Work in Gigonomics – What Happens When the Algorithm Manages You?

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Introduction

In 2009, The Daily Beast published the article titled “The Gig Economy.” Tina Brown begins the article with the following words: “No one I know has a job anymore. They've got Gigs.” She describes “gigs” as short-term, free-floating projects, consulting assignments, part-time jobs that people collect like squirrels gather nuts- just to make it through the end of the month. Brown also notes that “gigs” were nothing new for low-income workers, but they were new for those who once believed that a university degree was a guarantee of employment stability: “Welcome to Gigonomics.”

The word “gig” emerged in English in the early 20th century within the artistic sphere. Jazz musicians used the term gig to refer to live, one-off, or independent performances. Accordingly, the term gig is well-suited to a business model based on short-term, task-based labor. Platform work is often portrayed as the future of labor- flexible, with broad worker autonomy and minimal employer oversight. The worker seemingly has the freedom to choose when and where to work. However, the question emerges: What happens when an algorithm enters the picture, bringing with it mechanisms of control?

Flexibility, which at first glance appears to be an advantage, in reality gives rise to uncertainty and the risk of poverty. Income instability, lack of social protection, and undefined working hours create a new yet familiar form of precarious labor. This is not solely a challenge of the digital age. The fissurization of labor and the shifting of responsibility and risk from employers to workers began long ago, and today, under platform labor conditions, we are witnessing a new dimension of this process (Hacker 2016; Weil 2014; Veen, Barratt, and Goods 2020; Rubery et al. 2018).

This study is a systematic literature review that explores how real worker autonomy and process flexibility truly are when labor is governed by algorithms. It is an attempt to view platform work not only as a product of technological progress but also as the outcome of long-term structural changes.

The article is structured into three parts. The first section discusses the typology of platform work and its key characteristics. The second part examines the mechanisms of algorithmic management and their impact on workers’ autonomy. In the third section, we analyze the precarious nature of platform labor as a phenomenon shaped by systemic and long-term structural transformations in the world of work.

1. What Is Platform Work?

The on-demand economy, also known as the gig economy, is a system that enables access to various services through digital platforms (Harris 2017; Duggan et al. 2020). Within the gig economy, there are different typologies of platform labor; however, De Stefano (2015) identifies: remote (non-localized labor, also known as crowd-work) and app-based (on-demand work) labor. In the first case, the client and the worker can connect from anywhere in the world. App-based labor, on the other hand, is localized and includes services such as transportation, cleaning, and delivery, meaning it requires both the worker and the customer to be physically present in the same geographic area.

A platform enables an unlimited number of users to place service requests, which are then matched to individual workers by an algorithm (Duggan et al. 2020).

Thus, there are three key actors in platform labor: the worker - a person whose compensation is tied to individual tasks; the user - a person who needs a specific service; and the platform - whose algorithm connects the worker and the user.

Within this "triangle," the platform is positioned as an intermediary. This allows companies to avoid employer responsibilities while shifting economic risk onto the workers, leaving them without employee status or the corresponding social protections (Veen, Barratt, and Goods 2020; Stewart and Stanford 2017; De Stefano 2016; Rubery et al. 2018).

This model of redistributed responsibility transforms not only the legal nature of labor relations but also the daily work process itself, now governed by algorithms. This further intensifies uncertainty around working conditions and creates a unilateral mode of control (Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020; Griesbach et al. 2019; Rosenblat and Stark 2016).

The following section describes the specific features of algorithmic management and its impact on workers.

2. Algorithmic Management

In recent years, companies have begun using algorithms to manage work processes. An algorithm is a computer-programmed set of pre-defined rules that transforms data into desired outcomes (Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020). Rather than repeating the same rules, algorithms adapt during operation — they rewrite their own code based on new data, generate new rules, and continue functioning accordingly (Won, Lee, and Lee 2023).

Algorithmic management refers to the supervision, control, and regulation of labor through artificial intelligence algorithms — including worker surveillance and tracking, as well as the evaluation of their actions and task performance (Won, Lee, and Lee 2023; Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020; Wood et al. 2018; Griesbach et al. 2019). Self-learning algorithms replace

human managers and allocate tasks based on data collected through continuous surveillance of workers (Duggan et al. 2020).

The absence of a direct human supervisor may appear to grant workers a degree of autonomy. In localized gig work, autonomy typically means that the worker is free to choose when to work, which orders to accept, and which to decline (Wood et al. 2018). This perceived flexibility is precisely the feature companies use to attract workers (Rani and Furrer 2021). However, research has shown that algorithms manage the labor process with greater scale and precision than any human could, raising serious questions about the reality of such autonomy. Griesbach, et. al.(2019) even refer to this level of control as "algorithmic despotism."

In the following subsection, we draw on the typology developed by Kellogg et. al. (2020), who identify three core mechanisms of algorithmic control: a) algorithmic direction, b) algorithmic evaluation, and c) algorithmic discipline.

Additionally, Veen et. al. (2020) emphasize the algorithm's opacity and the informational asymmetry that pervades algorithmic management. For a more comprehensive analysis, these dimensions will also be considered to better understand how algorithmic control affects worker autonomy.

2.1. Mechanisms of Algorithmic Control

2.1.1. Algorithmic Direction

One of the key methods of algorithmic control is algorithmic direction — the process through which algorithms guide workers by determining what tasks need to be completed, in what order, and within what time frame. To do this, the algorithm employs both recommendations and constraints (Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020).

While the algorithm presents tasks as optional suggestions, in practice, it often dictates the "correct" course of action (Goods, Veen, and Barratt 2019). This guidance is implemented through various mechanisms. For example, some localized platforms do not allow workers to see the final destination of an order before accepting it. Drivers or couriers only learn the destination after they have agreed to the task (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). Additionally, algorithms automatically increase pay rates in areas or times of high demand — a psychological nudge designed to ensure that workers are active in the right place at the right time (Gandini 2019). Some platforms also send normative messages in a playful, informal tone to influence worker behavior and boost engagement (Veen, Barratt, and Goods 2020). In all these cases, algorithmic direction blurs the line between freedom and instruction, shaping worker decisions while preserving the illusion of autonomy.

What mechanisms does the algorithm use to ensure that workers follow its recommendations, or that service delivery consistently aligns with demand?

This is where algorithmic constraints come into play. These refer to the deliberate limitation or partial disclosure of information to workers, designed to either encourage or prevent specific behaviors (Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020). For instance, localized platforms like Uber use algorithmic constraints to withhold full details about shifts, ride options, or delivery alternatives. Workers often do not have access to comprehensive information that could help them make strategic decisions. And when confusion arises during the workflow, they cannot directly contact a human manager. Instead, they must interact with “support teams” — typically anonymous operators offering limited assistance (Rosenblat and Stark 2016; Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020; Calo and Rosenblat 2017).

As a result, workers’ ability to choose tasks or determine their working conditions is only nominal. The very design of the platform limits their control over when, where, and how they work. This infrastructure restricts autonomy and creates conditions where workers' rights and well-being may be undermined (Tan et al. 2021; Min Kyung Lee et al. 2015). The algorithm’s guidance increasingly resembles traditional managerial instruction, creating the distinct sense that the worker is under continuous, if invisible, supervision (Griesbach et al. 2019).

2.1.2. Algorithmic Evaluation

Platform companies use evaluation systems to ensure uniform service for customers (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). Algorithmic evaluation occurs in two ways: through algorithmic data collection and algorithmic rating (Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020).

The algorithm collects data on how quickly a worker accepts a task, how many tasks they reject, their speed, fuel consumption, the time it takes them to reach the customer, and other factors (Griesbach et al. 2019; Rosenblat and Stark 2016).

Customer feedback is a crucial component of the rating system. This introduces a new concept into platform work — "customer-driven management." This, in turn, is accompanied by emotional labor (De Stefano 2015; Gandini 2019). It refers to workers managing their emotions in such a way that their facial expressions and body language are perceived positively by external observers (the customer) (Hochschild 2012). Emotional labor was traditionally characteristic of the service sector, but it has now become part of the platform economy.

Customer feedback, in the case of platform workers, is transformed into measurable units — for example, the 5-star rating system. Whereas customer feedback used to be invisible to others, the platform worker's rating now accompanies their profile and is visible to all.

An important factor to consider in the rating system is its vulnerability to discriminatory biases. Societal racial, gender, and ethnic prejudices influence the decision-making process of algorithms (Tan et al. 2021).

Discrimination by algorithms can occur at three stages of their functioning: data collection, data processing, and decision-making. Algorithms learn and make decisions based on various types of data. This includes archived data, as well as selectively collected survey data, which may already contain discriminatory tendencies. During the analysis and preparation process, it is essential to consider the social context and principles of fairness. Without this, the discriminatory tendencies present in the data could be exacerbated.

Data and the resulting evaluations play a significant role in the decision-making processes of platforms. A high rating means more work opportunities for the worker. Algorithms restrict access to certain types of tasks or working hours for low-rated workers (Wood et al. 2018; Tan et al. 2021). This brings us to the next mechanism of algorithmic control — algorithmic discipline.

2.1.3. Algorithmic Discipline

Sometimes, to incentivize workers and at other times to ensure compliance with platform demands, algorithms resort to disciplinary methods (Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020).

Algorithmic replacement (Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020) refers to the quick, sometimes immediate firing and replacement of workers. On localized platforms, in case of unsatisfactory or undesirable behavior, workers are restricted from accessing the app (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). When labor guarantees are nonexistent, and companies have almost no criteria for selecting workers, replacing a worker who has been removed from the app is simple.

With algorithmic rewards, such as higher rates and more opportunities, companies incentivize workers with good performance. On localized platforms, bonus systems are common (Veen, Barratt, and Goods 2020), as well as early access to “good” jobs. Daily targets are also common, achieving high numbers of kilometers traveled or orders delivered (Gandini 2019). Since the rewarding bonuses are based on merit, workers fear losing them. To maintain bonuses or early access, couriers and drivers must constantly meet the platform's demands. This, in turn, increases competition, and the pressure also increases, reflected in their working hours. For workers, this naturally adds additional pressure (Griesbach et al. 2019).

2.2. Algorithmic (In)Transparency

In the previous section, we saw that platform companies provide workers with limited information. However, informational asymmetry does not only emerge during algorithmic task allocation- it accompanies algorithmic management as a whole.

Workers generally have a basic understanding of how tasks are assigned, pay rates are determined, or deactivation from the platform occurs. Yet, it is common for a worker to receive an order that, by general rules, should not have been assigned to them, or to be working under an unexpected rate, without having been informed of the change. Sometimes, their access to the app is restricted without any of the stated conditions being met. Workers are constantly

trying to decode the logic behind algorithmic decisions because usually they are not provided full information about changes in the system. All of this becomes an inaccessible “black box” (Griesbach et al. 2019), which increases stress during work (Rani and Furrer 2021).

Informational asymmetry is also evident in rating systems. Although platform companies inform workers about the possible consequences of good or bad ratings, workers do not clearly understand this control mechanism (Veen, Barratt, and Goods 2020), since they lack full information, and the standards and criteria are often changed unilaterally by the company. These changes are eventually reflected in the algorithm's code (Griesbach et al. 2019).

Companies justify the opacity of algorithmic operation by invoking market competition, arguing that the algorithm’s design, code, and underlying principles must remain confidential to preserve competitive advantage (Rani and Furrer 2021). However, for example, Spain became the first country where, in 2021, the Supreme Court ruled that the worker’s right to information in platform labor also includes access to the mathematical and other types of information that determine working conditions. Companies were required to disclose information about the algorithm’s functioning to workers’ unions (Aranguiz 2021). The Chinese government has also introduced several regulations requiring companies to explain their algorithms to workers in understandable terms (Li et al. 2025).

The lack of transparency and incomplete information has naturally led to the emergence of online forums and social media groups. These virtual spaces have become key places for workers to share and receive information, exchange experiences, provide emotional support and solidarity, and social sense-making (Min Kyung Lee et al. 2015).

3. The Shift of Risk to the Worker and Precarity of Work

By delegating managerial "authority" to algorithms, companies have shed their responsibilities as employers, while workers have been reclassified as self-employed, independent contractors, or micro-entrepreneurs. In traditional employment relationships, worker status is linked to a range of social benefits in many countries. Independent contractors, however, are typically not entitled to unemployment benefits, paid leave, overtime compensation, reasonable accommodation (for persons with special needs), protection against workplace discrimination, the right to unionize, and more.

The gig economy is an extreme manifestation of shifting risks from employers to workers. David Weil referred to the fissurization of traditional employment, through outsourcing, subcontracting, franchising, and gig work, as the "fissured workplace." Through this process,

employers reduce their obligations to provide benefits and protections, allowing them to avoid business risks and distance themselves from their role as social partners.

In many countries, this is compounded by fiscal constraints on governments, the weakening of the welfare state, and the deterioration of social programs, despite growing demand for them (Hacker 2016). As employers and the state withdraw from their responsibilities, the burden of risk increasingly falls on individual workers.

In general, five methods of shifting risk onto workers are identified, and these are clearly evident in unregulated gig work as well (Bieber and Moggia 2021):

1. Short-term contracts – Labor laws typically restrict employers from dismissing employees without notice. However, the short-term contracts common in the gig economy allow companies to hire workers temporarily, avoiding the need for formal dismissal, since contracts expire quickly on their own.

2. Non-fixed working hours – The lack of guaranteed working hours is another way in which business risks are transferred to the worker. The most extreme version of this is the zero-hours contract, where companies only call on workers when needed.

3. Variable pay – Compensation that depends on the completion of specific tasks or the achievement of set goals. This model places income uncertainty on the worker.

4. Flexible scheduling – While it allows businesses to respond swiftly to demand, for workers, it requires constant availability. They may be summoned at any time and often end up working regular overtime.

5. Reduced insurance coverage – Social insurance (such as unemployment or health insurance) helps mitigate risks faced by workers. Traditionally, such costs were shared between employers and employees. In non-standard forms of employment, however, employers are far less likely to participate in these schemes, avoiding additional expenses.

This is particularly evident in localized platforms. Workers are not offered employment contracts, fixed working hours, guaranteed hourly wages, defined start or end times for shifts, or insurance coverage (Bieber and Moggia 2021).

Labor laws, originally designed to ensure fair labor standards and protect workers, now indirectly facilitate these shifts, as they often fail to account for the increasingly complex organization of modern work. As a result, regulations that were meant to safeguard labor standards, reduce health and safety risks, and ensure economic stability are no longer effective in the current context (Weil 2014).

In recent years, some platform workers have managed, through collective organizing, to obtain employee status, form professional unions, and thus gain access to social benefits in certain

countries (Vandaele 2023). In 2024, the European Union also adopted a directive that regulates both the employment status of platform workers and issues related to algorithmic transparency and informational asymmetry. Member states must implement the directive into national legislation within two years (European Council 2024). However, in many places—including Georgia—platform work remains largely unregulated.

The fissured work environment has weakened workers' bargaining power, increased labor precarity, and exacerbated income inequality (Weil 2014).

3.1. Precarity of Work

When discussing precarity, it is essential to examine another key component of platform work: flexibility. This includes task flexibility (the ability to choose which tasks to accept), spatial flexibility (the ability to choose the work location) (Dunn, Munoz, and Jarrahi 2023), and time flexibility (Kahancová, Meszmann, and Sedláková 2020). Flexibility—alongside autonomy—is one of the main reasons people engage in gig work (Rosenblat and Stark 2016; Dunn, Munoz, and Jarrahi 2023). The absence of fixed working hours allows workers to combine platform work with other responsibilities, such as education, family, leisure, and more (De Stefano 2015). However, this same flexibility, especially temporal flexibility, has become a central dimension of precarity in platform labor (Dunn, Munoz, and Jarrahi 2023; Kahancová, Meszmann, and Sedláková 2020).

There is no single, universal definition of precarity, but labor is generally considered precarious when workers lack the guarantees typical of a standard employment relationship. Platform work exemplifies this. Its demand-based and unstable nature places workers in precarious positions and, in effect, deprives them of the ability to plan for the future (Bieber and Moggia 2021). Precarious work can be characterized by three key features (Olsthoorn 2014): a) Unstable employment – the worker knows they might not have a job in the short term; b) Poor support mechanisms – limited workplace rights and protections; c) Vulnerability – the worker is exposed to the risks of job instability and poor working conditions.

In modern platform labor, even more indicators of precarity have been identified. Based on their study of gig work in developed countries, Kahancová, Meszmann, and Sedláková (2020) define six such dimensions:

1. Income – Precarity is present when income is at least two-thirds below the median wage. It is also noted that platform work is typically not regulated by labor law, and any wage-related regulations (where they exist) do not apply to it. However, income-related precarity depends on whether platform work is the worker's primary or supplemental source of income.

2. Job stability – In this case, precarity refers to the reduced protection of employment compared to standard employment relationships. This includes flexible work conditions, seasonal fluctuations, direct impact of customer ratings and reviews on work availability, and the lack of protection mechanisms in case of job termination.

3. Social protection – Precarity stems from limited or non-existent social protection guarantees, including restricted rights to leave and collective benefits, which are tied to specific work arrangements (such as small contracts, zero-hour contracts, self-employment, and other similar models).

4. Working time – Precarity is linked to unpredictable working hours and the overall volume of work time, which often includes excessive and frequently unpaid overtime.

5. Workplace autonomy – Precarity may arise from inadequate working conditions, including limited access to training and skill development, absence of career advancement opportunities, increased risk of work-related stress, lack of information, and pressure resulting from real-time user ratings, feedback, and reviews.

6. Collective representation – In this dimension, precarity emerges from limited access to collective representation of interests. This is partly because traditional labor unions rarely focus on platform workers. On the other hand, the nature of platform work, where workers have few opportunities to interact, prevents the formation of a collective identity and the defense of their interests.

According to these criteria, if we look at developed countries, where the social safety net is strong and employment relationships offer numerous advantages to workers, we can confidently say that gig work is indeed more precarious compared to standard employment. However, in developing countries, particularly in low- and middle-income states, the gig economy has contributed to increased employment and poverty reduction (Wood et al. 2018). In contexts where labor conditions are already poor, the gig economy offers employment opportunities to individuals who would otherwise be jobless or forced to work under even worse conditions (Tan et al. 2021; Min Kyung Lee et al. 2015). However, this does not mean that platform work in these countries, including Georgia, is not precarious. On the contrary, in such contexts, both standard and non-standard forms of labor are characterized by precarity.

Conclusion

Platform work was supposed to be a solution for workers, offering flexible schedules and autonomy. However, algorithmic management, or control through directives, rating systems, and reward-and-punishment mechanisms, significantly limits the scope of that autonomy. In addition, workers have limited information about how algorithmic management operates, or about the algorithms themselves. This informational vacuum is often filled through their own observations and discussions on online forums.

This form of platform labor has taken shape as a result of two major processes: 1. The fragmentation of jobs, during which the structure typical of standard employment relationships breaks down. The social contract that once existed between workers and employers has disappeared. 2. Employers have shed responsibility for the social guarantees workers used to receive from them. And when the state also fails to provide an adequate social protection system, all risks are shifted onto the worker.

As a result of these processes, work has become precarious, creating an unstable environment that weakens the worker. Platform workers experience stress due to unstable income, instability of the workplace itself, unregulated working hours, lack of social guarantees, and limited autonomy on the job.

In some countries, platform workers have succeeded in securing coverage under labor law and have formed professional unions. However, in many places, this remains an unattained goal.

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