

CHAPTER 4

Online Workers

Delivery and transportation are forms of work that must happen in a particular place. They are easy to stumble upon during our day-to-day lives. However, other forms of platform work can be much harder to gain an insight into. This chapter will discuss these other forms of online work. While all work is, of course, linked to location by the fact that a worker is completing it somewhere, there has been a growth of work that is mediated online. This does not mean that location is not important, but rather that it matters in a different way. The two main forms of online work are freelancing – which may entail tasks such as graphic design, copy-editing, software or website development – and microwork – which involves short tasks broken apart and distributed to workers across the world. The differences in the character of both these kinds of work has meant that the previous label of ‘unorganisable’ (which had been applied to all platform workers) is now increasingly applied to these online workers. After all, so the argument goes, these workers do not meet each other on the streets, so how could they start building the networks they need to organise? The aim of this chapter is to show that online workers can – and indeed are – organising against platforms.

Origins of Online Work

Before moving on to talk about the experiences and activities of these platform workers, it is first worth stepping back to consider how this work came into being. The first underpinning factor is global labour arbitrage. Work has always been distributed unequally across the world, between different countries and regions. This has been fundamentally shaped by histories of conquest, colonialism, and imperialism. Historically, capital has been able to exploit these regional and national differences, creating networks of production and circulation based on – and indeed exacerbating – these divisions. Although there are

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long histories of this alongside capitalist production, the introduction of forms of digitised work has increased the capacity for these new global divisions of labour – which of course also rely on global networks of production for the infrastructure and technology that allow them to work.

One of the most visible – or perhaps audible – examples of this is call centre outsourcing. The relocation of call centres has followed the linguistic lines of imperialism (Huws et al. 2001), with call centres moving from Britain to India, or from Portugal to Brazil, for example. The legacy of imperialism means that many workers in the previously colonised countries speak the same language as the customers in the imperial centre, while the cost of their labour is significantly less. The integration of telephones with computers meant that it was possible to route calls internationally, without significant cost or challenges to the technical quality of the conversation. While in many cases this led to a huge shift in call centres to India and the Philippines (Sallaz 2019), it also allowed work to be combined in new ways. Some of this involved a form of virtual outsourcing, in which ‘firms routinely reroute calls from UK to Indian centres when UK operators are busy, at night or weekends, or when overtime rates apply at home’ (Glucksmann 2004, 807). As Glucksmann argues, this kind of outsourcing involves both ‘organizational’ and ‘spatial’ dimensions, building on ‘industrial and organizational divisions of labour’ that ‘enmesh with global divisions of uneven development’ (2004, 801). Call centres that followed this model initially gained competitive advantage, which later reduced as competitors adopted the same methods. This led to a context in which the ‘only way to continue to compete is to use the, now established, work system more intensively’ (Ellis and Taylor 2006, 6).

These dynamics in the call centre became the testing ground for new methods of technological surveillance and control, many of which would later be developed in the platform model (Woodcock 2020a). However, as Taylor and Bain (2004) argue, the movement of call centres ‘should be regarded as an extension, however dramatic, of the spatial dynamic that is inherent in the call centre project’. This kind of work organisation starts by pulling together workers in a single workplace and having them call – or be called – by remote customers. It therefore provides a virtual interface between customers and companies, while driving down the costs of these interactions.

Online work develops from this same organisational and spatial dynamic. It involves a much more diverse set of tasks than simply speaking to a customer and can draw on a much larger pool of potential workers. For example, there was much early hype surrounding the discovery of the capacity of a ‘crowd’ of participants to solve problems. Crowdsourcing develops this idea to fill a particular niche for capital. The term was coined by Howe (2006) in the techno-evangelist magazine *Wired* as ‘the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call’. Rather

than just taking the communication interface of the company, as in the case of the call centre, this takes aim at other aspects that would have previously been internal to a company. This is the first step towards microwork – often posited as a ‘competition’ to complete a task: designing a new logo or coming up with a new flavour of a product, for example. However, most of these outsourcing tasks involve a new form of cooperation. As Marx previously argued, ‘as a general rule, labourers cannot co-operate without being brought together: their assemblage in one place is a necessary condition of their co-operation’ (1867, 447). However, with digital technology it has now become possible to assemble huge numbers of workers across the world to cooperate indirectly under the command of capital. This new cooperation of a dispersed crowd is what microwork allows.

Automation

From this origin of outsourcing and crowdsourcing, platform technology has facilitated new ways to manage remote and distributed workforces. Here, crowdsourcing is transformed into online freelancing for large tasks, or crowdwork through new methods of breaking up and distributing smaller tasks. In a sense, online freelancing is an extension of the longer histories of freelance work, with tasks now subcontracted across increasingly global platforms. For crowdwork, this builds on a technical organisation of work which ‘relies on dyadic relationships consisting of one buyer, one supplier and a well defined final deliverable’ (Kaganer et al. 2013, 25). It is hard to break up complicated tasks into smaller fragments for distribution in this way. Instead what is needed is a clear output: the tagging of an image or the transcription of a small part of text, for example.

The Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform provides a clear example of this process. Amazon distributes HITs (Human Intelligence Tasks) to a large group of workers. The platform does not provide a way for these workers to collaborate on the discrete tasks, nor to know what large piece of work they are contributing to. The HITs are posted as microtasks, with workers competing for them. The name of the platform alludes to the Mechanical Turk. This was an eighteenth-century hoax: an automaton made to look as though it were playing chess while hiding a human player inside. The Mechanical Turk was widely displayed and toured, although it would later be outed as an illusion. While it was on display in London in 1784, Edmund Cartwright visited it. Apparently, he was so taken with it that he questioned whether ‘it is more difficult to construct a machine that shall weave than one which shall make all the variety of moves required in that complicated game’ (quoted in Levitt 2000, 31). Spurred on by this, Cartwright filed a patent for a power loom within a year (Levitt 2000, 32). The introduction of the power loom is often cited as a key development in the

industrialisation of weaving during the Industrial Revolution. Hundreds of thousands would be built, driving out skilled weavers and creating conditions that William Blake would refer to as ‘dark satanic mills’.

This is therefore a particularly interesting choice of name by Amazon. First, it implies that Amazon is hiding workers behind the platform façade. Indeed, Trebor Scholz (2015) argues that Amazon’s ‘crowd sorcerers work with coolness and the spectacle of innovation to conceal the worker’. This can also be seen with the abbreviation HIT, using and then removing ‘human’ from the name of the task. This deliberate hiding of workers’ labour on the platform makes it appear quite different to the transportation tasks previously discussed. Platforms, like an increasing proportion of our society, operate like a ‘black box’, meaning a ‘system whose workings are mysterious’ (Pasquale 2015, 3). As Scholz (2015) has argued, the labour process at MTurk can be understood as a form of ‘digital black box labor’. However, this labour is being used for particular ends. For example, Amazon itself has previously used the slogan ‘artificial artificial intelligence’ for MTurk. This is applied to tasks that, for now, rely on the human ability to interpret things, whether images or emotions. These kinds of tasks are those that, so the current AI (artificial intelligence) hype goes, could soon be performed by AI.

MTurk is therefore part illusion. It provides the illusion of automation, or as Astra Taylor (2018) has described it, ‘fauxtimation’, to make it appear as though the work has been automated. In fact, the technical challenges of artificial intelligence have led to some companies opting to use MTurk instead, as ‘some startups have worked out it’s cheaper and easier to get humans to behave like robots than it is to get machines to behave like humans’ (Solon 2018). Expensify is one example of this. It was positioned as an automated app for business expense management, claiming to have developed ‘SmartScan technology’ to automatically transcribe receipts. However, it was later discovered that the company had done no such thing. Instead the scanned receipts were posted as HITs to MTurk. As one MTurk worker and advocate, Rochelle LaPlante, said, ‘I wonder if Expensify SmartScan users know MTurk workers enter their receipts’, including personal and sensitive data such as ‘someone’s Uber receipt with their full name, pick-up and drop-off addresses’ (quoted in Solon 2018).

The reality, as companies such as Expensify have found, is that automating these tasks requires the development of machine learning algorithms trained on high-quality datasets. These datasets still have to be produced by real workers. The reality for workers is that requesters (those posting HITs) increasingly treat workers as part of their software, plugged in to wider assemblages of algorithms and automation. Indeed, they do not even have to get involved with the messy business of hiring and firing people. As Jaron Lanier says, this involves ‘a sense of magic, as if you can just pluck results out of the cloud at an incredibly low cost’ (2014, 178). This low cost is the result of much work being very poorly paid (Hara et al. 2018), and the exploitation both of international differences in the cost of living and people who cannot find work elsewhere. Clearly, Amazon’s offering can be quite attractive to capital.

However, MTurk represents something different from the chess-playing automaton: it is also helping to develop the basis upon which automation could happen in the future. As Cartwright saw the original illusion and the potential for greater automation, so too do many of MTurk's clients (those posting work). The huge quantities of human labour being exploited on MTurk therefore provide a route towards automation, as well as a cover for failing to have achieved this so far. This goes far beyond the original illusion. For example, Uber's dream of automated vehicles relies upon the training of datasets by microworkers (Gray and Suri 2019). This ties in with broader claims about the coming automation of work. The claims vary: either 47 per cent of occupations are at high risk of automation in the next two decades (Frey and Osborne 2017), or half of all work could be automated (McKinsey Global Institute 2017), or risks vary across countries, with 14 per cent of jobs being highly susceptible to automation (Nedelkoska and Quintini 2018). MTurk therefore needs to be understood within this drive, both real and apparent, for automating work. However, as the later chapters will discuss, automation of work needs to be understood as developing out of the existing economic and power relationships in the workplace (O'Neil 2017; Eubanks 2018; Noble 2018), not as some deterministic drive.

Automation is, in a sense, an important part of less discrete online work. Online freelancing can take in a wide range of different activities, but it is also tied to the contradictions of outsourcing and forms of creative work. Unlike discrete HITs, online freelancing has an element of autonomy, something that brings risk for capital as the labour process takes place outside the boundaries of the traditional workplace. Capital has struggled with the need to 'balance' the 'insatiable need for a stream of innovative ideas with the equally strong imperative to gain control over intellectual property' and workers (Huws 2010, 504). As Braverman observed, after 'mental labour is first separated from manual labour', it 'is then itself subdivided rigorously according to the same rule' (1998, 78). This specialisation can be seen in crowdwork and outsourcing, with tasks being carved off and then subjected to greater control, deskilling, and devaluing. The reality has meant increasingly complex forms of surveillance and control – both with online work, and then increasingly applied to workers within the boundaries of organisations. The pressure for automation is there too with online work, as training algorithms does not just involve training datasets, but also finding ways in which 'workers' knowledge is first routinized, then codified and transferred from its variable (human) component to its fixed, machinic form' (Dyer-Witheford 2015, 178).

Technical Composition

Online work has grown enormously in scale. As Mark Graham (2015) has previously argued, there are now 'millions' of online workers in 'low-income countries like Kenya who can use online work to transcend some of their local labour market's constraints.' However, in escaping the local labour market conditions,

these workers enter what we might call new ‘planetary labour markets,’ with Upwork and Freelancer, the two largest English-language platforms, claiming to have 12 and 25 million workers signed up each (Graham and Anwar 2019). It is worth noting that this figure is not the same as those who have actually secured paid work on the platform – a figure that is much lower. The global scale of these marketplaces forces ‘many workers to desperately try to underbid each other to attract short-term contracts. And, because contracts are largely unregulated, stories of discrimination and exploitation abound.’ Despite this increasing digital mediation of work, there remain important geographic features and dynamics. Much of the work, as noted earlier, follows linguistic lines of imperialism. Companies in the Global North request the majority of the work, which is mostly completed by workers in the Global South. According to one study, almost three-quarters of demand comes from the US and the EU, while two-thirds of the workers live in Asia (with India and Bangladesh comprising 41 per cent). However, there still remain significant numbers of online workers in the Global North: US workers make up 12 per cent of the total (Ojanperä et al. 2018).

On this vast scale of globally distributed online work, there is a risk that the individual – and indeed collective – worker fades in the background. Despite the role of digital technology, these relationships of work still involve capital and labour, and the labour of workers happens in a particular place, drawing on and using the physical world. Often the metaphors of clouds and so on obscure the materially rooted processes that underpin this work. It is worth returning to the example of the Mechanical Turk, but this time inquiring into the conditions of the person behind the façade.

The first experience that is important to draw attention to is one that comes from the technical composition of this work. Signing up to work on one of these platforms is an isolating experience. The platforms use a range of double-speak to refer to aspects of the work – for example, not even calling it work, as in the term HIT used by Amazon. There is often little explanation of how to complete the tasks. This means that workers need to learn how to work in this way. This often starts with testing the water – signing up to platforms and figuring out if it is possible to make money this way. Unfortunately, there are many diversions and dead ends as part of this process. The promise of making money from home has long involved scams: envelope-stuffing work-at-home schemes have existed for almost a hundred years. The flyposted offers of an income far beyond what workers could find elsewhere (although often the figure is ‘up-to’) are one example of this. These scams have proliferated through online networks, preying on people who are unable to find work elsewhere.

The process of signing up to work online is one of avoiding scams like these. However, scamming is a widespread practice on platforms. While the capitalist work relation involves scamming at its core – workers are paid less than the value they produce – there are also scams that further exploit workers beyond

the contracted limits. This is, of course, nothing new. Marx noted that the factory inspectors had observed the “‘small thefts’ of capital from the labourer’s meal and recreation time,” and how, as one master explained, ‘to work only ten minutes in the day over-time, you put one thousand a year in my pocket’ (1867, 352). These struggles over the length of working time stem from the contradiction between labour and capital, played out in both factories and digital platforms. In the case of microworkers who are not legally employed, they are only paid when actually completing the small tasks. This means that paid work is regularly interrupted by unpaid periods. It would not be possible to sit down for a shift of, say, seven hours and be paid non-stop for that period. Instead, bits of paid work are interspersed with unpaid time searching for new tasks. This strips out the unproductive time for capital, meaning that it only needs to pay for the parts that are profitable. After all, as Marx noted, ‘moments are the elements of profit’ (1867, 352). At the beginning of the process, these periods of unpaid work are even longer. Understanding which platform to work for, signing up, learning the interface, training for the work, reading the requirements of the task, and so on are all unpaid.

As a worker becomes more experienced, they would hope that these periods of unpaid work could be reduced to a minimum, ensuring they have the maximum pay for their time. However, this calculation is not as simple as increasing the pace of your work. On platforms such as MTurk, requesters can ‘reject work that does not meet their needs,’ a safeguard on the platform that in practice ‘enables wage theft’ (Irani and Silberman 2013). Perhaps this was included to convince early requesters that the work would be of high quality – a kind of money-back guarantee. However, MTurk has been going on long enough, with enough requesters regularly using it, that this has become a commonly abused feature. Again, this follows a long history of capital’s ‘petty pilfering of minutes’ (Marx 1867, 352). For example, one study found that requesters that were badly rated by workers (a point we shall return to later with the worker-rating platform Turkopticon) could engage in wage theft around five times more than other requesters. As a result, working for the highly rated requesters meant that workers could earn 40 per cent more (Benson et al. 2015).

This creates a challenge for microworkers. Clearly, it makes sense only to work for the highly rated requesters and to avoid the dodgy ones. However, taking the time to establish which requesters to work for involves more unpaid labour – as well as narrowing the pool of available work. This also raises another issue. As a new worker on a platform, you have no reputation of your own. Even if you have moved from another platform, you start afresh on the new one. This means that workers have to grind through low-paid – and more frequently unpaid – work to develop a reputation through ratings from requesters. On microwork platforms this means very low-paid work in very large quantities, often competing with other workers for these accessible tasks. On freelance platforms this means underbidding other, better-rated workers, to compete for

entry-level tasks that can start to build this reputation. As Wood et al. found in a study of online freelancers, ‘work flowed to those workers who had managed to maintain a strong reputation over a long period and were thus known by clients and highly ranked by platform algorithms’ (2018a, 69). As an example, Graham and Anwar (2019) found that only 7 per cent of workers signed up to Upwork had ever been able to secure work. This results in high levels of competition between workers. It also gives workers with high reputations the ability to repost work to those with lower reputations, taking the difference in pay rates for themselves. While these online platforms may look like open markets for work, the reality is that they are stratified, with new and existing relationships of exploitation and exclusion.

When workers do find work, the kinds of tasks can vary significantly. Workers are asked to write website content, essays, reviews, work as personal assistants, translators, and lead generators, among other things. Microworkers fill out surveys, tag images, transcribe text – all small and discrete tasks. Much of this is repetitive work with low pay. It is far from the so-called *prodsusage* (Bruns 2008) of ‘content creators’ on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. In fact, these platforms rely on low-paid hidden work to operate effectively. With massive quantities of user-generated content being constantly uploaded, there needs to be a way for this to be moderated. This moderation is required for advertising to be effective, ensuring that brands are only associated with the kinds of content they would approve. There is a growing demand for what Sarah Roberts has called ‘commercial content moderation (CCM)’ work. The ‘interventions of CCM workers on behalf of the platforms for which they labor directly contradict myths of the Internet as a site for free, unmediated expression.’ Instead, these workers engage in microtasks that involve viewing and categorising ‘racist, sexist, homophobic, or sexually or violently graphic content’ that is considered either too unpleasant or disturbing for users and/or advertiser (Roberts 2016, 150). These platforms rely on this work, hidden away from the user perspective – perhaps thought of as an automated function. These workers are like the cleaners of the internet, picking up after platforms and users. However, there is often little or nothing done to protect the mental health of the workers who are exposed to this material, often for lengthy periods of time.

New Forms of Political Composition

While CCM is at the more extreme end of the risks of this work, the day-to-day experience of online work can be harder to get an insight into. It is possible to hear stories of workers on these platforms when they protest. Despite the claims that these workers cannot organise, there have been flashes of public conflict. One example is the letter-writing campaign organised by MTurk workers. This followed a public relations campaign from Amazon that proclaimed: ‘Jeff Bezos

may run Amazon and he may be a billionaire, but he is very accessible to his customers with an easy-to-find email address, `jeff@amazon.com`' (Shontell 2013). MTurk workers organised a letter-writing campaign (Dynamo 2014). This began with a statement that outlined three aims for Turkers (workers on MTurk):

1. Turkers are human beings, not algorithms, and should be marketed accordingly.
2. Turkers should not be sold as cheap labour, but instead as skilled, flexible labour which needs to be respected.
3. Turkers need to have a method of representing themselves to requesters and the world via Amazon.

Each letter began 'Dear Mr. Bezos', and then went into detail about the writer's individual experience of working on the platform. The letters brought to light the personal experiences and reasons why workers started on MTurk – revealing the people behind the screen.

The open letters of MTurk workers hint at networks of online workers, something that is likely to have grown significantly since 2014. These networks emerge, like those of transport workers, from the contradictions of the labour process. Despite these workers not sharing a workplace, or even a physical space like the roads of a city, workers still find ways to connect with each other. This is mostly home-based work, with workers searching for work on the internet. The challenges of this, as outlined above, include a lack of clarity and training over the work, as well as competition for jobs. At first glance, these dynamics might imply that workers are not engaging in cooperation. Microwork is necessarily collaborative (see Irani 2015) – after all, the overall project is broken up into smaller parts for a group of workers to complete. The benefit of this is that it is quicker than getting a single worker (or smaller group) to complete the task, increasing the pace of completion. On these platforms there is no reason for workers to be in touch with each other. The cooperation is coordinated by capital, piecing these fragments back together after the workers' task is done. It is therefore no surprise that platforms do not integrate ways for workers to communicate with each other. It is better to emphasise the isolation of workers, encouraging competition and reducing the risk that workers might band together on platforms.

Despite platforms not facilitating communication between online workers, they nonetheless find ways to meet and discuss with each other. This is driven by the contradictions of the labour process: the work can be difficult to understand, the platforms do not provide training or other resources, and there are clear benefits to meeting other workers. In the section above, it was emphasised that microworkers and online freelancers are not homogeneous. Instead, workers develop skills and reputations through the work. They are stratified on platforms through a combination of these factors, the locations they work

from, and the different cost of reproducing labour power (and so different possible pay rates). Engaging in these groups can also be a response to what workers have identified as the ‘loneliness of working without interpersonal contact’ (Wood et al. 2018a, 66). It should not therefore be a surprise that there are uneven networks of communication that have emerged in online work. Like the zone-specific WhatsApp groups of Deliveroo riders, different overlapping communities have emerged online, becoming established on different communication platforms. Previous research has demonstrated that these forms of online communication are a key part of how workers engage in this work (Gupta et al. 2014; Gray et al. 2016; Yin et al. 2016). One survey, for example, found that 58 per cent of online workers had communicated with other workers at least once every week, whether through social media, text message, email, or in forums (Wood et al. 2018b, 100–1).

Turkopticon is an important example of how these worker networks can grow and develop. This project, focused on Amazon Mechanical Turk, involves an attempt to reverse the power and information imbalance between workers and the platform. The name reflects this, combining ‘Turk’ with the latter part of panopticon (Foucault 1991). The architectural model in which prisoners are subjected to the constant threat of observation has been applied in call centres, for example (Fernie and Metcalf 1997; Woodcock 2020a). Starting as an academic project developed by Lilly Irani and Six Silberman, Turkopticon is ‘an activist system that allows workers to publicize and evaluate their relationships with employers. As a common infrastructure, Turkopticon also enables workers to engage one another in mutual aid’ (Irani and Silberman 2013, 611). As the Turkopticon (2020) website explains:

Turkopticon helps the people in the ‘crowd’ of crowdsourcing watch out for each other—because nobody else seems to be ... Turkopticon adds functionality to Amazon Mechanical Turk as you browse for HITs and review status of work you’ve done. As you browse HITs, Turkopticon places a button next to each requester and highlights requesters for whom there are reviews from other workers. Bad reviews let you avoid shady employers and good reviews help you find fair ones. You can view reports made against requesters with a quick click.

This plug-in functionality changes how workers engage with Amazon Mechanical Turk. In addition, the project developed a forum for workers. As an intervention, this shows how something that focuses on building worker power – however small – can provide a starting point to bring workers together. It is also a powerful example of how academic research can be brought into the service of developing worker power, through designing an intervention that promotes workers’ self-activity from the start. It shows how counter-data, in the form of negative ratings about requesters, can provide a source of counter-power for workers. While this does not fix the power imbalances of platform work, it provides a strategy for workers to avoid the worst aspects.

Turkopticon is a particularly visible example of microwork organising. However, across forums such as Reddit and elsewhere, there are large and lively communities of online workers. These are the virtual street corners and zone centres of online work. They may not look like traditional forms of union organising, but they are the building blocks upon which any successful organisation will be based. However, there is an even more visible example that shows an instance of the 'subterranean stream' of worker resistance making its 'way to the surface', as Braverman (1998, 104) put it.

Rev is a platform that has a similar pitch to many discussed so far in the book. As they explain on their website (Rev 2020):

Our mission is to give more people the freedom to work from home. Revvers work from all over the world using their freelance income to help fulfill a wide range of personal goals. Over 50,000 Revvers transcribe and caption millions of minutes of audio and video for companies like Google, BuzzFeed, NBC, and Amazon.

Then the keyword of the so-called gig economy appears: 'aside from the extra income paid out weekly via PayPal, the best part of freelancing jobs with Rev is the flexibility'. The claim is that you can log on to the platform and work any time with flexibility. The work itself involves transcription, providing captions, or foreign language subtitling. The platform has become one of the biggest online transcription services, being used for 'interviews, videos, podcasts, or whatever else' for 'the bargain-basement price of \$1 per minute of audio' (Menegus 2019a). As the hype for content creation grew, so did services like Rev, ensuring that fashionable podcasts could look as though they had professional production – for a fraction of the cost.

In November 2019 Rev had been running for almost ten years, with many transcribers having worked long term for the platform. However, resistance broke to the surface after an internal announcement to workers. In what has become the go-to management strategy for platforms, Rev unilaterally announced changes to its payment structure. With a justification that echoes transport platforms, it was argued that the change in payment structure was intended to 'more fairly compensate Revvers for the efforts spent on files' (quoted in Menegus 2019a). However, this change was not intended to improve the existing disparity between platform and worker. As reported by a 'whistle-blower', of the US\$1 cost, 'a little less than half of that buck went to the contractor, while about 50 to 55 cents on the dollar lined Rev's pockets' (Menegus 2019a). Rev now proposed to reduce the minimum payment to workers to 30 cents per minute (cpm).

Workers were informed of the change on the Rev forum. Unlike many platforms, Rev provides a forum for workers to discuss their work. As one worker explained, 'there was an internal forum post made two days prior, but not everybody checks the forums ... a lot of people found out when they logged on on Friday. People are still showing up in the forums asking what's going on!'

(quoted in Menegus 2019a). The pitch to Revvers was, as with many pay reductions on platforms, that they would actually make more money: ‘30 cpm will be a starting price for a very small number of jobs. On the other hand, some jobs will now start at 80 cpm ... The goal is NOT to take pay away from Revvers but to pay more fairly for the level of effort/skill required’ (quoted in Menegus 2019a). This was met with anger from many workers – including Li Zilles who broke anonymity and publicly explained what was happening in a Twitter thread.⁶ Workers began arguing that the pay cut was, in reality, a pay cut.

Li Zilles rapidly became a figurehead for the Rev workers protesting the pay cuts. As Zilles explained, ‘for the most part, we haven’t been able to organize because the only place we have to communicate en masse right now is the internal forum ... people are scared, some are still hoping to appeal to the company rep on the forum’ (quoted in Emerson 2019). However, from this starting point, workers were able to protest the pay cuts. Workers claimed higher rate jobs, then refused them, leaving a note for the next worker to try and claim the job. As Emerson (2019) noted, this was a development of a similar tactic used by Instacart earlier that month. During their protest, workers accepted jobs and then did not complete them, causing knock-on delays.

Much of the news coverage of the strike emphasised the weaknesses and challenges that these workers face. For example, Popper (2019), writing in the *New York Times*, argued that ‘the Rev protest is distinct from many that have come before because its workers don’t have any presence in the physical world, like the couriers and drivers who have led most of the protests in the past’. I reached out to Zilles on Twitter after hearing about the strike and was quickly put in touch with a worker in London. Far from not having ‘any presence in the physical world’, we were able to meet in a café in South London and discuss the action, sharing contacts and solidarity. Rev had previously provided work to many people with the promise of flexibility so prevalent on platforms. For those workers who spoke multiple languages, the transcription work could be relatively well paid. The worker I spoke to expressed how they felt the platform was trying to squeeze wages without engaging in any debate. The challenge was that most workers had never organised before and did not have links to other groups of workers to share experiences and tactics. For the worker I spoke to, the solution was to leave the platform and try to find work elsewhere. As I have written in the context of call centres (Woodcock 2017), this is a kind of half strike: refusing to work but not making demands that would have to be met in order to return to work.

Much of our discussion was reflected by a public response composed by a Rev worker, published in *Gizmodo*, which had provided coverage of the events. The worker explained (quoted in Menegus 2019b):

I am writing this anonymously because I fear reprisals from the company I am a transcriptionist for. I have already been subjected to arbitrary silencing on our internal forum for speaking my mind, although

I did not violate forum guidelines. Therefore I feel the only way to communicate this information is on an anonymous basis. I want to be clear about who I am. I am not a disgruntled former employee or a person who has only worked at Rev for a short time. I am a long-time [worker] with excellent feedback on my work from both the company and customers for over many years.

Rev seems to think that people can just work harder or longer, but there is a point where a person can't do anymore. Rev went through this same scenario in 2016 when they did away with some tasks that paid extra, no longer rounded all minutes up, and dropped their base price from 50 cpm to 48 cpm and then shortly later to 45 cpm. People protested then, too, but were told by CEO Jason Chicola that the price changes were here to stay and that if people didn't like it, they could leave. People tried to boycott the low-paying jobs, but Rev mass hired new people who would do the work. Again, people are boycotting low-paying jobs, this time by leaving unclaim comments urging people not to do those jobs. They have been threatened with losing forum privileges if they continue to leave these comments. Many fear losing their jobs if they continue to speak out.

Mr. Chicola was able to drop the pay in 2016. Perhaps he can do it again. But the businesses that use this company's services need to be informed and understand that their transcripts are produced by an underpaid, exploited workforce. Even if it's not illegal for an employer to set its contractor's wages far below the national minimum standards, it's certainly morally and ethically unacceptable.

Although happening with a different speed and intensity to transport platform workers, the same grievances are coming to the fore.

There is also the threat of automation hanging over this work. For example, Rev formed an artificial intelligence competitor in 2019. This led to a fear among Rev workers that they were only being allowed to continue in order to train their own replacements. As Popper (2019) found, other transcription services have actually experienced an increase in work 'because the advances in speech recognition technology have come alongside the proliferation in recording devices and people wanting to see their words turned into text', and 'much of the work ... today involves correcting bad transcriptions from automated services'. What is significant in the case of Rev is that the platform's cut can be as high as 50–70 per cent, significantly more than transport platforms, which often take 25 per cent. The high profile of the protests, particularly drawing attention to these figures, also meant that customers could be mobilised to boycott the service. This was particularly successful with journalists. The *New York Times* announced that it was 'aware of the concerns and are currently reviewing our use of the vendor', and writers at *The New Yorker* publicised a boycott (Popper 2019).

Despite the protests, the Rev website today states that the pay for transcriptionists is US\$0.30–1.10, for captioners US\$0.54–1.10, and for foreign-language subtitlers US\$1.50–3.00 (Rev 2020). This raises the problem of how protests can be converted into victories for workers on these platforms. As other researchers have emphasised (and indeed over-emphasised), there are serious challenges to developing bargaining power on either online freelance or microwork platforms. The mediation of this work online allows for competition on a global scale. Similarly, as Gerber (2020) has argued, many platforms encourage communication between workers, yet this has not led to a growth in workers' power. The seeds are, however, present in Rev and Turkopticon. Communication, clearly, is an important first step towards collective resistance and organising, but communication alone cannot build power. Protest, too, is not enough on its own.