown conditions, strengthening some pre-existing trends and deflecting others, while bringing to public visibility many previously hidden aspects of the working conditions of platform workers, including the physical risks faced by front-line workers in a pandemic.

Some authors were able to address this to a limited extent in last-minute revisions. However, it soon became clear that the changes were momentous enough to demand a much deeper investigation. We therefore put out a call for a special issue on ‘Platform labour in the post-COVID city’. This issue is the result. We believe that it brings together material that is not only useful for deepening our understanding of the impacts of digitalisation, and more specifically digital management, on work in the 21st century, but that it may also provide information of value to future historians on the extraordinary conditions prevailing in 2020–2021.

More specifically, this issue will, we hope, shed light on the way in which the pandemic context has both exacerbated existing features and exposed new aspects of the ways in which work is transformed under platformisation.

This issue adds to our previous issue in another important way: by validating the need for a ‘global gaze’. This is an approach that we have sought to follow not just in our 2020 special issue on ‘The algorithm and the city’ but also in other special issues, such as our 1919 issue on ‘Logistical Gazes’.² Much of the literature on platformisation has focused almost exclusively on the Global North, and on Western platforms, and we consider it important to correct this bias, analysing platformisation as a globally pervasive phenomenon, whose worldwide character and accelerated growth have become very evident during the pandemic.

1 See <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/workorglaboglob.14.issue-1>

2 See <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/workorglaboglob.13.issue-1>

Nevertheless, as the story continues to unfold, it is apparent that scholars are still working in an environment that is liable to change unexpectedly at any moment. Some of the conclusions drawn are necessarily provisional, subject to further modification in the future.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the article by Sazzad Parwez and Rajiv Ranjan on 'The platform economy and the precarisation of food delivery work in the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from India', based on fieldwork carried out before, during and after the first lockdown in 2020. It provides graphic evidence of the way in which the incomes and working conditions of food delivery workers deteriorated after that lockdown was originally imposed, but there is no inkling of the further devastation that would be wrought in the second wave of the virus in India in spring, 2021.

Riani Rachmawati, Safitri, Luthfianti Zakia, Ayu Lupita and Alex De Ruyter also focus on food delivery workers, known locally as 'ojek drivers', this time in Indonesia, drawing attention to the ways in which the formal status of platform workers as independent contractors contributes directly to their extreme vulnerability, excluding them from employment protection and the possibility of claiming benefits. Here again, it is clear that the pandemic has contributed to a dramatic worsening of working conditions and a drop in income.

These issues are equally relevant in developed economies. Melissa Renau-Cano, Ricard Espelt and Mayo Fuster Morell have studied food delivery workers in a European context, in Barcelona. They examine how the changes in the app used to manage their work that were introduced during the pandemic, which promised to offer workers greater autonomy and choice, actually had the opposite effect, leading to increasing precarity, worsening conditions and lower earnings. They conclude that such effects are the outcomes of using a business model 'characterised by hiring on-demand, piece-rate payment and exercising hard workforce control through algorithmic management'.

Jasmin Schreyer also looks at food delivery workers in Europe, this time in Germany. By taking an unusual case, where workers have managed to negotiate for the existence of works councils and some degree of security, she is able to examine the contradictory impacts of algorithmic management on workers' voice and propensity to organise collectively, arguing that the algorithmic form, by exposing the weakness of platforms' ability to communicate directly with workers and address their concerns, may actually act as an impetus to collective organisation.

Giovanni Allegratti, Sheila Holz and Nuno Rodrigues turn the spotlight onto drivers, more specifically the 'driver-partners' who work for the ride-hail platform Uber. Their research was carried out in Portugal, used by the company as something of a laboratory for the development of new business models and interactions with policymakers, where a pioneering law has been passed providing a special employment status for driver-partners. Their analysis shows that, while the pandemic crisis has aggravated some inequalities and problems associated with platform capitalism, it has also drawn attention to the status of platform workers as 'key workers'. In the process, it has exposed new contradictions, which might open the way for novel political solutions in the future.

Elizabeth Risi and Riccardo Pronzato turn their attention away from the platform workers risking their lives on the streets to those workers who were locked down at

home during the pandemic. Based on research carried out during the Italian lockdown in 2020, the first of its kind in Europe, they explore the consequences of confinement on the personal lives and working conditions of people working from home using digital communications, often for the first time. While there is a large literature on teleworking, this has in the past focused on a minority of people who have actively chosen to work remotely, or been obliged to do so by circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced this condition onto many more people, often lacking the skills or the motivation to work in this way. This contribution therefore contributes usefully to the general literature on remote working, as well as that on the impact of the pandemic.

The last contribution to this issue is by Andrea Fagioli, writing from Argentina, whose paper 'To exploit and dispossess: The twofold logic of platform capitalism' takes forward the debate about how to theorise platform capitalism, which has been addressed in the past in our pages *inter alia* by Claude Serfati in Volume 5, No 1,³ Sabine Pfeffer in Volume 7 No 1⁴ by Guglielmo Carchedi and by Henrique Amorim, both in Volume 8, No 1.⁵

This issue is part of an ongoing conversation that we hope to continue in the future.

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3 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/workorgalaboglob.5.issue-1>

4 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/workorgalaboglob.7.issue-1>

5 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/workorgalaboglob.8.issue-1>