

Two Models for a Fairer Sharing Economy

Mark Graham and Mohammad Amir Anwar

Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

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Introduction

Millions of workers around the world join the so-called ‘sharing economy’ every day to perform a variety of jobs. Most of these jobs are digitally mediated through internet-based platforms that connect buyers and sellers of goods and services. However, recent research has begun to highlight the many risks associated with jobs in the sharing economy (Scholz, 2016; Slee, 2016). Many such jobs are characterized by temporary contracts, long and irregular hours, and low income, and they are often unregulated. The work is highly commoditized, and a global market for this work means that many workers feel they are replaceable, with little bargaining power (Graham et al., 2017a). Workers are made to compete against each other which drives down wages. Thus, many workers will earn below the national minimum wage of their country of location. Since many of these jobs are small “tasks,” clients may have no formal or legal requirement to provide employment benefits to workers. In other words, many sharing economy work practices carry with them various forms of insecurities, and workers typically have less bargaining power than in standard labour markets. These risks are even more pronounced among workers in low and middle-income countries, where our research is situated.

In this chapter, we discuss ways in which the sharing economy can contribute towards economic development by making its work practices fairer not just for workers around the world. We first argue that there is a need to reframe work practices in the sharing economy. In some cases, this will mean ensuring that certain platforms are seen as employers (and workers are seen as employees rather than as self-employed) in cases where they exert a large amount of control over working lives. Secondly, a better understanding of the important nodes in sharing economy value chains (that is, points of influence and control) can help formulate strategies involving disruption and intervention by labour so that more value is captured for and by workers. This chapter introduces and reviews two models of cooperative working that could operate in conjunction with each other to make the sharing economy fairer for workers around the world.

The first is the idea of the ‘platform cooperatives.’ Worker cooperatives have been implemented in various sectors of the economy, particularly in agriculture, where they can help farm workers overcome some of the risks of predatory capitalism (particularly the high interest loans, expensive farm machinery seeds and fertilizers, casual farm labour and low farm wages). Applying the same principles to sharing economy practices will potentially give greater control of work to workers. Such platforms can prevent a concentration of power and hence abuse by those in charge. Platforms can instead be run and managed by workers, instead of private firms and shareholders, thus giving workers greater powers and control over how they organize their work. Secondly, there is a need for a ‘Fair Work Foundation’ to monitor work practices in the sharing economy. This idea is inspired by the ‘Fairtrade’ movement in primary commodities. We suggest greater economic transparency in digital economy value chains, whereby employers/platforms are encouraged to comply with certain standards of working conditions, with a certification process for those employers who clearly abide by fair working practices at all levels of the value chain. This, we hope, will incentivize ethical working practices and reduce the

risks for workers drawn into the sharing economy. Our hope is that the ideas presented in this chapter will stimulate wider debates among multiple stakeholders in order to encourage movement towards a fairer world of work.

1. What Is the Sharing Economy?

The term ‘sharing economy’ has been used to refer to a wide range of contemporary economic practices that have emerged recently with the increasing proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phone, computers, laptops, internet and smartphones. Similar terms used to describe this new phenomenon include the collaborative economy, the peer-to-peer economy, the access economy, the on-demand economy, online outsourcing, the gig economy and others (see Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2015; Hamari et al., 2016; Scholz, 2016; Schor, 2016; Taeihagh, 2017; van Doorn, 2017).¹ The term has been subject to critique from a variety of perspectives, and tends to incorporate different meanings, such as the sustainable economy, on the one hand, or even a form of neoliberalism (particularly the casualization of labour) (Martin, 2016). We operationalize the sharing economy as an ‘assemblage’ (after Deleuze and Guattari, 2004; and also Delanda, 2006) of multiple and heterogeneous parts (different economic practices and both state and non-state actors, for example) and their interactions with each other that enable the ‘whole’ to function.² Each of these component parts can exist outside an assemblage, are autonomous and take on a certain character in the place where they are territorialized, thus making assemblages dynamic (Delanda, 2006). This enables us to conceive of the sharing economy as a global assemblage of multiple economic practices and actors and also to understand the sharing economy as a sub-set of a larger global information economy that includes information technology hardware and software production, outsourcing, financial services, etc. Therefore, our understanding of the sharing economy includes the main platform firms such as Uber, Airbnb, Upwork, Amazon Mechanical Turk, etc. that develop and run these platforms and the technology giants such as Google, Apple, Samsung, Microsoft, Facebook, etc. whose ability to control information flows and provision of software and hardware technologies afford much needed technical support for these platforms.³ We also include internet and financial services providers, which form a key component in the platform firms’ ability to successfully operate, provide and deliver services in multiple geographical locations, thus expanding the network of sharing economy firms across the globe.⁴

¹ It is a common practice to use the term ‘sharing economy’ along with a host of other terms interchangeably in popular media and academic discourse. We use the term ‘sharing economy’ throughout the chapter in reference to a collection of new and contemporary economic activities conducted over internet platforms. Where we used other terms, it is to highlight how that term appeared in other works and perspectives.

² The absence of discussion on the role of state in the sharing economy discourse has been largely due to the unregulated nature of these practices. We argue that this is all the more relevant to call for greater attention to be paid as to what role can states play to make sharing economy fairer for workers.

³ These technology giants also occupy a very powerful position in the value chains of the information economy through their intellectual property rights and patents on products and services and their ability to control information flows. Recent research is beginning to show that sharing economy firms are able to leverage their access to information much to the disadvantage of sharing economy participants (Calo and Rosenblat, 2017).

⁴ Growth of these related actors is inter-dependent, the case in point is that the rise of the sharing economy helps the growth of the mobile payment systems. *WBS PayTech Conference: Mobile Payment Growth*, WARWICK BUSINESS SCHOOL, 5 Feb. 2016, <http://www.wbs.ac.uk/news/wbs-paytech-conference-mobile-payment-growth/>.

Furthermore, the sharing economy is also composed of multiple sub-assemblages of various kinds of economic practices that are emerging (such as rentals, transport, gig labour, etc.). Some prominent examples include room rentals (Airbnb, Roomorama), transport and taxi services (Uber, Relayrides, Lyft, etc.), cleaning services (Task Rabbit, Handy.com, Helping.co.uk), and digital gig labour (Upwork, Amazon Mechanical Turk, Freelancer.com, etc.). Estimates by PricewaterhouseCoopers suggest that five key sharing economy activities—travel, car sharing, finance, staffing, and music and video streaming, accounted for US\$15 billion in global revenues in 2014 and is expected to grow to around US\$335 billion by 2025 (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2014). Uber has been valued at US\$70 billion (Reuters, 2016), which is more than Ford and GM individually, and higher than 80% of all companies listed on Standard and Poor's index of the 500 largest corporations (Myers, 2015). Another indication of the rapid growth in sharing economy activities is the estimated 48 million people registered on various digital gig work platforms (prominent among them are *Freelancer.com*, *Upwork*, *Zhubajie/Witmark*, *Guru*, *Peopleperhour*, *Crowdfunder*, *Amazon Mechanical Turk*, etc) (World Bank, 2015). Workers in different parts of the world are increasingly looking to find various types of digital work such as virtual assistance, writing jobs, transcription and translation, programming, graphic design, proofreading and editing, data entry, and the like. We are currently experiencing 'a mass migration of labour without the migration of workers' (Standing, 2016; cf. Graham and Anwar, forthcoming, 2018: 2).

The ubiquity of ICTs and data have made this possible. Silicon Valley technology companies like Uber and Airbnb have developed web applications that can be downloaded onto smartphones to connect lenders (those willing to share/rent their assets) with buyers/users (those who want to use those assets) across different geographical locations. The result is the unlocking of the value of various unused or under-used assets by matching goods and service providers directly with customers. Proponents argue that the underlying logic is that this model eliminates intermediaries, thus reducing the cost of goods and of the provision of services (Ferrell et al., 2017). However, as we shall discuss in this chapter, new forms of intermediaries are emerging in the sharing economy.

We want to stress here that many of these activities discussed above are not fundamentally different economic practices and their mechanism of provision is roughly the same i.e. the delivery of goods and services conducted on the internet through a platform with the help of human labour. Therefore, our target of discussion is not a particular set of economic activities of tasks but rather the actual human labour forms and processes in the sharing economy. One particular aspect of this human labour that unites these activities is that most of these are small and minute "tasks" or "gigs" of different kinds to be completed by workers all around the world. Rapid penetration of the internet and mobile phones has enabled a sharp rise in the number of internet users around the world, particularly outside the OECD countries. Today, more than three quarters of internet users live outside the European Union and North America and this trend is likely to continue.⁵ Thus, there will likely be a huge number of people from low and middle-income countries joining the sharing economy in the coming years.⁶ Our focus in this chapter is on sharing economy activities in the context of labour in low and middle-income

⁵ Data available from World Internet Stats. INTERNET WORLD STATS, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>.

⁶ See (Dillahunt and Malone, 2015; Dreyer et al., 2017; Hira, 2017; Liem, 2015).

countries, where the downsides of the sharing economy (such as economic exploitation and extraversion) tend to be more pronounced.

2. Labour Related Risks in Sharing Economy Practices

Such has been the uptake of the sharing economy that some have called it a ‘potential new pathway to sustainability’ (Heinrichs, 2013: 228) since it allows a shift away from a culture of owning assets to a culture of sharing them. For example, platforms like Uber allow individuals to pay for a ride in another person’s car, rather than own a car. It is true that the sharing economy provides both economic and social benefits in the forms of temporary employment for some people, income-earning potential, social interaction and access to resources not otherwise possible. However, there are also certain downsides to it (Malhotra and Alstyne, 2014).

Platforms like Uber and Airbnb, while enabling provision of cheap and efficient services for consumers, rely for their business model on extracting value from the (private) assets of individuals shared via its platform.⁷ For example, Uber retains 25 percent of the cost for each ride a driver completes. This type of model represents a new wave of commoditization of personal assets and resources and of unlocking value of these assets.

The rise of the sharing economy has also enabled a surge in on-demand work. As Scholz (2016) argued, the very concept of the sharing economy is not about sharing but is actually an ‘on-demand service economy.’ Anyone with a smartphone and internet connection can order a car, get food delivered to their doorstep, find someone to mind their kids at home or get someone to deliver their weekly shopping. Those workers who are drawn into the sharing economy will often find their work being dictated by platforms. For example, Uber decides how much a trip will cost, not the driver. A driver’s rating on Uber will be dictated by his or her riders—who may not like the car’s smell, how they drive, or that the driver talked too much (or not enough).

So, what does the sharing economy hold in the future for these new workers, from car drivers, to cycle couriers to virtual assistants?

One of the main challenges in the contemporary world capitalist economy is that labour faces constant threats to working standards and is treated like a commodity, as has been documented since the time of Marx. As millions of people around the world compete for the same jobs on sharing economy platforms, this has the potential to further undermine a range of labour standards. For example, on Upwork, one of the largest online work platforms, workers compete against a global supply of freelancers for small jobs such as editing a CV through a bidding process. Clients list jobs on these platforms and workers then try to outbid each other for contracts by offering a lower price or a better service. Such a scenario, where workers and clients/employers enter into a non-proximate relationship, makes monitoring and control of work difficult. Thus, platform companies rely on a user-based rating system for quality control, for efficient matching of workers and employers, and to create a mechanism for trust between providers and suppliers. These ratings and reputation scores for workers give undue advantage to

⁷ There are some free exchanges of goods and services in the sharing economy, such as Freecycle where people give away goods for free, or Wikipedia, a free online encyclopaedia where knowledge and content is created and shared freely, for example. Refer to FREE CYCLE, <https://www.freecycle.org>.

clients/employers; so, while they ensure the quality of work performed on platforms, it often leaves new workers without jobs for a long time and at the mercy of clients or employers. In our ongoing work on gig workers (Graham et al., 2017c), we have spoken to workers who had spent months trying to get their first job. In order to secure it, workers often accepted extremely low wages or sometimes did free labour for the promise of high ratings that would allow them to find online work in the future (e.g. Graham et al., 2017a).⁸

Another important problem here is that the design of online work platforms is such that labour is treated as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market. Digital gig work is often packaged up into bite-sized tasks and workers can easily be replaced (Graham et al., 2017a). If certain forms of labour are seen as a commodity to be easily bought and sold, then millions of people on online marketplaces, who are desperate for work and willing to work for low wages, carry risks themselves (ibid). This creates a downward pressure on wages and potentially renders local minimum wages or living wages less effective as workers compete against a global supply of labour to win contracts.

Furthermore, online work platforms enable new forms of platform intermediaries (Figure 1). During our fieldwork in African countries, and some of our previous collaborative research in both Africa and Southeast Asia, we found evidence of re-intermediation (Graham et al., 2017a; Lehdonvirta et al., 2015). Some workers with relatively high scores tended to be offered more work from platforms than they could handle themselves. They would outsource some of their work (either through the platform or outside the platform) to someone else at a fraction of the cost and retain a large chunk of the profit. Similarly, car-rental companies are some of the biggest winners on the Uber platform, particularly in some African countries. For example, in Ghana, a big car-rental transport company owns a large fleet of cars which they have registered on Uber. These cars are then rented out to prospective drivers, while the Uber payment account is kept with the owner of the rental company. This is made possible because many of these drivers do not own cars and are desperately seeking some form of paid work. Drivers pay a portion of their daily/weekly earnings to the rental company (Field Observation, Accra, April-June 2017). This kind of re-intermediation of Uber's value chain by car rental companies further reduces the value captured by drivers and has great implications for already poor and marginalized drivers/workers' lives and livelihoods. For example, many of the drivers that we spoke to told us they struggle to pay their rents for cars and have to work extremely long hours to meet their daily targets. Some drivers in Lagos we spoke to do not go home over the weekends and sleep in cars so that they can maximize their time driving customers home.

In such a scenario, what strategies do we have to ensure that workers in the sharing economy are treated fairly, earn a living wage, and have greater levels of control over their work

⁸ Along with some colleagues, we have been involved in two major projects about digital labour (Mark Graham, *Microwork and Virtual Production Networks in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia*, OXFORD INTERNET INSTITUTE, <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/microwork-and-virtual-production-networks/> and *Welcome to the Geonet Project*, GEONET, <http://geonet.oii.ox.ac.uk/>). These projects focus on several African (South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana and Uganda) and Asian countries (the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam). We are concerned with the developmental impacts of digital gig work in the Global South, particularly from the perspective of labour. Two of the key publications from these projects are (Graham et al., 2017a, 2017b). We are also aware that there are multiple phrases used to describe gig work. We prefer to use 'digital gig work' or 'gig labour' because it captures the fact that many of these work activities are treated by platforms as a temporary "gig."

activities? While we focus on the sharing economy in low-income contexts where our research is situated, it is important to point out that globally labour in the sharing economy is facing growing threats to its existence and with regards to work standards, irrespective of its location. A Deliveroo worker in London and an Uber driver in Nairobi may have different socio-economic contexts in which they work, but they both face extreme work pressure, unsociable working hours and extremely low wages. Therefore, our discussions and suggestions below are pertinent to sharing economy labour in both the global and low- and middle-income countries contexts.

Insert Figure 1: Heuristic understanding for types and levels of re-intermediation

3. Making the Sharing Economy Fairer for Workers

One of the first steps in addressing the question of worker rights in the sharing economy is to think about reframing some of the concepts invoked in discussions of the sharing economy. We should stop treating platform companies simply as technology firms but also as transport companies, media houses, and delivery companies. For example, Uber drivers are often classed as “self-employed entrepreneurs” rather than workers. Recently in the UK, an employment court ruled that Uber drivers are not self-employed and are entitled to the national living wage, thus opening the way to further scrutiny of employment practices of platform companies and other large firms (Osborne, 2016).

This reframing of work in the sharing economy has the potential to build a sense of collective identity among workers and mobilize social movements (Huws and Dahlmann, 2010; Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), which are key to determining the well-being of various social groups (Bryan and Nandi, 2015; Dovidio et al., 2005; Haslam et al., 2009). Here, labour unions can also play an important role in mobilizing workers (social media can be a useful tool too for organizing labour); helping them achieve class consciousness and collective identity; and highlighting the risks in sharing economy work practices. This could then also open up the possibilities for collaboration, cooperation and collective bargaining among workers who are employed by these companies to secure better working conditions.⁹

Secondly, we need to understand important nodes in sharing economy value chains where value is created and captured, which can be disrupted by workers. For example, platform companies make effective use of technology (including big data and algorithms) to drive their platforms. Without its app or internet-based platform, Uber wouldn’t be able to match drivers with riders and remain competitive with ordinary taxi drivers. Workers do not own or control platforms and hence can be subjected to regulatory mechanisms and platform policies such as pricing, ratings, feedback and surveillance methods, often leaving them powerless. It is true this mechanism ensures the quality of work/services, benefitting users, but it also increases

⁹ In Seattle, Washington, the city council voted in 2015 to allow Uber and Lyft drivers to unionise for better pay and working rights. However, this ordinance has been blocked pending a law suit by the the US Chamber of Commerce e. *Law Allowing Uber and Lyft Drivers to Unionize Temporarily Halted in Seattle*, THE GUARDIAN, 4 Apr. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/apr/04/uber-lift-ride-sharing-union-law-seattle-judge> and <https://www.bna.com/seattle-law-allowing-n73014463849/>.

punishment for workers generally. Therefore, an important question here is to think about ways in which the sharing economy works for both users and workers. One of them is for workers to have greater control over the platforms where much of the value is captured and a greater say over how these platforms are governed.

While there is no doubt that the sharing economy has become a powerful socio-economic phenomenon, the ownership and the governance of platforms needs to be made more democratic (Schor, 2016), for them to make a genuine and meaningful impact on workers' lives and livelihoods. Here we outline two visions to make the sharing economy fairer for workers.

A) Cooperatives for a Fairer Sharing Economy

Cooperatives have long been recognized for their role in economic development,¹⁰ with some of the most successful in primary commodities such as tea, coffee and cocoa. Cooperatives are owned and managed by their members, who therefore have an opportunity to participate in how the business is run.¹¹ One of the major differences between a cooperative and a privately-held enterprise is this shareholding power. In a private corporate entity, the voting power is determined by the number of shares a person controls, whereas a cooperative tends to be more democratic, in that power is shared rather equally among its members. Thus, cooperatives do not allow any one person or group to concentrate power, thus ensuring that they remain democratic (Mazzarol, 2009).

This idea has been translated into the form of a radical movement called the 'Platform Cooperativism Consortium,'¹² an international network dedicated to furthering efforts to build sustainable platform cooperatives. A platform cooperative can be defined as a member-owned platform or organization that enables the exchange of good and services in similar fashion to already existing corporate platforms, except that it favours decentralized governance, open data and the development of information and material commons as opposed to a corporate-style extractive model (Silvester-Bradley, 2016). At the heart of platform cooperatives lie three principles: communal ownership, democratic governance and transparent data. The underlying idea is that in the age of platform capitalism, there is a need to build an alternative to the extractive sharing economy that is more decentralized and democratic. Thus, platform cooperatives should leverage new technologies to create similar platforms to Uber, Airbnb and others that promote social ownership and management of the platforms, and reframe the ideas of innovation and efficiency to benefit all and not just the few (Scholz, 2016). Such platforms would prevent concentration of power and hence abuse by those in charge. Instead, platforms would be run and managed by workers. This would give them greater powers and control over how they want to use platforms for their own benefit. If workers can use the same technologies,

¹⁰ Prominent international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) are advocates of cooperatives. See (FAO, 2011; ILO, 2015, 2011).

¹¹ The International Co-operative Alliance defines a cooperative as an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.

¹² The Platform Cooperativism Consortium supports the development of digital/platform cooperatives through research, documentation of best practices, and the coordination of funding. The Consortium is an international network dedicated to helping efforts such as this that aim to build sustainable cooperatives. See, The Platform Cooperativism Consortium, PLATFORM CO-OP, <https://platform.coop/about/consortium>

data and algorithms to design, develop and build their own apps and manage them, then we have a greater chance of workers being able to maintain fair working conditions. Today, the movement is growing and incorporates a range of cooperative platforms that include ‘alternative financing models, labour brokerages for nurses, massage therapists, and cleaners, cooperatively owned online marketplaces, and data-protection platforms for patients,’ just to name a few.¹³

Several platform cooperatives have emerged recently in different sectors with the aim of ensuring that workers rather than shareholders have a stake in them. Such platform cooperatives are aiming to disrupt the control of big corporations over modern technologies and the socio-economic systems of our times. For example, there are several taxi apps which are built, managed and run by drivers who own the company and share the proceeds such as Cotabo (Bologna, Italy), ATX Co-op Taxi (Texas), Green Taxi Cooperative (Colorado), The People’s Ride (Michigan), and Yellow Cab Cooperative (California). Several other similar initiatives include Stocksy, a stock photo website owned and curated by photographers, and Loconomics, a platform for freelance therapists, caregivers and cleaners who keep 100 percent of fees (FT, 2017).

In the context of sharing economy activities like taxi rides, takeaway deliveries, etc., platform cooperatives have great potential. These types of work activities (which carry with them inherent stickiness, i.e. work that can only be performed in a particular location, such as a taxi ride) cannot be outsourced to distant locations or to other countries and thus are locally contingent. Since much of the sharing economy is mediated by digital technologies, and technology is socially constructed and embedded (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999), it is critical for such types of sharing economy technologies (apps or platforms) to be designed for their local contexts. A taxi app designed in and for Los Angeles, New York or London drivers will have greater applicability in these cities but may not necessarily be suitable for other locations such as Lagos and Kenya. Drivers in each of these locations would know more about their respective areas and places of operation. For example, what areas to avoid in the city, busy traffic times, any local incidents, etc. Thus, there is a greater utility in workers’ collaboration, communication and sharing of information towards the locally-specific designs and development of the platform or the app that would suit a particular location and demographic. In such sticky-work contexts, both the buyer and seller are geographically proximate, which also ensures that local regulatory laws can easily be applied in order to protect both parties.

Platform cooperatives can also help control intermediation in the sharing economy, whereby some workers are able to get more work than others and therefore subcontract it out. Cooperatives can potentially ensure that working hours are limited in such a way that fairer distribution of work takes places among its workers. For example, a worker should be entitled to do only a certain number of hours in a week. While the details of this needs to be discussed and debated, we think this could be a starting point for dialogue to curb the very practice (intermediation) the sharing economy is thought to eliminate, but instead recreates.

While platform cooperatives represent an important way to reduce some of the risks among workers in the sharing economy by transferring power into their own hands, the movement is still in its early stages and faces some challenges relating to awareness, funding,

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PLATFORM CO-OP, <https://platform.coop/about>.

regulation of its activities, knowledge transfer, collaboration, etc. (Bigot-Verdier et al., 2017). However, there are other ways through which platform cooperatives in the sharing economy can be complemented. We argue that enhancing economic transparency in production networks is key to further address harmful and unethical work practices in the emergent sharing economy.

B) Economic Transparency in Digital Economy Value Chains

Trans-national corporations (TNCs) (Dicken, 2011) make every effort to maintain opaque production networks in order to ensure efficiency of production, gain new markets, and maintain a competitive advantage (Dunning, 1993). As production has become more globalized, it has become far more difficult for consumers to find out about firms' production practices taking place in distant parts of the world, and therefore to be properly informed about their products. Consumers are often not aware of the production practices behind their sports shoes or mobile phones, for example.¹⁴ Recent reports of corporate scandals such as violation of labour laws by Apple's factories and suppliers in China (Chamberlain, 2011; The Independent, 2013), the Libor scandal (Keegan, 2012; The Economist, 2012) and the onset of financial crises with the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, for example, have made the issue of transparency in global production networks (Coe et al., 2004)¹⁵ even more prominent.¹⁶

One of the main challenges in the contemporary world economy is that while we can often trace the provenance of physical goods, it is much harder to trace the provenance of informational goods or services. Consumers, therefore, lack knowledge of the sites of production and distribution, and of the way digital goods are designed or produced. In other words, consumers often have less information about value chains or the production networks of digital products or services. Someone who uses a driverless car, for instance, likely has no idea that the artificial intelligence powering the machine was trained by warehouses full of workers in Nairobi; each a low-paid worker, categorizing trees, people, cars, and roads in order to ultimately allow a machine to be able to make those distinctions for itself. A casual user of social media will likely not know that there are offices full of content reviewers in the Philippines who ensure that uploaded pictures do not breach platform guidelines (and who are thus constantly exposed to disturbing imagery). Even a person who calls an airline to change their ticket, knows little about

¹⁴ Cook's (2004) article 'Follow the things' uses a multi-site ethnographic method to analyse the papaya production network that stretches from Jamaica, Hawaii, and Brazil, to the US and the UK. It attempts to inform consumers about various people and processes involved in the production of papaya, and therefore encourage them to think about important moral and ethical questions around exploitation of labour. Encouraging ethical consumption practices can enhance human development outcomes (Kleine et al., 2012).

¹⁵ The 2008 financial crisis exposed the secrecy and opacity with which financial markets (and financial products such as mortgages) and actors (big investment banks, for example) have been operating since the 1990s that led to the housing markets crash in the US in 2008 (Sato, 2014). Its effects reverberated around the world (See Harvey, 2011). Subsequently, both EU and US regulators instituted several reforms to regulate financial markets and increase transparency in financial flows. For a critical commentary on these reforms see Helleiner, (2014).

¹⁶ Transparency is a multidimensional concept that cuts across various socio-economic, political and corporate spheres. Loosely defined, transparency deals with the access to and availability of reliable/trustworthy information at the disposal of an agent to make an informed decision. However, the concept has been the subject of extensive debate. A useful collection of essays dealing with various theoretical aspects of transparency can be found in Forssbaeck and Oxelheim, (2014). Another relevant work is by Ball (2009).

the lives of the workers they are speaking with.¹⁷ In the context of the sharing economy, it is even more important that transparent production practices are maintained by platform companies, who are often dependent upon flows of data and information from one node to another. This will enable consumers to make informed decisions by being more aware of the social, political and environmental impacts of the available products, and more importantly about the labour conditions that went into the production of information-based products (Graham and Haarstad, 2011).

There have been various movements designed to curb exploitative labour practices, by highlighting flows of goods and values across various production networks and using consumer power to encourage firms to refrain from poor labour practices in farms and factories. Most prominent among them is the 'Fairtrade' movement, which is largely confined to primary-sector economic activities (tea, coffee, cocoa, soya, etc.).¹⁸ But we could similarly imagine a 'Fairwork' movement to ensure that the Googles, Facebooks, Upworks, and Ubers of the world are held accountable if poor working conditions or digital sweatshops enter into their own virtual production networks (Graham, 2016; Graham and Woodcock, 2018).

4. Envisioning a 'Fair Work' Foundation

Guy Standing has described these types of workers as 'the precariat,' as a new 'class-in-the-making' who lack various forms of labour-related security, hold only temporary positions, earn a precarious income, receive few (or no) benefits or social protections, lack an 'occupational identity' and live with a deep existential insecurity (Standing, 2014). Our own research in Africa and Asia involving interviews with around two hundred digital workers from different platforms covering a wide range of work activities (including transcribers, editors, virtual assistants, customer service agents, web developers, writers, etc.) shows that many of these workers fit the definition of 'the precariat' with few notable exceptions (e.g. Graham et al., 2017a, 2017b). Such workers, therefore, increasingly need an effective way to improve their working conditions.

When we use a product, a service, or even an algorithm that was brought into being using digital labour, there is no way to know whether an exhausted worker is behind it; whether they will get laid off if they become sick or get pregnant; whether they are spending twenty hours a week just searching for work; how precarious their source of income is; or whether they are being paid an unfairly low wage.¹⁹

Digital gig work certainly can, and should, be regulated. However, many countries are

¹⁷ Working conditions inside call and contact centres have been repeatedly found to be a lot worse than generally understood. Some key works in this regard are (Bain et al., 2002; Hastings and MacKinnon, 2017; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Woodcock, 2016).

¹⁸ Fairtrade refers to the Fairtrade movement, which includes networks of different organizations under Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO), such as International Resources for Fairer Trade (IRFT), European Fair Trade Association (EFTA), Network of European Worldshops (NEWS), etc. FLO develops, designs and reviews fair trade standards, and also incorporates issues relating to tariffs, subsidies, worker rights, etc. The term Fairtrade is used to describe the certification and labelling system governed by FLO to enable consumers to make informed choices about goods produced under agreed ethical labour and environmental standards (Mathews, 2009: 1).

¹⁹ The following text is taken from Graham and Shaw (2017).

reluctant to do so. Regulators in places like the Philippines or Kenya know that if they attempt to ensure that digital work is properly regulated (by, for instance, enforcing local minimum wages), it could flow out of those countries as quickly as it flowed in. Alternatively, digital gig work could theoretically be regulated in the home countries of clients (think of, for instance, German regulators insisting that German firms must ensure certain working conditions are met—no matter where workers are based). There is, however, little political appetite for such internationally-minded regulation, when regulators in the Global North already struggle to protect their own citizens.²⁰

While strategies built around platform cooperatives certainly hold promise, they are also held back by few fundamental limitations. First is the lack of capital for setting up platforms that can compete with some of the dominant ones. With crowdfunding and some form of state support, this could potentially be addressed.²¹ Second, is the structural problem of the massive oversupply of labour power and the intense competition for jobs on most platforms undermines the potentials of collective bargaining power. The very existence of a huge and global pool of digitally connected workers means that even if good wages are paid to some workers, there is little stopping that work from being re-outsourced. As ever more people from low-income countries come online, we should expect this large pool of workers (in the context of an existing oversupply of labour) to act as a magnet, pulling wages and working conditions downwards.

What else, then, can be done? We argue that these are fertile conditions for strategies that demand more transparency in the global supply chains of work. While consumers of products from companies like Starbucks and Cadbury have pressured those companies into ensuring that the entire chains of production are certified as Fairtrade, users of services from companies like Apple, Microsoft, Uber, Amazon, Samsung, Upwork, Facebook, Google, etc., have no similar way of persuading those firms to behave ethically. Users currently have no idea if the workers that help to create and maintain those services are treated fairly or paid living wages. In many cases, users may be unaware that there are actually any human workers at all behind those services. But the fact that tracing production networks of digital services and products is a challenging task should not deter us from trying.

In much the same way that the Fairtrade Foundation highlights successes and makes lead firms concerned about unethical practices in their supply chains, a ‘Fairwork Foundation’ could have similar impacts in the realm of digital work. The specific forms that such a foundation could take is open to debate (some ideas are outlined in more detail at <http://fair.work> and in Graham and Woodcock (2018)). At a minimum, it would monitor and certify chains of digital work: ensuring that key standards such as fair wages and protection against non-payment are met.

Our clicks ultimately tie us to the lives and livelihoods of digital labourers in Manila or

²⁰ However, the recent decision by the London transport regulators to ban Uber in London is a case in point where governments are stepping up their pressure to ensure platform firms like Uber are more accountable. The debate, on the logic of Uber ban and what its consequences might be, is still going on. Another similar initiative is in Quebec. See Ashifa Kassam, *Uber Threatens to Leave Quebec in Protest at New Rules for Drivers*, THE GUARDIAN, 26 Sept. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/26/uber-threatens-leave-quebec-drivers>.

²¹ There are some ongoing initiatives already in this regard. See (Co-op News, 2013; Spitzberg, 2016).

Mumbai as much as buying shoes might tie us to a Vietnamese sweatshop or buying chocolate to a Ghanaian farmer. It is therefore no longer good enough to imagine that there is nothing beyond the screen. Every click we make, every search we perform, and every photo we like reverberates around the world. We are enmeshed in complex and invisible networks of work. And with that realisation comes the power to collectively make a difference. We can demand more. We can insist that everyone that we indirectly interact with in these chains of work is treated fairly and with dignity. Our actions matter; and our actions, no matter where we are and what we do, can help bring into being a fairer world of work.

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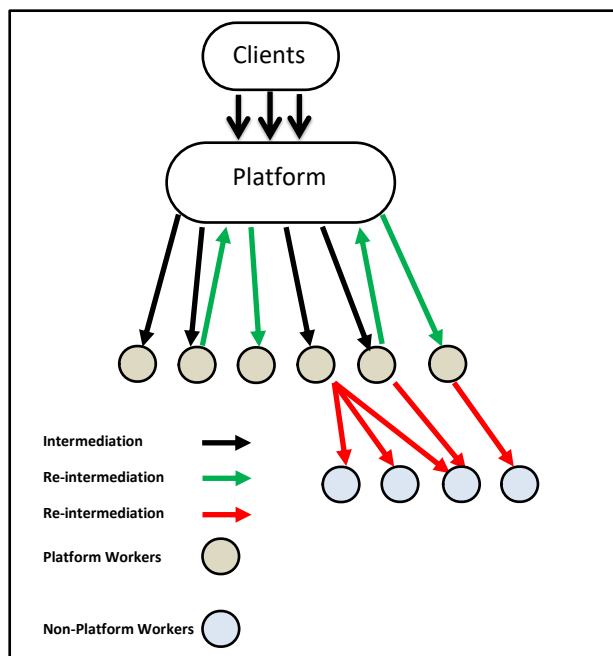
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Figure 1:



(Arrows show flows of work and colour denotes different levels and types of intermediation on platforms)