

La Nouvelle Revue du Travail
Call for submissions

**Moving work online:
Digital platform-based employment and jobs**

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A number of digital platforms (Airbnb, Deliveroo, Uber, etc.) have expanded in recent years by presenting themselves as new types of intermediaries linking end users and the suppliers of labour. The success of these new kinds of companies has intrigued the press, causing polarised debates between advocates of “the sharing economy” and critics of how “uberisation” damages work and employment. Some of these new economic actors have become multinational enterprises within a very short period of time, generating colossal revenues, whereupon they become quickly and widely lauded as the harbingers of a new digital economy. Yet behind this supposedly innovative business model, one particularity characterising this new type of economic transaction is the fact that the suppliers or labour are often private individuals who neither earn wages nor qualify as bona fide professionals. The correct way of viewing them is as the owners of the means of labour (i.e. labour force) that they - acting in their capacity as independent contractors - either sell directly to consumers or else to other intermediaries.

More broadly, the digital economy raises renewed questions about the borders of work. “Digital labour” is turning into a fully-fledged field of study. The concept is comprised of a wide range of concrete inputs, ranging from Facebook “likes” to comments found on various websites or the “captcha” codes that can regularly be found online. It encompasses all digital activities undertaken outside of a “work” framework and which are often not considered work, despite generating the earnings they do. As such, the concept resonates with studies done into the kind of work that consumers do. Its ability to reshape the definition of labour – and the economic and commercial system in which it materialises – is highly stimulating.

These new digital economic interfaces call for empirical investigations as well as theoretical reflection. The present issue will seek to analyse new economic practices as well as the kinds of work that they induce – without necessarily labeling them from the very outset as something that is particularly innovative or even unusual. After all, digital platforms might also be construed as resurgent forms of ancient practices. The kind of outsourcing that these new technologies facilitate is akin to the “putting-out system” that characterises proto-industrialisation, with “manufacturers” - who contrary to what the name suggests also manufacture nothing - allocating orders they have received (along with the necessary materials) to workers employed home, who will later return the finished products at an agreed time and for an agreed price. When seen in this light, crowdsourcing might be equated with a renewed and internationalised form of what was once called the “domestic system”, despite the latter concept being more or less banned since the late 19th century.

Observing digital platforms and analysing how they function raises a series of fundamental questions about working practices, forms of employment and the social and legal models surrounding today’s economic system. The idea then becomes to question economic and

social situations as well as workers' legal and even political status. Ancillary to this is (new) thinking about what shape wage-earning and work itself have taken in the modern world.

A partial and indicative list of thematic questions relevant to this issue include:

Inequality vis-a-vis “sharing” and “free services”. Issues here include which workers offer their services via such platforms and what kind of inequality results from this social structuring of the digital economy; and whether the appearance of these new kinds of intermediaries will reinforce inequality or alter the composition thereof. After all, if inequality can be thought of in terms of class, gender, generation, migratory trajectories and racial descriptions, digital platforms constitute an invitation to explore the international division of labour that they cause occasionally, as well as the ensuing inequalities between countries.

The commercialisation of free labour and the borders of work. The focus here includes to what extent digital economy recasts the spotlight on borders between professional, volunteer and home work; what role it plays in commercialising activities previously undertaken outside of a paid work framework; whether some activities might end up being recognised as work; to what extent the commercialisation of “work done on the side” can spark a professionalisation process; and how this affects existing professions and careers.

Employment status and social protection analysis might include what work modes and employment statuses connect platforms to workers; which legal statuses and social protections then become relevant to them; whether digital platforms could cause confusion about people's employment status or indeed wage-earning itself (conceivably replaced by a society of small entrepreneurs); and if encouraging individual initiative is a source of liberation or precarity.

Working modes and conditions topics might ask how these activities mesh with the social, family and professional trajectories of the workers involved; which are the exact functions that intermediaries or the platforms themselves actually fulfil (in terms of networking, coordination and quality control); by what channels and thanks to which mechanisms can work be organised at this level; and how do workers relate to the platforms.

The new economic actors' legal and political regulations raise questions about how the platforms' own legal and political regulations are organised (and specifically what is the role of traditional worker support bodies such as trade unions or professional organisations; whether workers in the digital economy might be advised to found collectives to defend their interests and rights; and if the mobilisation modes they inaugurate are specific to them.

National specificity and international comparison themes involve using digital economic actors' international nature to explore this topic in different national contexts and by so doing highlight each country's specificities (as well as the digital economy's implications for the international division of labour).

Submission details:

Articles cannot exceed 45,000 characters (including spaces, footnotes and bibliography). They should be sent before 4 December 2017 to nrtravail@gmail.com as per the instructions and presentation norms specified under the NRT website's Submission and Evaluation tab.