

Hi Ben, this is Jamie from Support. How can I help?



Exploitative Deliveroo, government inertia, Time and Space

The future of work as experienced by an exploited Deliveroo rider in Dublin

By Shane Brock

Covid 19 has generated an increased dependency on digital technologies, escalating workplace surveillance. It has increased time-space compression such as algorithmic monitoring: Time; and the ubiquitous visibility of Zoom/WhatsApp: Space.

These devices have been hungrily applied by the forces of contemporary capital accumulation.

Michel Foucault examined the significance of social reformer Jeremy Bentham's architectural concept, the panopticon, which envisaged prisoners coming under surveillance from all angles.

We are now seeing internet-mediated organisations, such as Deliveroo, transitioning away from human-centric surveillance, to a more algorithmic, 'human-in-the-loop' model of workplace surveillance.

In these roles, workers are being increasingly supervised by algorithms, while human supervisors are beginning to play a secondary role.

The observer within the panoptic structure of surveillance may not need to be human at all.

Maynooth University's Professor Rob Kitchen claims that ubiquitous digital technology allows workers more temporal flexibility.

However, he attributes the growing unpredictability of labour relations in general to the pervasive global roll-out of digital platforms, especially within the 'gig economy'.

In fact, he believes that digital platforms have become crucial to enabling the mass shift in work relations, insofar as they allow for labour to be organised at a distance and instantaneously, and

make work-time labour relations a lot more flexible for the employer.

In essence, he says that the wider reach and implementation of digital platforms modifies labour relations, making them more precarious. As a result, workers become subject to "time-stresses, and can feel like they're constantly on a kind of digital leash".

I spoke to 'Miguel', a food-delivery 'rider', who described his role as like "a new system of slavery". He explained how, before the pandemic, workers would bid for their scheduled time of work a week in advance. Those who were best ranked by the platforms' algorithms got priority, and as many hours as they wished, while less 'disciplined' riders were shafted.

Miguel explained how the platforms have since adopted a new model. Now, they have all implemented a timing system that allows workers to work at any time, for as long as they wish.

It appears that the delivery riders have attained absolute temporal autonomy. However, it comes at a cost.

Miguel described the increasingly stringent timing system of Deliveroo:

"If you don't complete your order in time, they'll rate you with a sad face...After three notifications, they'll block your account".

He explained how he had begun to notice how the timing systems in place appeared to adapt in real-time while he was working. He explained that:

"It would jump from 18-23 mins on one trip from A to B, to 15-20 mins on another trip along the same route".

He pointed out that because riders are kept unaware as to how they are ranked or prioritised

by the platforms' algorithms, they often feel unjustly punished.

Miguel described how, at the height of the pandemic, Deliveroo introduced a tiered licensing system. Almost overnight, they introduced the electric bike, motorbike, and car accounts.

He explained that the riders' priority, pay rate per order, as well as the required distances for delivery depend on what vehicle the rider possesses.

"After this system was introduced, they began paying less and less, without informing the staff that they were reducing the rates".

The increasingly poor pay rates trigger many riders to game the distanced algorithmic management systems.

It becomes necessary for many of them to work for all three food-delivery platforms (Deliveroo, Just Eat and UberEats) at once, meaning that they often collect and deliver multiple orders simultaneously, via two or more platforms.

Miguel also explained that only those with an Irish/EU passport, or a Stamp 4 visa, could officially own their own account with these platforms. He claims that a large majority of riders are Latin American students, many of whom arrive in Ireland to learn English, and must abide by strict 20-hour workweek visas (STAMP 2).

Upon arrival, many of the students are stuck waiting up to six months for PPS numbers, GNIB cards, or Irish work permits, and require a means to pay bills and keep a roof over their heads.

The illegitimate economy beckons them.

According to Miguel, the majority of the workers illegally sub-let their accounts from legitimate account holders for a weekly fee. The rate being charged for accounts varies between 15 and 40 Euros per week. However, some holders rent bundles of all three licences; allowing them to charge a higher fee.

"If you have three accounts, it will cost you around 60-70 Euros per week (An entire 8-hour workday)".

Intriguingly in view of Fine Gael's mishandling of Uber's lobbying – exposed recently by the ICJ – Miguel, as well as the English Language Students Union, have brought this issue to the awareness of Leo Varadkar, the Tánaiste, and SIPTU, Ireland's largest trade union. Nevertheless, the sub-letting of accounts continues to go completely unchecked.

If Miguel's claims are true, then the food delivery platforms have no duty of care obligations, and are not vicariously liable, for the vast majority of staff working for them in Dublin City Centre and the surrounding area.

Miguel emphasised that:
 "These gig services, they are working in the shape of a legal void...They know we are vulnerable in this legal void, so they take advantage of us".

Shane Brock recently completed a thesis 'How do Digital Technologies Affect Workers' Perceptions of Time and Space?' in Griffith College for which he interviewed Miguel and others.



Digital fast-food platforms like Deliveroo allow for labour to be organised at a distance and instantaneously, and make work-time labour relations a lot more flexible for employers who also benefit from working in a legal void