Sustainable Platform Cooperativism

Towards social and environmental justice in the future of the gig-economy

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INTRODUCTION

Gig-economy platforms are disrupting the way that work is managed, completed and measured in low and no skill work in the UK. 2.8 million people work in the UK's gig-economy, in which "the exchange of labour for money between individuals or companies via digital platforms that actively facilitate matching between providers and customers, on a short-term and payment by task basis" [9]. The large uptake of these platforms in the logistics sector (e.g. Uber, Deliveroo) provides employers with a dynamic, flexible and lower cost workforce, who can be instantly matched to piecemeal work through ICT and ranked on their performance [6]. Gig-work is growing as the primary way of work in the last-mile goods courier sector and urban mobility, intertwined with increasing levels of externalities connected to rapidly evolving consumption and unsustainable logistics networks [1,4,5].

Gig-workers fall into a legislative grey area in current labour law [16] with discrimination and casualisation of gig-workers being invisible. Access to work is gate kept by algorithms that do not overlook bias or discrimination [12,15]; workers face isolated working days with little human contact [7,8]; gig-workers face lower than living wage pay with no holiday, sick or maternity leave, and trouble accessing welfare [3]; and, ratings and reviews (and their biases) playing an increasing role in access to income and livelihoods of the worker [6,12]. Public policy makers face mounting pressures around the impacts of an on-demand gig-economy due to outdated 20th Century labour laws [6] and a decade of mass disruption of digital platforms.

CHALLENGES AND NEXT STEPS

We seek to begin a journey that enables policy makers, academics and workers to coordinate and build the foundations for a cooperative gig-economy which pro-actively shifts power to gig-workers. At the core of this vision are the principles and values of the cooperative movement[1]. Three main areas are of focus: 1) pro-active co-design of processes and systems to help workers organise; 2) building evidence bases and stories to engage policy makers; and, 3) embracing and promoting post disciplinary approaches (cf. [10]).

Embedding more deeply with cooperatives, unions and communities. Embracing relationships, models and systems through engagement and active work with the actual people who are living, working and breathing these lives and pains, such as unions, cooperatives and communities e.g. CoTech[2], Fairwork Foundation[3], PCDK[4], Co-operatives UK[5], IWGB[6].

Co-designing the foundations for "Sustainable Platform Cooperativism" in a future of worker individualism. Embracing co-design, provocative design, design fiction and software systems to promote cooperative platforms and shifting narratives to rebalance work and labour that active supports the rights and lives of gig-workers and life-style couriers (cf. [8,7,5]).

Communicating with public and organisational policy makers. Academics are uniquely trusted by organisations and public policy makers as neutral parties. As part of this work, we look to ask the difficult questions, get access to data, and use our privilege to communicate effectively with policy makers (cf. [14]).

Embedding cooperatives in education. Creating a network of organisations and communities to engage in post disciplinarily research and dissertation projects, embedding the stories of social and environmental justice in our Computer Science, HCI and Data Science curricula.

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[1] http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles
[2] https://www.coops.tech
[3] https://fair.work
[4] https://wiki.fluidproject.org/display/fluid/Platform+Cooperative+Development+Kit
[5] https://www.uk.coop
[6] https://iwgb.org.uk

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