

## **The politics of learning-at-work and reality of gig and platform workers**

Paper accepted for presentation to International Labour Process Conference 12-14.4.2021

Kovalainen, Anne & Poutanen, Seppo

University of Turku

Presentation at 13.4.2021 at 10:00-12:00 session (UK time)

### **Introduction**

The paper stems from a large, three research institute research project led by University of Turku and funded by the Academy of Finland: [www.smartworkresearch.fi](http://www.smartworkresearch.fi) – SWiPE.

In the project, we have analysed different facets of platform economy, the various types of work, the new established relations between platforms and work, taskification of skilled work, growth of gig economy and gig work as well as specific aspects of education (higher education institutions, vocational education).

The generally accepted policy argument currently reigns that the new products and services require upgraded skills levels in technology and in non-cognitive soft skills, and that learning at work is growing in importance (e.g. OECD 2018). Updating the skills needed in the contemporary and future working life takes place either at work or in educational institutions and increasingly outside of their realm, through new mechanisms of learning. Both the Government reports in Europe and several reports, such as one by OECD (2018) address the “urgency” for new skills, and “closer connections” between education/learning at work. These calls align in their request of the ‘usability’ of education, and do not address or discuss the type of work where tensions or disruptions at work where no learning at work is possible.

The recent programme for Post-Covid-19 has brought the need to address learning as part of the active labour markets. European Skills Agenda by European Commission for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience sets ambitious, quantitative objectives for upskilling (improving existing skills) and reskilling (training in new skills) for the next 5-year plan, including Covid-recovery funding, starting from 2020 ( <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en>).

### **Theoretical frame**

Platforms can be defined as multisided markets that can have direct (same side) and/or indirect (opposite side) network effects. Although there is no single agreed-upon definition of “platform economy”, the most common definition describes platforms as digital non-neutral, opaque market places for buyers and sellers. Platform economy is entangled with technology that changes any organizational form – whether platform is private corporation or public sector platform. They all share the opacity & ownership control, which is not transparent and they share algorithmic logics (Poutanen & Kovalainen & Rouvinen, 2020).

The rise of the platform economy has become a major source of debate in both advanced and developing economies. Driven by the spread of mobile devices, growing access to the internet, the

availability of venture capital, and the economic strategies of many governments, internet-based economic transactions have rapidly grown during the last decade, a period in which Uber, Airbnb, Upwork, Mechanical Turk and many other platforms have risen to world-wide prominence. Though the effects of platforms are as yet uncertain, there is widespread agreement that the platform economy is likely to have far-reaching effects on the structure of the retail sector (as e-commerce “disrupts” brick and mortar stores), urban transportation (which is increasingly being shaped by private, for-profit firms), and consumption patterns (as the discourse of the “sharing economy” suggests). Social media platforms have enticed users on sites such as Youtube and Instagram to compete for prominence in the “attention economy,” performing “aspirational labor” as a means of generating advertising revenues through their on-line activity (Duffy 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018). Perhaps most far reaching are the potential changes which the platform economy is likely to have on work and employment, as “gig” work becomes more prominent, even changing our very conception of what it means to have a “job” (Davis 2016). The scale of these changes can be glimpsed by comparing the most heavily capitalized firms in the world today with their counterparts of a few decades ago. Here one begins to see the growing prominence of the FAANGs –Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google—firms that employ relatively workers, own relatively little in the way of fixed capital, and very likely represent a new epoch in the development of contemporary capitalism (e.g., Gottfried, 2013; Smith, 2016; Srnicek 2017; Schor and Attwood 2017; Vallas and Kalleberg, 2018; Vallas and Kovalainen, 2019).

Platforms have also attracted interest for political and cultural reasons quite apart from their economic consequences (Zuboff, 2018; Frey and Osborne, 2013; Vallas, 2012, 2019; Acemoglu and Autor, 2010), perhaps because of their seeming omnipotence, their ability to manage workers algorithmically, and their skill at evading established forms of regulation (Thelen 2018). These characteristics, along with a growing sense that machine learning, robotics, and artificial intelligence have outstripped societal controls, have imbued the debate over platforms with a highly polarized, often moralistic quality. Advocates see in the platform revolution an opportunity to establish a more entrepreneurial and inclusive economy; critics see instead a privately owned surveillance state that usurps the power of state planning agencies. Needed are analytical approaches toward the platform economy which are aware of such issues, but not reducible to them. Needed are theoretically nuanced models of platforms, a necessary condition if we are to direct them down socially useful paths.

Yet such approaches are not readily available at present. Although there has been a surge of scholarly research on the dilemmas and challenges which platforms pose to workers, firms, and communities (Vallas, 2019; Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017), this literature has developed in highly uneven ways. Much of the attention has been focused on the very largest global players –Uber, Airbnb, and Mturk as prime examples— potentially skewing our knowledge in arbitrary ways. Gender bias has been smuggled into the literature, as is evident in the general neglect of care work, a massive and largely female part of the platform economy that has received relatively little attention until recently (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Although scholars have used provocative analogies to portray the meaning of the platform revolution, e.g., seeing it as ushering in a backward-looking reversion to the putting out system that characterized early capitalism (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Joyce et al., 2019), metaphors cannot substitute for the empirically grounded theoretical frameworks. These are needed to make sense of the various types of platforms, their relation to the conventional economy, and their impacts on different segments of the labor market.

Prior to the growth of platformization and the app economy, the technological developments that transformed or changed production did not enable the “decoupling” of work and workers from the organization/institution. Because workers were connected to their organizational or institutional structures through their embeddedness within the firm and their spatial co-presence (e.g., DiTomaso, 2001; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2015), scholars could explore how new information and process control technologies were changing the interior operations of the firm. Now, however, platforms have seemed to accelerate the erosion of the Fordist firm. Now, platforms and apps mediate work digitally, they divide tasks and work in novel ways, and also enable control the performance of workers/task performers through algorithmically governed structures that have lend work and employment entirely new features. The direction, allocation, and evaluation of work are increasingly accomplished digitally, with little transparency and few opportunities for information negotiation.

The new forms of production are exemplified through the rising number of platforms and consumption as work, that is, working consumers (Cova et al., 2011) (e.g., through bloggers’ and vbloggers’ virtual and identity work) add post-consumeristic features to the digital economy. These working consumers are even considered sources of growth in stagnating economies, particularly in respect of industrial platforms and the renewal of traditional industries. However, these effects on work are not restricted to advanced economies only, nor to visible production mechanisms. At the global scale, the conjecture is that the effects of the digitally wired economy are likely to affect the work and labor in developing countries much more and more severely than those in the developed countries (e.g., Giuntella and Wang, 2019; Casilli and Posada, 2019). The effects extend not only to the amount of work or number of jobs but, more profoundly, to the contents of work, creation of new jobs, and disappearance of old forms of work and ways of working.

Platforms support a specific kind of individualization of work and work tasks. As brought up, individualization is one of the distinct features of platformization. The individualization of work tasks, loss of collectivity and social dimension at work, and detachment from the workspace have both cultural and political percussions, and in fact this may undermine our notion of the shared public sphere and the social basis for social solidarity more generally. Informal forms of work take place at platforms: unpaid work is increasingly performed in connection and intertwined with the paid employment, as is the case with aspirational work, identity work and work performed but not billed, for example, to maintain one’s own job security.

Individualization has many facets. One of these is the characteristics of “do-alone-meet-no-one” work, which typically covers on-screen work performed at platforms. Another characteristic of individualization is it being a cultural feature and thus connected to the emergence of a distinctively late modern conception of individualization (e.g., Beck and Lau, 2005). The question is how does this notion relate to the platformization of work? It can be argued that work performance on platforms is also based—besides the actual work tasks—on “virtual catwalks,” digital presentations and traces of presentations, and track-records and self-representation. These are accentuated in the rating procedures that so crucially are part of the platform functions and rank hierarchies of workers. We argue that the constant rating in platform work may require emotional and identity work that can be stressful, as it is not necessarily a question of the skills or capabilities but the abilities to put them on display.

Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor conceptualizes the emotionally draining service work (originally, that of flight attendants). Here, the offer of various features is assumed to create positive responses from the receivers of the service or act, where the act of displaying appropriate emotions, is called emotional labor. For Hochschild, this was first and foremost a question of personal encounters between service providers and clients, taking place as emotional labor for service provisioning. "Identity work," for its part, is viewed as an emotional process similar to emotional labor, but achieved when selling the skills of workers (Vallas, 2012).

The rise of knowledge-intensive work and technological innovations have coincided with the rise of individualization, and the growth of precarious work that has taken place since the 1970s (Kalleberg, 2009, 2011). It has been argued that the rise of *societal individualism* and *cultural individualization*, both visible in the jobs and careers of the new economy, increasingly in the public sector (e.g., Sennett, 2008). These have shifted the focus to individual achievements at work, thus ignoring several other aspects in knowledge-intensive work, such as emotional labor and "otherness" (Irani, 2019) in the literature (Ocejo, 2017; Sennett, 1998). Both emotional labor and identity work are performed at platforms through rating and on webpages where skills and capabilities are exhibited. The ways in which these performative actions rest on the new managerial language that transforms work into tasks through managerial practices, such as "branded clothing," "supplier agreements," and "contract termination" (Rosenblat, 2018), calls for more ethnographic analyses of the depth of this transformation.

These changes raise new issues regarding trust building in the decoupling of work and workers; legal questions regarding labor classification, the role of regulatory bodies, and the role of governments in directing scientific and technological innovation. As platforms grow, they also raise questions about access to training, support for research and development, and the future course of the welfare state. Platforms and platformization are also increasingly involved in public goods production, such as in education (e.g., the massive open online courses, or MOOCs) and healthcare (apps for data gathering and use).

### **Research question**

The new platforms of work that grow in importance and create demand for new capabilities and tasks and skilled jobs (Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2016) inevitably change the possibilities for learning at work. We can justifiably ask how to define the "learning at work" if the work consists of on-line screen work that is timed and monitored and paid accordingly. The same question needs to be put forward also towards the learning at contracted work. We explore the ways, for example, organizations arrange contracted professional work, and in the paper we will also discuss what are the learning at work possibilities for an independent gig worker. We ask, how these new forms of labour 'contracts' are present in state/supranational documents of 'continuous learning', 'life-long learning' strongly advocated by policies and also by polity?

Lifelong learning is often defined as "ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated" pursuit of knowledge that enhances social inclusion, active citizenship, personal development, personal competitiveness and employability. We are interested in finding out who has the agency for the life-long learning in the case of platform workers? Whose interests the polity and policies drive? Do platforms require training and will those who work at platforms gain training as well?

## Data and analysis

	EU Documents	National docs	Interviews
Number of units	Pending	Pending	>12 Upwork platform workers
Level of analysis	Content analysis	Thematic analysis Content analysis	Content analysis
Outcome	Presence/absence of platform work & education /learning	Presence/absence of platform work & education / learning	Presence/absence of learning/ education at platforms

We are in the middle of analysis of the documentary materials - much of it is still in developing at the national levels - due to post-Covid-19 situation. The national policies are emerging concerning the adaptation of the EU Skills Agenda.

This paper addresses the questions of how and in what ways do platform workers develop their skills and capabilities to work. With longitudinal observation and interview data we are able to ask what are the learning mechanisms for those that reside outside of organizations and sell their skills and competences on-line globally, or work mostly in gig-based work. Is there a tendency to leave the algorithm based work, and what happens to individual skills and capabilities over time?