Technology and Labour for "Good"

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Abstract

Inspired by the "labour for good" roundtable at the 10th STS Italia Conference, this *Crossing Boundaries* section brings together leading scholars on the relationship between technology and labour, with a focus on the role of digital platforms in shaping the negotiation dynamics, the forms of resistance, and even the very redefinition of labour and work practices, beside the power relationship between platforms and workers. This section aims also to provide a forum for STS to engage with and open up to kindred currents and fields of research such as labour studies, political economy and cultural studies, thereby fostering a cross-fertilization of frameworks and empirical results to better understand what and how we, as scholars and researchers, can mobilize STS for the "good" of workers and labour institutions, within but especially beyond the thresholds of academia.

Keywords
labour; technology; platforms; STS; labour studies; cultural studies.

Navigating Platform Labour through STS and Kindred Currents

Paolo Bory, Francesco Bonifacio

Science and Technology Studies have been leading important theoretical and empirical reflection on how digitalization processes have reshaped the organization of social life as well as the production and circulation of scientific knowledge. Despite this widespread interest, however, the STS voice has remained surprisingly marginal within the field of digital labour. This marginality mirrors, at least in part, a long-standing lack of sustained engagement with work-related issues. Indeed, as pointed out by Attila Bruni in this journal, while work has historically been "at the core of STS", it has "progressively dropped out […] from the STS debate" (Bruni 2024, 9).

Quite ironically, questions about work have lost their centrality within STS at a historical moment when technologies have gained increasing visibility – and popularity – among labour scholars.

Building on these considerations, the latest STS Italia Conference has convened in a round-table some of the most influential voices in the debate on digital labour, with the aim of building conceptual and empirical bridges between STS and adjacent fields, such as labour studies, digital sociology and cultural studies. In line with the conference's overarching theme, *Technoscience for good*, the roundtable was conceived as a collective reflection on the meaning of *good* in relation to the intricate entanglements of labour and digital technologies. Recasting this intent into an interrogative form, the guiding question that animated the discussion can be articulated as follows: *What does it mean to speak of "Technology for good" when the infrastructures that mediate work processes are contested objects, simultaneously celebrated as enablers of participation and condemned as new instruments of exploitation?*

Among the wide array of digital technologies currently reshaping the organisation of work – from artificial intelligence to robotics – the roundtable turned its attention to digital labour platforms. Platforms, in fact, are a pivotal example of contested socio-technical innovations. Initially celebrated as a "future of work" grounded in ideals of sharing and collaboration, they are now seen as the main expression of digital capitalism, driving new forms of value extraction, labour exploitation, and precarity. At the same time, it is almost impossible to comprehensively address the relationship between labour and technology without mentioning platforms. In the last two decades, they have become the most relevant infrastructures mediating not only communication practices but also the labour market and how workers, companies, and even regulatory institutions negotiate and exercise different forms of power (Plantin et al. 2018).

The three contributions that animated the roundtable addressed this issue from a shared perspective: rather than focusing on technologies *per se*, they examine how digital platforms acquire meaning and become arenas of negotiation and contestation through their enactment in situated contexts. This focus on actors and on processes carries both theoretical and political implications that resonate with some of the core tenets of STS. First, it requires abandoning the assumption that technologies possess an intrinsic or universal meaning, and instead recognising their fundamentally relational nature. This perspective foregrounds the interpretative flexibility inherent in any technological artefact (Pinch and Bijker 1984), opening up space for agency, negotiation and resistance. At the same time, it invites caution against assuming the outcomes of these processes as necessarily oriented toward any abstract or predefined notion of what is considered *good*. From a political standpoint, this means questioning the normative assumptions that scholars themselves may bring to the analysis of technological practices, and acknowledging the plurality of situated interpretations through which technologies acquire meaning(s) and value(s).

This tension is central to Kylie Jarrett's contribution, which challenges the universal claim according to which digital platforms have led to a generalised deterioration of working conditions. Jarrett shows that such claims rest upon a historically and geographically situated conception of "good work" – one that is deeply rooted in the industrial capitalist traditions of the Western world – and cannot be extended to the plurality of social identities and positions that coexist within the so-called platform economy. The very economic theories underpinning these claims, she observes, are themselves embedded in Western epistemic and institutional

frameworks. Evaluating whether digital labour can be considered a form of "bad" or "good work" thus requires closer attention to workers' identities and to the plurality of conditions shaping the experience of digitally mediated labour. Drawing on a wide range of studies, Jarrett seeks to "identify very specific sets of labour relations that govern whether or not platform work is experienced as, or can be interpreted as, good work". Her analysis, for instance, points to how platforms may broaden the employment landscape for certain social groups, such as undocumented migrants, or how the discourse of entrepreneurialism – often mobilised critically to describe the subjectification processes engendered by digital platforms – may take on different meanings when considered from the standpoint of workers themselves. Taken together, these reflections invite a critical problematization of normative assumptions regarding what counts as good or bad work in relation to digital platforms. More precisely, they highlight that the meaning of *good* is neither singular nor universally shared but rather co-constructed within historically and socially situated contexts.

This attention to the plurality of perspectives and to the situatedness of normative categories also informs Karen Gregory's contribution, which focuses on the method of *worker inquiry*, grounded in *operaismo* and feminist thinking, as a tool of emancipation. In the context of digital labour platforms, where employment relations remain insufficiently regulated due to the juridical misclassification of workers as independent contractors, and where algorithmic systems often operate beyond existing regulatory frameworks, Gregory argues that such a method acquires renewed urgency. Here, the co-construction of knowledge becomes an explicitly political practice, which marks what we may call an *alliance for good* between workers and researchers. Also in this case, however, this alliance does not rest upon any predetermined understanding of "good technology" or "good work". Instead, it arises from the recognition of workers' capacity to "take up the tools of research" in order to "document their own conditions, invert the gaze of platform metrics, and produce [...] data collected to contest dominant institutions and ideologies". Gregory's discussion carries important ethical and theoretical implications, which resonates with long-standing concerns in STS scholarship on the co-production of techno-scientific innovations (Arnaldi et al. 2023). Much like practices of public engagement or participatory design, the cases examined by Gregory foreground the situated knowledges and lived experiences of those traditionally excluded from innovation and decision-making processes. At the same time, the method of *inquiry* challenges extractive models of academic research – where data are gathered from workers, processed within universities, and circulated through inaccessible venues – by assuming co-production and reciprocity as defining dimensions of what may count as "good" research. Finally, the contested nature of digital platforms is explored in the contribution by Tiziano Bonini and Emiliano Treré, who call for a dialogue between STS and Cultural Studies to investigate the moral dimension of digital platforms. In this context, too, the interpretative flexibility of technologies constitutes the basic condition for the emergence of micro-resistance practices, which, as the authors show, can also acquire a collective dimension. Platforms are recognised as sites of contested meanings where material configurations intersect with social norms and imaginaries. While the material features of platforms delimit users' possible interactions within a set of constraints, these constraints can be tactically reinterpreted and transformed into cooperative affordances that subvert their underlying logics. The originality of Bonini and Treré's

account lies in how they frame such practices not as mere acts of technical workarounds that "de-script" (Akrich 1992) the courses of action inscribed in the platform. Rather, they propose an alternative moral order in tension with the competitive, quantified, and performative logics that underpin digital platforms. In doing so, their work illuminates how processes of technological appropriation can instantiate alternative visions of what counts as *good* in relation to work and technologies, thereby making visible the political stakes that emerge through situated practices that negotiate the platforms' normative logics. Moreover, Bonini and Treré offer a compelling example of how bridging different intellectual traditions can enrich our understanding of socio-technical phenomena, revealing that, despite using differing terminologies, they often share profound conceptual affinities.

Beyond the usual normative principles of value-freedom and symmetry, the current historical context – whether concerning digital labour or other sensitive fields such as digital warfare or digital health – demands STS to get their hands dirtier and to share their empirical and intellectual foundations with other fields and experiences. This openness and porosity have always been a key feature of STS scholarship. Keeping and implementing this exchange means also to take new risks, leading almost inevitably to a series of mistakes, missteps and misinterpretations across disciplines and their respective boundaries. But in pursuit of what the STS community recognizes as "good technoscience", and if we want to navigate together platform labour for the good of workers and institutions, STS have the responsibility to provide their ship to everyone. In brief, in mixing concepts and epistemologies, empirical practices, and research methodologies, the great challenge for STS is not so much losing the command of the boat, but rather navigating together and following the "good", or at least the "best" route.

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From Algorithms to AI: Why Worker Inquiry Matters

Karen Gregory

1. Solidarity

The central focus of this article is digital labour and the significance of workers' inquiry for improving working conditions in the platform economy. However, I would like to begin with an expression of solidarity toward scholars, educators, and students worldwide who are working under increasingly hostile conditions. Higher education is not an island of privilege, separate from the broader currents of political economy and power. Rather, universities themselves have become contested terrains. Across the globe, critical social science is under sustained attack. Authoritarian governments threaten academic freedom, neoliberal university management deepens precarity among staff and students alike, and research that challenges dominant economic and technological interests is systematically defunded or delegitimised (Giroux 2020). The rise of digital surveillance within universities, the use of data-driven monitoring of academic work, and the outsourcing of core university services to private technology vendors further demonstrate how higher education is being drawn into the same dynamics of privatisation, risk-shifting, and algorithmic governance that are transforming other sectors of society.

These attacks on higher education are not disconnected from the transformations we observe in the world of digital labour. The structural pressures are parallel: both involve the erosion of public institutions, the prioritisation of private profit over public good, and the delegitimisation of critical inquiry and worker knowledge. In this sense, the precarity faced by delivery workers on the streets of Edinburgh or London resonates with the precarity faced by early-career researchers on short-term contracts in universities. Both groups are navigating a world in which risk has been systematically redistributed downwards, and both face the challenge of working under opaque systems that measure, monitor, and evaluate their performance through digital platforms.

Digital technology companies, and particularly large platforms, play a central role in this wider political economy. Companies such as Uber, Deliveroo, Amazon, and Just Eat have not only reshaped the labour process in specific industries but also forged deep alliances with states. Platform corporations lobby aggressively against regulation, deploy sophisticated public relations campaigns that promote the rhetoric of "innovation" and "flexibility", and experiment with forms of algorithmic management that push the boundaries of legality (Srnicek 2017). At the same time, states often turn to these corporations for logistical and technological capacity (Wells et al. 2023).

The entanglement between platforms and states, therefore, requires us to think critically about the nature of power in the digital age. If platforms serve as both infrastructural providers and employers, they also act as regulators of everyday life, designing the conditions under which millions of people work and interact. These are not neutral tools or markets, but socio-technical systems, infused with political choices about whose interests are protected, whose risks are ignored, and whose knowledge is deemed legitimate. For researchers committed to understanding these systems, alliances with those most affected by them, including workers and their communities, are crucial.

In these comments, I take up this commitment by focusing on one specific site of digital labour: the on-demand delivery sector in the United Kingdom. Over the past several years, this sector has become emblematic of the promises and perils of the platform economy. While it has been heralded as the "future of work", celebrated for offering flexibility and opportunity to workers, the lived reality for many delivery workers is one of extreme precarity, physical danger, and exploitation (Gregory 2020). Delivery workers risk their lives on city streets to transport goods, often for wages that fall far below minimum standards, particularly once expenses and waiting time are considered, while facing constant surveillance through GPS tracking, performance metrics, and increasingly invasive forms of identity verification.

These workers face what we have called a "double regulatory gap" (Gregory and Gallagher 2024). Not only is the employment relationship itself insufficiently regulated, due to the misclassification of workers as "independent contractors", but the technologies that govern their labour – algorithms, metrics, and facial recognition tools – are also left largely outside existing regulatory frameworks. In this vacuum, platforms operate with extraordinary asymmetry of power, dictating the terms of work while evading accountability. However, workers are not passive in the face of these dynamics. Across the UK and internationally, platform workers have developed creative and insurgent forms of collective inquiry and resistance. Drawing on traditions of "worker inquiry" that stretch back to Marx's 1880 "Workers' Questionnaire" and have been revitalised by feminist, decolonial, and digital labour movements (Woodcock 2014; Irani and Silberman 2013), workers are taking up the tools of research themselves. They are documenting their own conditions, inverting the gaze of platform metrics, and producing what has been called "counterdata" (Olojo 2024) or data collected to contest dominant institutions and ideologies.

2. Labour On-Demand

The on-demand delivery sector in the United Kingdom provides a clear lens through which to examine the dynamics of platform capitalism. At first glance, food delivery work appears simple: riders or drivers log into an app, accept orders, and transport meals or groceries from restaurants and shops to customers. Yet beneath this seemingly straightforward process lies a highly complex socio-technical system, one that redistributes risk, reconfigures labour relations, and introduces new forms of algorithmic control. Platform-based delivery work is fundamentally risky. As I have observed in my research, workers literally risk their lives to deliver something as mundane as a cheeseburger. And the risks here are multiple. There are physical dangers, including traffic accidents, particularly in urban centres where riders navigate congested streets under time pressure. A recent research report (Mendonça et al. 2024) suggests that over 80% of riders surveyed feel unsafe at work. The same report notes that 90% of riders surveyed have experienced workplace abuse and harassment. Furthermore, there are financial risks as riders bear the costs of bicycles, motorbikes, fuel, and smartphones, as well as the expenses of maintaining and replacing these tools. In addition, riders face the risks of wage fluctuations and job insecurity, with income levels highly variable depending on demand, weather, and platform-specific algorithms.

These risks are not accidental but integral to the business models of platform companies. By classifying workers as "independent contractors", companies such as Uber Eats, Deliveroo, and Just Eat shift the responsibilities and costs of employment away from themselves and onto individual workers. As De Stefano (2016) has argued, this model represents a form of "demutualised risk", where the collective protections historically provided through employment law and social insurance are dismantled, leaving workers to bear the risks of doing business on their own. The romantic rhetoric of "being your own boss" obscures the reality that workers are, in effect, running small businesses without the protections or resources of traditional entrepreneurs. Paradoxically, while workers are framed as independent, they are also subject to highly intensive forms of control. Platform companies have pioneered data-driven management systems that monitor, evaluate, and discipline workers in real time. Riders' locations are tracked via GPS; their performance is measured through acceptance rates, completion rates, and customer ratings; and their access to work is mediated through algorithmic allocation systems that determine who receives orders and when.

These systems introduce new forms of opacity and asymmetry. Workers rarely understand how allocation algorithms function or how their data is being used to shape their opportunities for income and the apparent neutrality of algorithms masks deeply technical decisions about how performance is measured, and who has the power to challenge or appeal managerial decisions. Facial recognition technologies, in particular, represent a troubling frontier. Uber, for instance, has introduced "Real-Time ID Check", requiring drivers to periodically submit selfies to verify their identities. These systems, often built using third-party facial recognition APIs, have been shown to produce higher error rates for workers with darker skin tones, raising serious concerns about racial discrimination (Buolamwini and Gebru 2018). For many migrant workers, who constitute a significant proportion of the delivery workforce in the UK, such technologies can become instruments of exclusion and arbitrary dismissal.

It is within this context that the concept of the "double regulatory gap" becomes salient. On the one hand, platform labour itself exists in a grey zone of regulation. The classification of workers as independent contractors has been contested in courts across Europe and the UK, with varying outcomes. In February 2021, the UK Supreme Court ruled that Uber drivers should be classified as "workers" rather than independent contractors, granting them rights to minimum wage and holiday pay (UK Supreme Court 2021). Yet the implementation of this ruling has been slow and uneven, and other platforms have sought to differentiate themselves from Uber to avoid compliance. Thus, for many on-demand delivery workers, basic labour protections remain inaccessible.

On the other hand, the technologies that govern platform work – algorithms, data-driven decision-making systems, and biometric verification tools – operate in a largely unregulated domain. While data protection frameworks such as the GDPR provide some rights, such as access to personal data and information about automated decision-making, these are rarely enforced in practice and are not tailored to the specificities of labour relations. Regulators often lack the technical expertise to scrutinise algorithmic systems, and labour inspectors are not empowered to investigate data-driven management practices. As a result, platforms are able to use technologies of control with relatively little oversight or accountability.

The double regulatory gap is not unique to the UK. Similar dynamics have been observed across Europe, North America, and the Global South. In Spain, the 2021 "Riders' Law"

mandated that delivery workers be classified as employees, while also requiring companies to disclose the "algorithms" used in work allocation. This represents one of the first attempts to address both aspects of the double gap, though enforcement remains contested. In Italy, courts have ruled against platforms such as Foodinho/Glovo, finding a lack of safeguards to ensure algorithmic fairness and accuracy (Eurofund 2023). In California, the passage of Proposition 22 in 2020, heavily funded by Uber, Lyft, and DoorDash, carved out exemptions from employment law for gig platforms, illustrating the intense political struggles around regulation (Dubal 2021). In the Global South, where platform labour has expanded rapidly, regulatory gaps are often even wider. In countries such as India, Kenya, and Brazil, platforms operate in contexts of weak labour and data protection enforcements. As Anwar and Graham (2020) have shown, workers in these regions often experience a "race to the bottom", where global platforms exploit differences in national regulatory regimes to extract maximum profit. The double regulatory gap thus has a planetary dimension, reinforcing global inequalities in labour conditions and technological governance. Recognising this double regulatory gap is essential for developing effective responses to the challenges of platform work. Addressing only one side of the equation is insufficient. Strengthening labour rights without tackling algorithmic management risks leaving workers vulnerable to new forms of digital exploitation. Conversely, regulating data without securing employment protections risks reproducing precarity in different forms.

If the double regulatory gap describes the structural conditions under which platform workers labour, worker inquiry offers a methodological and political response. It is not only a way of gathering knowledge about working conditions but also a practice of solidarity, education, and struggle. To appreciate its relevance in the context of algorithmic management, it is worth tracing its intellectual roots and considering how it has been renewed in contemporary movements. The idea of worker inquiry is often traced to Karl Marx's 1880 *Workers' Inquiry*, a 101-question survey published in a French socialist newspaper (Marx 1997[1880]). Marx invited workers themselves to describe their wages, hours, housing, and health conditions. Although the questionnaire was never widely completed, its symbolic importance was profound. It reflected a conviction that workers possess privileged knowledge about exploitation, and that this knowledge is indispensable for critique and transformation.

Fast forward nearly a century, and worker inquiry re-emerged in postwar Italy through the operaismo (workerist) tradition of the 1960s and 1970s (Woodcock 2014). Faced with rapid industrialisation and labour unrest, Italian Marxists such as Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti argued that the factory floor should not only be studied but politicised. They conducted *inchiesta operaia* (workers' inquiries) in car factories and industrial plants, gathering testimonies about machine rhythms, foremen's discipline, and workers' everyday tactics of resistance. For operaismo, inquiry was not a neutral sociological exercise. It was a means of mapping capitalist command while simultaneously identifying points of resistance. It recognised workers as the "vanguard" of struggle precisely because their lived experiences of labour gave them insights into how capital operated and where it might be disrupted. The slogan "*conricerca*" (co-research) captured this ethos – research and struggle were inseparable, and workers were both the subjects and the theorists of inquiry.

Feminist movements in the 1970s extended worker inquiry beyond the factory gates (Fortunati 2013). Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and other thinkers in the Wages for

Housework campaign highlighted how reproductive labour – caring, cooking, cleaning – was essential to capitalism but systematically devalued. Feminist inquiry documented the hidden and unpaid work of women, challenging dominant categories of labour and exposing the ways in which exploitation extended into the home and community. These approaches broadened the scope of worker inquiry, demonstrating that the sites of labour and exploitation were not limited to factories or formal employment. By emphasising reproductive, affective, and care work, feminist inquiries also reshaped the politics of knowledge production: who counts as a worker, whose experiences are visible, and whose voices are heard.

3. Toward a Renewed Worker Inquiry

The platform economy, with its algorithmic opacity and fragmented workforce, has revived the importance of worker inquiry. Gig workers often labour alone, connected more to an app (or multiple apps) than to colleagues. Simultaneously, traditional unions have found it difficult to organise workers whose employment status is precarious and whose workplaces are dispersed across city streets. Under such conditions, inquiry becomes both a way of making sense of the organisation of work, as well as a collective organising strategy.

Inquiries use varied methods and take inspiration from workers own questions and their material circumstances. For example, inquiries might entail WhatsApp groups where riders share screenshots of their pay slips; grassroots surveys documenting experiences of harassment; data requests under the GDPR; and ethnographic projects where workers and academics co-design research questions. These practices allow workers to piece together fragmented experiences into collective knowledge. What appears as an individual misfortune – say, an unexplained account deactivation – can be reinterpreted as a systemic practice when documented across multiple testimonies. A central feature of contemporary worker inquiry is the production of what has been called "counterdata" – or information generated by workers to contest the dominant narratives and practices of platforms. If platforms rely on data to manage, rank, and discipline workers, workers can in turn produce their own data to expose exploitation, support legal challenges, or build solidarity. Turkopticon, created in 2008 by Lilly Irani and Six Silberman, is a classic example. By allowing Amazon Mechanical Turk workers to rate and review requesters, it flipped the asymmetry of surveillance – workers monitored those who hired them. Similarly, the Fairwork project has rated gig platforms according to principles of fairness, producing public benchmarks that can be mobilised by unions, policymakers, and the media (Graham et al. 2020). Counterdata, however, is not limited to quantitative metrics. Testimonies, ethnographies, and oral histories all form part of the collective archive of worker inquiry. The point is not to replicate corporate databases but to develop alternative ways of seeing and knowing the labour process – ways that foreground exploitation, injustice, and possibility. The inquiry process thus raises profound questions about who produces knowledge, who benefits from it, and how it circulates. Traditional academic research has often been extractive: data is taken from workers, analysed in universities, and published in journals that workers may never read. Inquiry challenges this model by insisting on co-production and mutual benefit. Knowledge should not simply

describe workers' conditions but also serve their struggles – whether by informing collective bargaining, shaping public policy, or building solidarity.

This requires reflexivity. It means recognising power imbalances in research relationships, being attentive to ethics, and ensuring that inquiry is accountable to those whose lives it seeks to illuminate. It also means acknowledging that inquiry is not just about producing reports or publications, but about creating infrastructures for ongoing dialogue, learning, and resistance. And, to my mind, the spirit of worker inquiry is finding tangible expression in contemporary projects that combine data, law, and participatory research to contest the power of platforms. Two such initiatives – Worker Info Exchange (WIE) in London and the Workers Observatory (WO) in Edinburgh – demonstrate complementary strategies for mobilising worker expertise in the platform economy. These case studies illuminate how workers can transform fragmented and precarious labour conditions into collective knowledge, legal leverage, and educational opportunity.

4. Worker Info Exchange (WIE): Litigation-Driven Counterdata

Founded in 2019, Worker Info Exchange (WIE) emerged in response to the growing influence of algorithmic management over gig work. WIE enables platform workers to access their personal platform data via the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and uses these data to challenge unfair practices through legal action. The GDPR, implemented across the EU in 2018, provides rights that are highly relevant to platform workers. Article 15 ensures the right of access to personal data; Article 20 provides data portability; and Article 22 protects individuals from solely automated decisions with significant effects. WIE operationalises these rights through Subject Access Requests (SARs), which allow workers to obtain a copy of personal data collected by the platforms.

By aggregating these SARs in a collective data trust, WIE transforms individual requests into systemic insights. Information about pay calculations, account deactivations, performance scoring, and dynamic allocation systems reveals patterns that would otherwise remain opaque. In effect, the project is not merely collecting data but forging new social relations at the level of the database – worker data requests enable collective analysis. To date, WIE has processed over 500 SARs from workers across platforms including Amazon Flex, Bold, Deliveroo, Free, Just Eat, Ola, and Uber (Safak and Farrar 2021).

However, WIE's work goes beyond analysis. Legal interventions provide a crucial mechanism for translating counterdata into accountability. One landmark case involved four Uber drivers who had been effectively "robo-fired" without recourse. The Amsterdam Court of Appeal found that Uber's automated account deactivations were carried out with minimal human intervention, rendering the process arbitrary and opaque (*ibid.*). The ruling highlighted the insufficiency of supposed human oversight, emphasising that automated decisions cannot be legitimised by symbolic gestures. Beyond dismissals, WIE has successfully pursued transparency regarding algorithmic pay and task allocation. Courts have required Uber to disclose how worker profiles, dynamic pay, and task allocation systems are calculated and implemented. Such rulings not only benefit the workers directly involved but set legal precedents that can challenge broader corporate practices across the gig economy.

WIE is also contesting the use of facial recognition technologies, which have been linked to discriminatory deactivations. For instance, Uber's "Real-Time ID" system links selfies to location data to authenticate workers. Yet the system is known for high error rates among Black and ethnic minority workers, who constitute a majority of UK private hire workforce (*ibid.*). WIE is pursuing cases on behalf of affected workers, highlighting how technological innovations can reproduce and amplify systemic inequities.

Taken together, the work WIE is doing illustrates the potential of litigation-driven inquiry. By combining legal expertise, data analysis, and worker knowledge, it shows that platform workers can not only document exploitation but also actively intervene to change corporate practices. Importantly, WIE demonstrates that data are not a neutral commodity. When appropriated by workers, they can become instruments of solidarity and resistance.

5. Workers Observatory (WO): Participatory Inquiry and Local Solidarity

While WIE operates at a transnational legal level, the Workers Observatory (WO) in Edinburgh exemplifies participatory, locally grounded inquiry. Established in 2020 in collaboration with the Scottish Trade Union Congress and funded by the ESRC Digital Good Network, the WO focuses on the lived experiences of migrant delivery workers navigating algorithmic management in the city. The WO currently engages 25 on-demand delivery workers in Edinburgh to co-design research questions, methods, and analysis. Workers identify the issues most pressing to them – ranging from wage discrimination and harassment to e-bike theft and debt incurred to access work. Surveys, interviews, field observations are coupled with regular rider meetings, creating a hybrid methodology that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches. For example, a survey of 70 riders in Edinburgh revealed systemic patterns of racial harassment, tips being withheld by platforms, and the widespread theft of bikes (Gallagher and Lieutaud 2024). These findings have been taken to local policymakers. Most recently, the Edinburgh City Council has taken steps to address worker concerns through their Fair Work Action Group. This includes the possibility of reinstating a Gig Workers Task Force, as well as working with local restaurants to develop a fair work manifesto for on-demand delivery, as well as developing ways to bring platform labour into the City's Fair Work Charter.

Beyond documenting working conditions, the WO fosters worker education. Participants express interest in understanding the data science principles underpinning the platforms that manage their labour. Through participatory inquiry, workers develop skills in survey design, data analysis, and critical interpretation. This blurs the boundary between research, activism, and education, transforming inquiry into a vehicle for upskilling and future mobility. The WO's participatory inquiry also cultivates social solidarity. Workers who initially lacked formal networks discover shared experiences and develop collective strategies. The WO exemplifies how inquiry can create new infrastructures for mutual support, offering a counterweight to the atomising effects of platform work. By situating workers as experts of their own conditions, the project foregrounds local knowledge as a political resource, reshaping both labour relations and civic engagement.

Together, WIE and WO represent two complementary strategies of worker inquiry: WIE leverages legal frameworks and aggregated data to contest corporate power at national

and transnational levels. WO emphasises participatory methods and local solidarity, generating knowledge that directly benefits workers in their daily lives.

Both approaches treat workers not as passive subjects but as co-producers of knowledge, capable of interpreting algorithmic systems and mobilising counterdata for collective action. Importantly, these strategies demonstrate that worker inquiry need not be confined to one form: litigation, data analysis, and participatory ethnography are mutually reinforcing methods that expand the possibilities for resistance.

The WIE and WO projects also point to broader implications for inquiry in the age of AI. Platforms increasingly deploy algorithmic management, predictive scheduling, and real-time performance monitoring, creating conditions of heightened precarity. Counterdata and participatory research reveal the human consequences of these systems, while also training workers to critically engage with the technologies shaping their labour.

The platform economy confronts us with profound questions: who controls the infrastructures of work? How are risks and rewards distributed in digital capitalism? What forms of knowledge and expertise matter in governing algorithmic systems?

The stories of Worker Info Exchange and The Workers Observatory offer partial but powerful answers. They show that workers – long cast as the objects of managerial control – are emerging as critical agents in the struggle for algorithmic accountability and data justice. Through participatory research, legal mobilisation, and grassroots organising, they are not only contesting exploitation but also inventing new models of solidarity, education, and co-production.

For STS scholars, these initiatives underscore an urgent task: to align our research with movements for technological justice, to amplify worker voices, and to imagine regulatory and infrastructural alternatives that prioritise human dignity over corporate profit. This is not simply a matter of academic interest; it is a matter of democratic survival in an age where the logics of automation and extraction threaten to hollow out the very conditions of collective life.

The 10th STS Italia conference, which inspired this contribution, provided an opportunity to share and advance this commitment – to solidarity, to inquiry, and to the co-creation of futures where technology serves the many rather than the few.

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◆

Digital Labour for Good

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The mediation of work by digital technologies – especially platform-mediated work – is often associated with reduced conditions, increased surveillance and micromanagement, and heightened exploitation. It is quite often, and quite legitimately, understood as anything but good work.

This paper, though, will take up the theme of the STS Italia Conference – Technoscience for Good – and accept the challenge of exploring how platform-mediated work may be approached, understood, or experienced as good work. This paper will first discuss rethinking precarity as the central critical paradigm for engaging with digital labour and platform work, drawing on intersectional approaches to ask questions about the subject at the centre of this critique. It will then explore a little of how some often criticised labour processes associated with digital platforms might be experienced positively by various kinds of workers, challenging blanket assumptions of this labour's inherently negative effect. Finally, it will explore how narratives of good work may be important shapers of both labour and struggle in the platform economy.

1. Whose Precarity?

One of the key features of various forms of digital labour – and especially platform work – has been how it upends the industrial model of secure, hourly-paid employment as the labour market, fracturing work into a series of gigs that people must piece together in order to generate a living. It does this, though, by decentring waged labour, coercing people into self-employment, through the return of proto-capitalist piece work remuneration and arguably, in some instances, a return to feudal dynamics. Some have claimed that designation as self-employed is a misclassification, arguing that many digital labourers are, in fact, employees of the platforms and companies to which they are ostensibly contracted. But in some ways, it doesn't matter whether being self-employed is an inaccurate representation. The reality is that many digital labourers in the global North are *structurally* in non-standard employment relations and or conditions of self-employment in some of their income-generating activity – a trend that began in the latter half of the 20th century as neoliberal economics and social policies diminished labour security.

The implications of this reorientation of the economy are pronounced. On one hand, these economic logics of digital labour emphasise the centrality of unpaid work to the economy. While unpaid labour, especially in the form of domestic work, has always been a feature of capitalist accounting – a point made by many Marxist feminists – social media and digital labour environments have industrialised the extraction of value from this kind of uncompensated activity. This is obviously the case when we look at the exploitation of user data in social media environments. But it is also the case in paid forms of digitally mediated labour such as platform-mediated work where conditions of self-employment mean that

workers absorb many of the labour costs related to, for instance, occupational health and safety or training that once might have been absorbed by an employer. One of the key lessons we have learned from the shift to non-standard employer/employee relations is the need to pay attention to the labour involved in the reproduction of workers and to map where, how, and by whom this is being undertaken.

But I most want to highlight how these conditions also indicate the contingency and non-universality of the industrial form of labour that Marx critiqued through the labour theory of value. The arrangements of work that he was describing during the birth of industrial capitalism, and which were entrenched with the 20th century Fordist factory, are seemingly in decline in the context of digital labour and especially platform work. Instead, we are in a context where unstable employment, unstable incomes, and unstable conditions are the norm; these are the conditions of precarity. Platform work – the emblematic form of digital labour – is leading in the normalising and furthering of these conditions.

This is a long-established position and a long-established lament. When it is articulated, there is always a sense of loss associated with it, viewing the conditions of the platform economy as a degradation of labour and working life. But my question is for whom do these new conditions represent a decline? For whom was the industrial compact of a job for life; secure income; waged labour with set conditions ever a reality?

It was certainly not always the case for women, especially women of colour, who were often excluded from industrial labour environments and economic stability, sometimes by capitalist logics, sometimes by unions and other trade organisations, and sometimes by heteropatriarchal and white supremacist culture and custom. While a promise that animated ambition or resentment, the security of industrial labour has not necessarily been an achievable reality for racialised others in industrial spaces as well as for migrants – documented or undocumented.

Perhaps more importantly, the conditions of the Fordist factory were never universal. For workers outside of the minority world, work has long been precarious and informal and functioning through various forms of self-employment. Piecing together different jobs in order to make a living is standard practice for many people around the world. The disguising of wage relations, and the harnessing of regimes of reproduction in the service of work is also a commonly experienced economic model – even by many people in the minority world or global North (Mezzadri 2020). The story of labour's decline then is very geographically and demographically specific. As Alessandra Mezzadri (*ibid.*, 156) puts it:

> [T]he very representation of the so-called Western labour trajectory has always been somewhat biased – over-representing the experience of a handful of core countries within the Western bloc and a (male) labour aristocracy within highly differentiated working classes. Ultimately, capitalism has only ever been "Golden" for a very few, in a very few places, and during a very few years.

In a provocative article about macrotask crowdwork in the African context, Elbanna and Idowu (2022) argue that we need to decentre the Western model of labour, including its default critique of growing precarity. The paradigm of precarity, they say, "assumes a society dominated and ruled by the formal economy, which contrasts with the domination of the informal

economy in developing countries" (*ibid.*, 130). It has no relevance in the contexts where they research, but the importance of this position extends far beyond. If the features associated with informal economies are becoming increasingly central across a wide range of employment contexts, both geographically and in terms of labour form, any model which centres formal, secure, waged employment as central and all else as deviance becomes increasingly untenable.

2. Recentring the Worker

Both Adam Arvidsson (2019) and Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020) typify this informal mode of working as hustle culture, with Arvidsson locating this mode of working in advanced pre-capitalist economies and the pre-industrial capitalist system, but also argues it has persisted in capitalist contexts. He says, even in the organized societies of industrial modernity, there has always been an "industrious economy" operating outside of regulated labour markets; as McMillan Cottom (2020) notes, this has also been a racialised space. What is novel today though, Arvidsson adds, is that those pushed to the economic margins and into entrepreneurial hustle, are "increasingly joined by middle-class university graduates, who historically used to prefer stable employment to the vagaries of entrepreneurship" (2019, 5).

This shifting of industriousness and hustle from the margins of the economy along with the emphasis on unpaid, reproductive work that digital labour has also highlighted (Jarrett 2016; Mezzadri 2020), work to decentre the experiences of the archetypal white factory worker in the industrial north as the central figure upon which pivot our base models of labour – and the ensuing critical paradigms that emerge from that labour experience. His reality of a secure, formally defined workplace defined by hourly paid income is no longer at the leading edge of economic change or even economic stability – and certainly not in digital labour contexts.

This decentring demands we engage more richly with that scholarship and those scholars and activists who have explored work outside of the global North and investigated the economic and labour practices of those on the margins of the economy. If we are to understand the nature of labour today, we need to move away from economic models and critiques rooted in the European/US historical context – exploitation through formally defined waged work and alienated labour via commodified labour-time – and embrace scholarship, economic thinking, and models of labour struggle and resistance that also emerge from outside of that context. This includes, as Mezzadri (2020) reminds us, feminist scholars who have argued for the importance of unpaid reproductive labour, but also – and especially – those scholars and scholarship from the Majority World that have long dealt with the politics and experiences of informal labour. Some of this work is being done in the field of digital labour studies but more is needed to extend our critiques beyond claims of precarisation.

3. Good Work

I propose this here in a discussion of platform work as good work not only because it challenges the omnipresent association of platform work, precarity, and bad work. I also

propose it because if we shift our lens from the experience of the normative white male cis-het- able-bodied industrial worker in the global North for a moment, and examine platform work in more diverse and specific contexts, we might see ways that good work is possible. Key is how digital platforms open up the employment landscape. For people with disabilities, undocumented migrants, those with limited educational experience, and indeed any other people located on the margins of the economy, platform work can provide a valuable mechanism for entering the labour market. For instance, for Iranian women who may be limited in working outside the home, especially in a context where economic sanctions have shrunk the economy, online creation and influencer labour can be an important space for engaging in legitimised economic activity (see Bahramitash and Esfahani 2014; Eslami 2021; Golzard 2020). By reducing entry requirements, including documentation, platforms have generated employment opportunities for refugees and migrants (see Hackl 2022; van Doorn et al. 2020; Webster and Zhang 2020). People with disabilities have also long taken advantage of the entrepreneurial opportunities available via various digital platforms to create economic opportunities (Hong 2024; Qu 2020). Workers may have ambivalent relationships to this kind of work – it may not always be safe, secure, or properly remunerated and sometimes may only be the least bad of the available options – but given it provides some kind of economic opportunity in the absence of others, it is perhaps too much of a stretch to describe all of platform work as irredeemably bad (e.g., Anwar and Graham 2020; Kashyap and Bhatia 2018; Wood et al. 2018b).

But is it not only economic opportunity that emerges because work is always more than work. At a recent training school on intersectional feminist approaches to platform work (part of the P-Will COST action) the participants re-approached their studies through an intersectional lens. In doing so, some recognised how their research subjects found forms of agency and some degree of economic or social autonomy not otherwise available to them in their platform work. For instance, Klaudia Khan (2025) explored how for Bangladeshi migrant men working as delivery riders in Poland, not only does the work enable them to earn an income. That income allowed them to send remittances home and, in doing so, rendered them able to perform the role of male provider and secure the sense of social and personal agency associated with this heteromasculine role. As problematic as this may be in terms of gender politics, for migrants who are often feminised and stripped of normative modes of power and dignity, platform work can become a valuable site for psychological and social agency (see also Hong 2024).

But we also need to think more about what might have been gained in the transition to digital labour and all that has entailed in terms of the re-organisation of labour. Here I turn to some of the qualities of the work that have been critiqued extensively in digital labour studies but might also be read as "good work": informal contractual obligations and the automated algorithmic management of platforms. I suggest there is great heterogeneity in how these features of platform work are experienced.

For instance, for some workers, such as women or others with care responsibilities, what might be described as the insecurity of work that comes from unfixed working times and informal labour contracts is often experienced as a benefit for it allows the flexibility for work to be organised, at least to a degree, around these other demands. In particular, workers compare

this provision for self-scheduling favourably against those offered by traditional employers and employment contracts, even though the reality of this opportunity is typically less than ideal (James 2024; Lehdonvirta 2018; Pesole et al. 2018; Piasna and Drahokoupil 2021). In an imperfect and unequal world, there are some positives in the less structured and formal labour arrangements that might be advantageous for some groups of people who aren't white, cis, het men seeking full-time employment (see also van Doorn et al. 2023).

It is also not the case that the machinic logic of platform management systems is also not always experienced negatively. For instance, Sai Amulya Komaraju (*forthcoming*) describes how for some platform careworkers the automation provided by algorithmic systems can actually professionalise and depersonalise their employment environment in ways that offer protection and security not available in their off-line labour environment. Not being hired directly by employers allows them to maintain the interpersonal distance needed to avoid common exploitation as "one of the family", for instance (see also Webster and Zhang 2020). Wood and colleagues (2018a) also describe the autonomy available within labour processes when algorithmic management resides only at the beginning and end of the working activity, and how this also enriched the labour experience for some workers.

My goal here is not to merely document a list of exceptions to the "platform work is inevitably bad" narrative but to emphasise that if we draw on intersectional approaches, and pay attention to the identity of workers and the specific conditions of oppression that differentially situate them, we can identify very specific sets of labour relations that govern whether or not platform work is experienced as, or can be interpreted as, good work. The decentring of the Fordist worker as the base of our understanding of labour demands that we bring this kind of lens to our research and use those positional dimensions as the launch point for our critiques rather than universalising and blanket arguments.

4. Imaginaries of Good Work

We might also describe platform work as good work because of its relationship to entrepreneurialism and its connection to disalienated work. In the *Digital Labour* book (Jarrett 2022a), I explore this idea by looking initially at the discourse of a millennial slashie creator – podcaster/author/artist – Emma Gannon who talked about how empowering she finds building her own career path through these unstable and uncertain roles. For her, the instability of digital labour is what allows her creative agency and autonomy.

Gannon is a particularly advantaged digital labourer – she was spruiking for Microsoft after all – and embracing autonomy is quite common in creative industries. But we see similar narratives about being your own boss and achieving autonomy and self-realisation throughout narratives by different kinds of digital workers. Certainly, platforms promote themselves to potential workers using appeals to the affective and cultural value of employment. Many specifically emphasise autonomy in work schedules and being your own boss, distinguishing themselves from boring office jobs.

But this is more than mere promotional guff. Various studies show that workers actually do experience and value these dimensions of their digital labour. We see elements of this in

Gray and Suri's (2019) study of clickworkers in India who, among other things, valued how the work provided opportunities for control over their working time, the chance to do work that was meaningful, and opportunities for self-improvement and self-determination. Brazilian platform drivers in a study by Marcia C. Vaclavik and Liana H. Pithan (2018, 13) placed importance on "control, autonomy, and self-efficacy" in their work. Similarly, a study by Ana Moritz (*forthcoming*), a PhD researcher in my School, has identified how some white collar data workers have a preference for working via platforms rather than formalised employment because of the autonomy that this kind of work affords them.

At play across all kinds of digital labour forms are the positively coded ideals of autonomy and creativity that we associate with entrepreneurialism. To be an entrepreneur is to be a self-made, innovative, self-reliant, risk-taker who possesses the freedom – and the free will – to invest in themselves and their dreams, rather than settle for the banality and tedium of wage slavery. It is arguably this imaginary that undergirds the platform economy as workers transform their talents, knowledges, and skills or their embodied identities into assets upon which to capitalise in the pursuit of a livelihood (Jarrett 2022b). We also see it as they exploit personal assets, such as houses, cars, or bicycles, turning them into income-maximising revenue sources. It is also structurally implicated in platform work where self-employment has supplanted hourly paid waged labour as the typical model of employment. People are rendered entrepreneurs – willingly or not – in this labour environment.

As I have argued in various places, entrepreneurialism is a wide-spread and privileged imaginary – a "sticky idea" as Szeman (2015) has it – connecting platform work and the particular dynamics of its precarious nature to positive cultural ideals. Being an entrepreneur, being self-employed, being your own boss has cachet and social value (Purcell and Brook 2020), which makes it compelling, reframing the narrative through which platform work is encountered.

We might dismiss this investment in entrepreneurialism as a false consciousness or as a "hoax" perpetrated by capitalism as Morgan and Nelligan (2018) suggest. But this would be to disempower workers' capacity to speak their own reality. If we approach the imaginaries of entrepreneurialism and autonomy on their own terms, we can see how platform work, as the emblematic form of digital labour, can be approached, experienced, and critiqued as good work.

In his discussion of hustle culture, Arvidsson (2019) argues that such work is undertaken with a view to generating meaning within work. Central to the cultural imaginary of entrepreneurialism of self-directed, self-employed work is conditions of disalienation – or at best reduced alienation. This labour context emerges as a response to what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) described as the "artistic critique" of capital which focuses on problems of authenticity and alienation in work rather than the distribution of resources. They argue that the response to this criticism – which began in the mid-20th century – has been investment by both capital and worker alike in dimensions of work that provide meaning and autonomy. Digital labour, its regimes of entrepreneurial self-employment, and their associated autonomy and self-actualisation seems to realise this agenda. In the *Digital Labor* book, I go on to suggest that perhaps the kinds of entrepreneurial workers we find in the unstable and precarious employment environments of the digital economy are in fact Marx's children, mobilising alternate models of work to realise the goal of disalienated labour. Obviously, I was being provocative in this framing, and there are serious questions about just how much this work is disalienated in a structural sense.

But what the wide circulation of this narrative of emancipatory entrepreneurial work tells us is that there is much we need to unpack about how the relationship between capitalism and exploitation is being reworked in digital labour and its regimes of self-employment, not least because this reshaping changes people's relationships to work and to struggle. In regimes of self-employment, we can no longer rely solely on the experience of alienation as the key social, cultural, and psychic harm being manifested by capitalism. It thus may not be the only or even primary logic animating and propelling labour struggles. Because self-employment, the class-locations it articulates and the social imaginaries it draws from resist the logics of alienated wage labour, the good work of digital labour suggests we need a revised, re-calibrated, recovered, and maybe even entirely new set of critical, analytical concepts to wield in our analysis of the contemporary labour environment.

But we might also argue that by mobilising these narratives, capital is providing a tool for its own destruction – it is eating itself as the dialectic suggests. That platform work does not, and cannot, realise the ambitions of objectively good work at all times – especially as its typically invasive management processes delimit the promised autonomy – may in fact provide an impetus for resistance and struggle. This is something I am finding in my own developing research into the craft retail platform Etsy. Sellers on the platform went on strike in April 2022 but this was a struggle rooted in the failure of the platform to uphold its promise of autonomous, entrepreneurial work. As this example suggests, it is worth considering more the role promises of autonomy and "good work" might be playing in animating contemporary struggle and resistance, especially from unexpected quarters such as middle-class craft retailers.

Additionally, we might also consider how in deferring control to machines, platform work may be structurally facilitating forms of resistance. It has been argued that without face-to-face contact and in the competitive, individualising environments associated with digital platforms, workers were less likely to resist their exploitation in collective ways (see, for instance, Attoh et al. 2019). However, this has proved to be far from the case as there is much evidence of workers' collective organising via different digital and offline means. But it is also arguably the very nature of the labour conditions associated with platform labour that are leading to forms of worker resistance. Ya-Wen Lei (2021; see also Jarrett 2022a) describes how platform workers' self-employed status means that when unscrupulous or inequitable practices are experienced, they are difficult to resolve through existing labour courts and provisions, leaving collective action, protest, and industrial action as the key solution. Lei also contends that the distance between workers and management created by algorithmic environments further works against settling grievances. Without the affective work done by human managers to secure consent and to normalise changes in labour environments, hostility toward management may actually be increased, amplifying potential for resistance.

Thus, rather than necessarily shutting down opportunities for organisation and resistance, the automated systems of management and the omnipresent (unrealised) promise of autonomy in digital labour may, in fact, be opening them up and facilitating them. Of course, this only happens because platform work is experienced as not good work, but the point I am making here is that assumptions about the inevitable descent into irredeemable badness often associated with this labour needs to be given more granular detail and complexity.

5. Is Platform Work Good Work?

In the end, do I think platform work and digital labour is good work in any objective sense? Would Marx think it was good work? No. I am not convinced. The documented inequalities, iniquities, and intense exploitation associated with platformised labour in all its forms clearly suggest not. Platform labour's good work is also leading the race to the bottom rather than raising the remuneration and conditions for all workers, even though some experience it as a boost.

But I do think that if we want to make any kind of determination of the goodness or otherwise of digital labour we need to be certain about which normative frame we are using to determine good or bad. What is our baseline? Who lives there – and who doesn't? Especially those of us from the global North/minority world need to question our assumptions about the nature of economics and labour as we wield our critical interpretations. We also need to situate any analysis of the experience of platform work within the particular arrangements of power at play in the particular contexts in which specific workers exist, rather than universalising labour experiences.

I also suggest that we must remain mindful of the dialectic which will always render unstable the particular model of capitalism in play at any given time, and involves transforming bad into good – and sometimes back again – as workers exercise their agency and push back against systems. This is how socioeconomic change happens. Finding the places where platform work and digital labour allow workers to experience goodness is just as important as documenting all the ways it goes wrong, even if that good is not one our critical frameworks have historically valued.

So while I am not convinced digital labour is good work, I am keen to stay troubled by, and troubling of, that position and remain open to seeking out the good where it manifests for workers.

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The Moral Life of Platforms: Bridging STS and Cultural Studies to Understand the Contested Morality of Artifacts in the Algorithmic Society

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This contribution builds on our intervention during the closing plenary session at the recent 10th STS Italia 2025 Conference in Milan and seeks to synthesise, in a focused and accessible manner, some of the key insights from our ongoing research into the moral dimensions of digital technologies, particularly platform infrastructures and algorithms. It draws on two main sources: our collaborative fieldwork on gig economy platforms in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, and the conceptual reflections developed in our recent book *Algorithms of Resistance* (MIT Press, 2024). It also intersects with the arguments we unfold more systematically in our forthcoming article tentatively titled "Do Artifacts Have a Morality?". At the heart of our reflection lies a simple but important statement: technologies are not just tools or infrastructures, but sites of moral negotiation. To describe this interplay between design and use, we mobilize the concept of moral economy. Unlike normative ethics or philosophical debates about right and wrong, moral economy allows us to focus on how everyday expectations of fairness, legitimacy, and obligation are embedded in and negotiated through technological systems. Our use of the term draws inspiration from E. P. Thompson's classic work on eighteenth-century English food riots (Thompson 1966; 1971), where he argued

that working-class protests were animated not only by economic need, but by violations of shared expectations about justice and entitlement. This sense of moral order was not codified in law but lived and felt through collective experience.

This historically grounded approach to morality has since been adapted by several scholars to explore how moral claims are made within markets, media systems, and digital infrastructures. Andrew Sayer (1999), for instance, has emphasised how economic relations are always embedded in moral evaluations, even when those evaluations are implicit or contested. In media and technology studies, the concept has been taken up by Silverstone (1992) and others to explore how everyday media use is shaped by judgments of what is acceptable, excessive, exploitative, or trustworthy. We build on this lineage to argue that platforms are not just economic or technical systems, but moral landscapes where struggles over legitimacy, fairness, and responsibility take place. Understanding platforms through the lens of moral economy enables us to ask different kinds of questions. It shifts the focus from what technology does to what it legitimises, enables, and forecloses in practice. It also provides a language for grasping how users engage with platforms not only as consumers or workers, but as moral agents who evaluate, resist, and sometimes reconfigure the rules imposed on them. This focus on morality is not a theoretical embellishment or a philosophical detour. It is central to understanding how power operates through technological systems. Platforms do not only distribute labour, revenue, and visibility – they encode and enforce normative visions of what constitutes good behaviour, efficient performance, and responsible participation. These visions are rarely debated in public or made explicit in terms of ethics, but they are embedded in the default settings, feedback mechanisms, and terms of service that govern our digital life. By foregrounding moral economy, we bring into view the contested terrain of values, duties, and responsibilities that shape platform governance. This allows us to shift from asking what platforms do to asking what kind of social order they attempt to produce, and how that order is accepted, subverted, or remade by users. In an era of expanding algorithmic decision-making, this question is not only timely but politically urgent.

STS has long drawn attention to the politics of design: the assumptions, worldviews, and norms encoded into technological systems. Langdon Winner's provocation that artifacts have politics (Winner 1980) remains foundational, reminding us that infrastructures are never neutral. Building on this legacy, scholars like Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour (1992) have shown how technologies script particular behaviours and relationships, embedding moral expectations into their material form. Latour's famous example of the seatbelt – a nonhuman actor that enforces a legal and moral contract – illustrates how artifacts participate in shaping users' conduct. Akrich's notion (1992) of pre-scription highlights how designers anticipate, guide, and discipline users through built-in expectations. She argues that designers inscribe their worldviews into the technologies they build. These inscriptions take the form of "scripts" that regulate use, specifying how artifacts should interact with both humans and nonhumans. These scripts function as sets of instructions or normative guidelines, which Latour (1992, 232) describes as the "moral and ethical dimension of technological artifacts". These scripts, or *prescriptions*, are essentially the material expressions of what Akrich and Latour (1992) call the artifact's *program of action*, a set of expected behaviours that designers hope users will adopt. In Latour's terms, the designer's intention is encoded into the object,

which then translates this intention into specific material and symbolic prescriptions. The artifact, in this way, exerts a moral agency. Akrich makes this clear when she writes:

> If most of the choices made by designers take the form of decisions about what should be delegated to whom or what, this means that technical objects contain and produce a specific geography of responsibilities, or more generally, of causes. (Akrich 1992, 207)

Whereas STS tend to emphasize the values inscribed (or "pre-scribed" in the terminology of Akrich and Latour) into technologies by their creators, Cultural Studies focuses on how these prescriptions are received, adapted, or resisted by users who "de-scribe" and re-encode them with alternative moral meanings.

From Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall 1980) to the domestication theory developed by Silverstone and colleagues (1992), this tradition has shown that audiences and users are never passive recipients of meaning or functionality. They actively negotiate, reinterpret, and often subvert the frameworks embedded in media and technological systems. Technologies, in this view, are not only infrastructures but also cultural texts that are domesticated and continuously re-read, re-encoded, and re-moralised through everyday use. Moral reasoning, within this tradition, is seen as socially situated, contextually emergent, and shaped by the symbolic struggles of everyday life. As Bengtsson and colleagues (2012) have argued, users constantly engage in informal judgments about what feels right or wrong, legitimate or excessive, when it comes to technology use.

These two traditions, STS and cultural studies, have too often spoken past each other. While STS has focused on the scripts and prescriptions built into technological systems, and cultural studies on how those scripts are interpreted or subverted, both fields are ultimately concerned with how power, meaning, and behaviour are mediated by non-human actors. What has often been missing in their dialogue is a shared vocabulary for addressing the normative dimensions of this mediation – that is, how technologies shape notions of what is good, fair, or appropriate, and how those notions are then contested by users in everyday life. We argue that the concept of moral economy can help bridge this gap by offering a framework that is attentive both to how norms are inscribed into digital platform infrastructures (Plantin et al. 2018) and to how they are reconfigured in use.

Scripts, in this view, are not merely functional templates for action. They carry moral weight. They anticipate and encourage certain kinds of users while deterring others. They distribute not only agency but also legitimacy, prescribing what kinds of conduct are rewarded, sanctioned, or silenced. Likewise, the interpretive work of users is not just about decoding meaning but it represents a form of moral negotiation that can affirm, reject, or creatively reimagine the values embedded in design. By integrating these insights, we can move beyond binary oppositions between designer intention and user reception and begin to trace the dynamic processes through which technological artifacts become morally charged in practice. To illustrate this framework, we draw on our AlgoRes project and the multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork carried out with food delivery workers across five countries: Italy, Spain, Mexico, India, and China between 2020 and 2022. We conducted 68 interviews with food delivery workers and engaged in participant observation during their work shifts. This was complemented by a digital ethnography of dozens of private WhatsApp groups created and used by the workers themselves

(Bonini and Treré 2024; Bonini et al. 2023). These contexts differ in terms of labour law, urban infrastructure, and platform penetration, but they reveal striking continuities in how platform morality is operationalised. Gig economy platforms such as Deliveroo, Glovo, Meituan, Uber Eats, and others encode a distinctive moral economy that challenges the values of their corporate designers which is based on competition, individual performance, quantification, and the extraction of behavioural data as a proxy for value. This moral order is not only written into public-facing branding or user agreements but becomes tangible in the structure of the apps themselves. This is evident in the way affordances are designed to constrain interaction. The absence of peer-to-peer messaging, for instance, is not a technical limitation but a normative decision. It prevents workers from coordinating, comparing pay, or forming alliances. The gamification of productivity – through rankings, badges, or performance scores – encourages workers to compete against one another and accept precarity as the price of flexibility. Opaque algorithmic evaluations determine who gets better time slots, higher-paying orders, or access to shift-swapping, yet the criteria for these decisions are rarely disclosed. These features are not morally neutral. They reward silence, speed, and obedience while discouraging forms of cooperation that might challenge the logic of individualised productivity.

Yet this moral framework is not uncontested. Workers do not simply absorb the normative codes embedded in platform infrastructures. Instead, they actively reinterpret, negotiate, and resist them in everyday ways. Through grassroots digital practices, they construct what we call cooperative affordances: informal, improvised infrastructures of solidarity and mutual support that arise in response to the isolating and competitive logic encoded in platform design (Bonini et al. 2023). These affordances materialise in the gaps left by the platform's architecture where interaction is restricted, communication discouraged, and collective agency rendered invisible. Cooperative affordances take diverse forms, depending on local context, infrastructure, and risk. In some settings, workers create and maintain WhatsApp or Telegram groups to share real-time information about bonuses, traffic blocks, or unsafe areas. They exchange screenshots, coordinate informal shift swaps, and flag sudden changes in app behaviour or delivery rules. These communication channels compensate for the opaque, one-way nature of the platform's informational flow. In contexts with high turnover or low regulatory protection, such as in parts of Mexico and India, they also serve as informal training hubs, where more experienced riders help newcomers interpret ambiguous rules or avoid costly mistakes. In other cases, workers establish unwritten moral codes: discouraging queue-jumping, warning against selfish behaviour, and offering emotional support during difficult shifts. These practices often occupy legal and contractual grey zones, but they reflect a coherent moral logic grounded in reciprocity, shared risk, and collective survival. Platforms may treat riders as atomised inputs, but riders actively produce forms of connection that reassert the social and moral dimensions of labour.

More specifically, these cooperative affordances give rise to three distinct but interconnected forms of moral reconfiguration that challenge the platform's normative order:

1. **Mutual learning**. In the absence of transparency from platforms, workers rely on each other to decode the algorithmic logic that shapes their conditions of work. They share tactics to avoid penalties, maximise bonuses, or understand subtle changes in dispatch

patterns. This collective knowledge production fills the vacuum left by the platform's refusal to explain its own decision-making systems. It also fosters a culture of informal pedagogy and mutual dependence, which directly contradicts the platform's celebration of self-reliance, gamified competition, and entrepreneurial individualism.

2. **Everyday resistance**. While not always formally organised or openly confrontational, workers engage in dispersed acts of tactical disruption. Riders may collectively log off to reduce delivery capacity, refuse undesirable orders, or experiment with hacks and workarounds that soften the algorithm's grip. These actions are rarely articulated in the language of protest, but they are meaningful forms of resistance. They reclaim space for negotiation within rigid systems and highlight the possibility of tactical agency under conditions of constraint. In some cases, such practices build toward coordinated actions; in others, they remain fleeting but significant interruptions of extractive routines.

3. **Solidarity and care**. Perhaps most overlooked, yet arguably most vital, is the emotional and relational infrastructure that workers create to support one another. Messaging groups become spaces not only for logistics, but for humour, empathy, and recognition. Workers check in on each other during dangerous weather, help colleagues replace broken gear, or share surplus orders when someone's income drops. These are not residual or sentimental gestures. They constitute a counter-moral economy based on mutual care, a human ethic that reasserts dignity in a system optimised for silence and speed. In contexts where burnout, isolation, or accidents are common, these solidarities become lifelines.

Together, these practices do more than alleviate the hardships of platform labour. They actively remoralise digital infrastructures, embedding values of cooperation, interdependence, and collective agency into spaces that were explicitly designed to minimise them. In doing so, workers reveal not only the exclusions built into platform morality, but also the possibility of alternative moral orders, grounded in everyday practice rather than top-down design.

These practices also invite us to rethink how we conceptualise moral agency in technological systems. If morality is not an abstract property inscribed once and for all, but an ongoing negotiation between multiple actors – designers, users, algorithms, infrastructures – then agency itself must be understood as distributed and contingent. Platforms do not possess morality on their own, just as users do not operate in a vacuum of pure choice. Instead, moral meanings emerge through the dynamic interplay of scripted behaviours, affordance limitations, contextual constraints, and creative reinterpretation. From STS, we draw the insight that artifacts delegate and prescribe actions. From cultural studies, we learn that users decode, disrupt, and re-signify those prescriptions according to their moral economy. It is in this push and pull, this constant dance between constraint and improvisation, between control and care, that technologies take on their moral texture. By placing design and use into the same analytical frame, we can better understand how moral economies are constructed, contested, and sometimes transformed.

In conclusion, we advocate for a relational and contested view of platform morality. Platforms are not passive tools, nor are they stable moral subjects. They are terrains of struggle,

shaped by conflicting scripts, uneven affordances, and divergent visions of justice. By bridging STS and cultural studies, we can better capture how these struggles unfold, not only in board-rooms and design labs, but also in the streets, phones, and chat groups where users reconfigure technologies through everyday practice. This approach also helps to move beyond determinis-tic accounts of technology that view power as either top-down or bottom-up. Instead, it fore-grounds the moral life of platforms as something that is constantly negotiated, reimagined, and embedded in the micro-practices of labour, resistance, and solidarity. Understanding platforms in this way allows us to grasp not only how control operates, but also how alterna-tives are enacted, however fragile or temporary they may be. We offer this reflection not as a finished theory, but as an invitation. It is a call to think with and across disciplines, and to trace how the moral contours of the algorithmic society are shaped in action, conflict, and care.

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