

NOT-EQUAL

EPSRC NetworkPlus: Social Justice through the Digital Economy

Project Final Review Form

Please submit this form within one month of completing your project to notequal@ncl.ac.uk.

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Lead Applicant (PI): Wifak Gueddana Email address: wifak.houij_gueddana@kcl.ac.uk Job Title: Teahcing Fellow Department: Digital Economy and Society Organisation: KCL	Co-Investigators (names and organisations): Kendra Brikken Strathclyde Uni, James Stewart Edinburgh Uni, Rob Proctor Warwick Uni, James Ravenscroft Filament Consultancy. Supporting Partner(s): Duncan McCann and Miranda Hall NEF. Project Title: Who Cares Project Reference Number: NE 106

1. SUMMARY

Please outline the research challenge and question your project aimed to address, in less than 100 words.

Platforms have been a key subject of publications over the past decades with a few unicorns that have been particularly under the spotlight such as, Uber, Deliveroo, Amazon and AirBnB. When first introduced, they have been heralded as 'new' or 'unique' and said to be technological disruptors that have transformed the labour markets by eliminating intermediaries, connecting workers with clients and lowering barriers to access jobs. This so-called 'platformisation' of work has been a crucial dimension in the rise of platforms and the gig economy more generally. It has also been powerful and productive from a research point view, leading scholars over the past decades to conceptualise platforms as bounded spaces and to study their relationships of automated control and trust in isolation from other key social and political dimensions. However, the so-called 'platformisation' of work is a reductive tech-logic that shows platforms as a new mode of affordance that is inherently different from traditional labour markets; In this way, mainstream platform research has created a dangerous disconnect with traditional sociology of work and existing studies on temp and non-standard working.

2. APPROACH



Please provide a summary of the approach of your research project, including any deviations from your work plan, the reasons for this and how you addressed any issues.

To address these shortcomings, we first show that platform-working extends the digital boundaries of platforms and is more broadly linked to the dynamics of online networking and digital communities. For e.g. Uber work is not limited to the job displayed by an app. Indeed, workers carry invisible work to support apps' transactions, like applying individually for MOT, searching for information, interacting with peers, acquiring skills, sharing experience, building a reputation, reviewing clients, monitoring payments and asking for tech and peer-support. However, the nature and extent of this digital labour is hardly studied and characterised; it is hidden and it is deemed unproductive, i.e. seen as work that only allows to sustain workers' digital livelihood and to hedge the risks of working online, i.e. avoiding scams, finding a job and getting paid. Accordingly, it is important not to just focus on one app to study platform work, instead to transcend platform-centrism by researching the multiple spaces of digital labour (i.e. online communities of work, group chats, work forums and social media pages) in order to measure what platform working really means.

Second, these online spaces encapsulate new bodies of knowledge on platform working, the changing nature of work and the life of platform-workers that are produced in real-time -i.e. especially data that can develop current understanding on platforms' algorithmic exploitation, automated inequality, and work discrimination, as well as, new forms of online organising and individual and collective resilience. For this reason, we argue that work forums are politically productive. They also constitute an alternative source of rich text data that is not fabricated by platform owners, nor is-it shaped by their transactional view of work. This could be used to further our understanding of the gig economy and help revert the power asymmetry that platforms have created over users' ownership of data.

3. ACTIVITIES & OUTPUTS

Please list any outputs from your project to be entered in the Not-Equal Researchfish submission. These include events, publications, workshops, webinars, invited talks, media coverage and tools (please include links to open source, git-hubs if relevant) that have resulted from your project.

Please include the following for each entry:

Our Not Equal team hosted panels on the topic of platforms and care work and presented our preliminary research at a number of conferences and events including:

[Resistance is Fertile: A One Day Conference](#) (14.09.19, Goldsmiths College)

[Challenging the Work Society Summit](#) (27.09.19, Birkbeck College)

[A Two-day Summit: Disrupting Technology](#) (16.01.20, University of Leeds)

Two articles covering NEF's research funded by Not Equal were published by the global media platform OpenDemocracy:

[The Crisis of Care.com: Platforms are reorganising the way we care for each other. But on-demand apps won't plug the holes in our broken social infrastructure](#) (11.03.20)



[Love Won't Pay the Bills: Many nannies and housekeepers won't receive anything from government coronavirus schemes. A minimum income guarantee could protect all workers – including migrants \(22.04.20\)](#)

4. INSIGHTS & IMPACT

Please describe the findings of your project and their significance in relation to potential or actual social impact.

THIS HAD SET US UP NICELY TO BRING TOGETHER THE PILOT FROM THE TOPIC MODELLING SIDE TOGETHER WITH THE SUBJECTIVE LIVED EXPERIENCES FROM THE LOW PAID ONLINE CARE WORKERS. WE HAD BEEN IN CLOSE CONTACT, AND ENERGIZED FROM THE POSITIVE FEEDBACK DURING THE CONFERENCE. WHEN THE LOCKDOWN HIT, THE SCHEDULED FIELDWORK COULD NOT TAKE PLACE. WE MERGED PARTS OF IT TO ONLINE, BUT SINCE MY ROLE WAS SUPPORTING THE DESIGN MORE, MOST WORK WAS DONE BY NEF AS AGREED.

5. REFLECTIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Please list the key highlights from your project, summarize any lessons learned from this work and outline any future directions or plans to continue activities beyond this project.

The key output here is a collection of exploratory spaces to read through key discussions, operate manual codes and identify key users who can be interviewed and invited to participate in complementary focus groups. Topics and network visualisations will also be shared with professional groups and focus group participants to enable a productive discussion on the limits and benefits of this methodology and whether this could be at all used to empower workers and help them organise.

So far, we have run a topic modelling (TM) analysis that generated analytical clusters -i.e. themes that are based on semantic text analysis and co-word occurrence. These were first generated automatically, then they were refined through manual coding and interpretative analysis of discussion threads. Second, we have listed a selection of discussion threads based on random sampling. This has allowed us to capture micro-stories, i.e. snapshots from workers' life that illustrate some of the issues that online freelancers experience. They were used as the basis for loose categories of issues such as security/scams, payment issues, inadequate platform support, search/indexing issues. Third, we have created visualisations that provide synthetic overviews of workers' networks and could be integrated as filters in the topic analysis to focus on key actors and sub-networks and analyse conversations in context.

Before this, it is also important to remind that this analysis, data mining and visualisation, were carried based on a large and systematic scraping of discussion threads across Reddit subcommunities of platform workers, online



freelancers and crowdworkers. This was possible through the work of a first interdisciplinary team. But today, we believe that we need to progress this work through even larger-scale and systematic analysis of forums (-instead of Reddit and random sampling). However, we may not be able to do that within the current team members, so that we still need to acquire the appropriate nexus of partners and technologists.

We thus partnered with the University of Sussex and CASM Consulting LLP in order to build new partnerships and better ways of conducting research on gig work forums and related social media data. More particularly, we have used their pioneering in-house social media analysis technology – ‘Method52’ to capture and analyse a range of voices and topics across forums. For example, we have mined to datasets on freelancers and crowdsourcing Reddit communities to identify key topics, surprise sentences and matching words. Using these outputs, our objectives is to keep ‘training’ the datasets to be able to generate more granular and relevant threads and topics. But this is still very work in progress.

The funding from Not Equal for preliminary scoping exercise into this under-researched area of the platform work has been extremely valuable for shaping NEF’s strategy for work on the digital economy. We are currently writing a policy paper on digital transformations in the UK care sector.

In terms of grassroots campaigning, we have also been supporting the Nanny Solidarity Network (a mutual aid group for home childcare workers) and the IWGB Nannies & Au pairs branch (the first UK union branch for home childcare workers) to develop a union campaign demanding that Bubble, one of the on-demand apps highlighted in our research, pay their workers a minimum wage.

6. WEBSITE SUMMARY

Please outline the research findings to share on the Not-Equal website

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this form, please contact notequal@ncl.ac.uk or 0191 2088268.

