
Behind the screens, beyond the shelves: a comparative assessment of digital labor in content creation and Amazon warehouses

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Abstract

The platform economy has developed in diverse ways, exhibiting distinct characteristics across sectors and labor markets. Rather than following a uniform model, it encompasses a broad spectrum in terms of required skills, employment arrangements, degrees of worker autonomy, and work locations. The rapid expansion of platform-based labor has not only diversified employment structures but also blurred the boundaries between traditional and non-traditional forms of work. Even defining a precise taxonomy of gig, digital, and platform workers remains particularly challenging due to the fluid and evolving nature of these labor arrangements. Rather than imposing rigid classifications, we examine the intersections among seemingly distinct worker categories that nonetheless share common features within the expanding platform economy, shaping new forms of employment relations and economic dependency.

By analyzing two distinct case studies positioned at seemingly opposite ends of the platform labour continuum—content creators and Amazon warehouse workers in Italy—we identify three key connecting dimensions. First, augmented precarity, which highlights how algorithmic opacity, information asymmetries, and weakened labor protections perpetuate worker vulnerability, reinforcing patterns of economic insecurity. Second, metrics-based control, which standardizes and monitors labor by transforming actions into data, optimizing performance while simultaneously extracting value. Third, performative reputation, which extends reputational mechanisms into new labor spaces, pushing workers to overperform under competitive, metrified conditions where visibility and rankings dictate opportunities. Despite significant differences between these workers in terms of skill levels, autonomy, and working environments, they share common structural conditions that reveal broader characteristics of digital capitalism.

By exploring these dynamics, this study sheds light on how the platform economy redefines work, power, and labor relations in contemporary capitalism. Platform labor is best understood as a fluid and evolving signifier, shaped by technological, economic, and cultural forces rather than a rigid category. This work contributes to the discourse on technology, labor, and society by offering a conceptual lens to grasp its complexities. Beyond theory, it prompts reflections on the shifting culture of work, as the growing dominance of platform capitalism extends its influence past traditional labor, shaping broader spheres of production, consumption, and social reproduction.

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Keywords: platform work, digital capitalism, Amazon, algorithmic management, influencer, digital labor