

The background of the slide is a collage of various digital screens and data visualizations. It includes a grid of blue squares, a world map, a bar chart with a rainbow bar, and several upward-pointing arrows. The overall color scheme is dominated by blues and purples, with some warmer colors like red and yellow in the bar chart and arrows.

Societal Implications of Media Platformisation

Opportunities and Pitfalls for Policy and Governance in the Digital Age

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KU LEUVEN

Bargaining Power in Online Freelancing Platform Work in Creative Knowledge Work in Europe Potentialities and Pitfalls

Valeria Pulignano

(with Karol Muszynski, KU Leuven & Maite Tapia, Michigan State University)



The puzzle

- On-line freelancing platforms organize ‘triadic’ relationships to facilitate transactions between freelancers and clients (Schüßler et al. 2021; Rochet and Tirole, 2003)
 - Platforms intensify transnational competition by pushing down rates for freelancers (Frenken et al., 2020)
 - Platforms constrain the development & transferability of portfolios (Duggan et al., 2021; Toth et al., 2022)
- Freelancers with developed portfolios are better placed to establish stable and long-term relationships with clients since they are considered more credible by clients (Leung, 2014; Gandini et al., 2016)



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The puzzle



Focus on a ‘dyadic’ & ‘antagonistic’ view :

- The capacity of workers to enter in conflict with the platform and/or with clients (Jarrahi & Sutherlands, 2019; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2021; Anwar & Graham, 2020; Wood et al., 2018)



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Towards an alternative perspective

- To move beyond a simple ‘dichotomous’ approach, i.e., antagonistic (conflict with platforms and/or clients) & not antagonistic (compromise with platforms and/or clients)
- To posit the understanding of bargaining power within the ‘triadic’ relationships (i.e., including clients, platforms, freelancers) of platform work



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Importance of 'context' to understand agency

- Organizational context of the platform organizing the transactions (Kenney and Zysman, 2020)
 - Matching freelancers with clients (e.g., by bidding or not) and the use (or not) of algorithmic-based ratings and performance measurements



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Importance of 'context' to understand agency

- Organizational context of the platform organizing the transactions (Kenney and Zysman, 2020)
 - Matching freelancers with clients (e.g., by bidding or not) and the use (or not) of algorithmic-based ratings and performance measurements
- The product market context (Brown 2008; Muszynski, Pulignano, Mara', 2022)
 - The nature of services (i.e., complex or simple)
 - Complex services in differentiated markets -> higher bargaining power (e.g., graphical designers and IT)
 - Generalized or simple services in standardized markets -> lower bargaining power (e.g., translators, copywriters)



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Research questions

How do the organizational (digital platforms) and product market ‘boundary conditions’ explain the bargaining power of online freelancers (price setting)?

- Organizational – platforms approach towards freelancers, way they match freelancers with clients
- Product market – differentiated (complex) vs standardized (generalized) services



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Research design, data collection & analysis

Sampling & Data collection

- Sampling along the platform organizational configuration (i.e., matching & algorithmic-based performance measurement) & product market (i.e., simple & complex tasks) in relation to professional occupations (i.e., graphic designers, IT, translators, and copywriters)
- Interviews (min. almost 1h & max almost 3h) with 63 online freelancers (2020-2021) across different online labor platforms (i.e., Jellow, Malt, Upwork, AddLance) and countries in the EU (i.e., across Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Italy) + some management interviews



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Research design, data collection & analysis

Data analysis

- Initial & axial coding (Hoddy, 2019) with initial wide ranged coding e.g., ‘turning point in work’, ‘building portfolios’, ‘building career trajectories’, ‘gaining skills’, to ‘having’ or ‘not having control over work’; axial coding systematized & contextualized the meanings of freelancers
- Abductive approach - Validity by using a qualitative ‘realist’ study in particular contexts (Maxwell 2012)



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Four scenarios

Concerns	High developmental concerns	Low developmental concerns
High control concerns	<p><i>Subordinated Cooperation</i></p> <p>Freelancers <u>gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to stable and long-term relationships with clients who rate freelancers within an <u>algorithmic-based performance measurement system</u> set by the platform</p>	<p><i>Subordinated Exploitation</i></p> <p>Freelancers <u>do not gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to casual (one-off) relationships with clients who rate freelancers within an <u>algorithmic-based performance measurement system</u> set by the platform</p>
Low control concerns	<p><i>Autonomous Cooperation</i></p> <p>Freelancers <u>gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to stable and long-term relationships with clients who do not rate freelancers because of <u>the lack of an algorithmic-based performance measurement</u> set by the platform</p>	<p><i>Autonomous Exploitation</i></p> <p>Freelancers <u>do not gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to casual (one-off) relationships with clients; yet clients do not rate freelancers because of <u>the lack of an algorithmic-based performance measurement</u> set by the platform</p>



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Four scenarios

Concerns	High developmental concerns	Low developmental concerns
High control concerns	<p><i>Subordinated Cooperation</i> (Malt)</p> <p>Freelancers <u>gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to stable and long-term relationships with clients who rate freelancers within <u>an algorithmic-based performance measurement</u> system set by the platform</p>	<p><i>Subordinated Exploitation</i></p> <p>Freelancers <u>do not gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to casual (one-off) relationships with clients who rate freelancers within <u>an algorithmic-based performance measurement</u> system set by the platform</p>
Low control concerns	<p><i>Autonomous Cooperation</i> (Yellow)</p> <p>Freelancers <u>gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to stable and long-term relationships with clients who do not rate freelancers because of <u>the lack of an algorithmic-based performance measurement</u> set by the platform</p>	<p><i>Autonomous Exploitation</i></p> <p>Freelancers <u>do not gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to casual (one-off) relationships with clients; yet clients do not rate freelancers because of the <u>lack of an algorithmic-based performance measurement</u> set by the platform</p>



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Four scenarios

Concerns	High developmental concerns	Low developmental concerns
High control concerns	<p><i>Subordinated Cooperation</i></p> <p>Freelancers <u>gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to stable and long-term relationships with clients who rate freelancers within <u>an algorithmic-based performance measurement system</u> set by the platform</p>	<p><i>Subordinated Exploitation (Upwork)</i></p> <p>Freelancers <u>do not gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to casual (one-off) relationships with clients who rate freelancers within <u>an algorithmic-based performance measurement system</u> set by the platform</p>
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Four scenarios

Concerns	High developmental concerns	Low developmental concerns
High control concerns		
Low control concerns	<p><i>Autonomous Cooperation</i> Freelancers within both <u>complex and generalized services</u> <u>gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to stable and long-term relationships with clients who do not rate freelancers because of the lack of an algorithmic-based performance measurement set by the platform</p> <p><i>(e.g., Yellow)</i></p>	<p><i>Autonomous Exploitation</i> Freelancers do not gain bargaining power over clients due to casual (one-off) relationships with clients; yet freelancers with <u>complex tasks</u> <u>can gain power (autonomy) by disintermediation</u> due to clients not rating freelancers because of the lack of an algorithmic-based performance measurement</p> <p><i>(e.g., Addlance)</i></p>



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Four scenarios

Concerns	High developmental concerns	Low developmental concerns
High control concerns	<p><i>Subordinated Cooperation</i> Freelancers within <u>complex and generalised services gain bargaining power</u> over clients <u>by gaming (no exit)</u> due to stable and long-term relationships with clients who rate freelancers within an algorithmic-based performance measurement system set by the platform. (e.g., Malt)</p>	<p><i>Subordinated Exploitation</i> Freelancers within <u>generalised services do not gain bargaining power</u> over clients due to casual (one-off) relationships with clients who rate freelancers within an algorithmic-based performance measurement system set by the platform; yet freelancers within <u>complex services can gain power (autonomy) by disintermediation (exit)</u> (e.g., Upwork)</p>
Low control concerns		



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Conclusions

Freelancers' bargaining power is enhanced when platforms manifest high developmental concerns in comparison to when they manifest low developmental concerns.



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Conclusions

Freelancers operating in complex (differentiated) sectors retain relatively more bargaining power in comparison to freelancers operating within standardized markets.



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Conclusions

Within platforms the bargaining power of freelancers will heavily depend on whether the freelancers perform complex tasks (graphical designers, IT). But across the platforms we find a weaker effect of the product market.



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Policy recommendations for governance

- Adjustment of Competition Law (EU Council proposal on CB) & minimum standards
- Mechanism to regulate the digital market (digital platform is not ONE market but differentiation among different sectors/occupations holds)
- Data portability & career mobility (i.e., freelancers)



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Work in the Global Economy • vol XX • no XX • 1-27 • © Authors 2022
 Online ISSN 2732-4176 • https://doi.org/10.1332/273241721X16654825793852
 Accepted for publication 11 October 2022 • First published online 10 November 2022

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Control and consent regime dynamics within labour platforms

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Thank you for your attention

Article

Product markets and working conditions on international and regional food delivery platforms: A study in Poland and Italy

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European Journal of Industrial Relations
 2022, Vol. 28(3) 295-316
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Why does unpaid labour vary among digital labour platforms? Exploring socio-technical platform regimes of worker autonomy

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Working for Nothing in the Platform Economy: Forms and institutional contexts of unpaid labour

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European Economic, Employment and Social Policy
 2021.15

Does it pay to work? Unpaid labour in the platform economy

Valeria Pulignano, Agnieszka Piasna, Markieta Domecka, Karol Muszyński and Lander Vermeerbergen

