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Episode name: How to make gig work fair: Mark Graham and Alessio Bertolini

People: Mark Graham, Alessio Bertolini

Transcript

00:00:04 Veena McCool

Hello and welcome to the OII podcast from the Oxford Internet Institute, part of the University of Oxford. The OII podcast looks at issues and developments in the digital world that matter to us all.

Today we're joined by Professor Mark Graham and Doctor Alessio Bertolini. Mark is professor of Internet geography here at the OII. His research focuses on digital labour, the gig economy and digital inequalities. Alessio is a researcher at the OII for the Fair Work Project, where he is investigating platform work in the UK and Germany. Hello, I'm Veena McCool. Welcome.

Today we're going to discuss how we can make gig work fair and I'll start with you, Alessio. How big is the gig economy?

00:00:50 Alessio Bertolini

Well, what we know is that it's very big, but we don't know exactly how big it is and the problem is that statistical offices around the world and even researchers from around the world have found it very difficult to define exactly what the gig economy is and what the parameters to include gig workers in a statistics or not. So the estimates really vary.

Quite substantially from a fraction of a percentage point to several percentage points up to 15 to 20%.

So it also like there's a big difference between those workers that only work in the economy occasionally as a part time as a casual gig on top of other jobs, and workers who do this on a, you know, full time permanent basis. However, what we know is that it's growing and it's becoming more and more everyday part of the labour market.

00:01:48 Veena McCool

And is the gig economy really coming for our jobs?

00:01:52 Alessio Bertolini

Well, it's not really coming. It has come already, in a sense, many and many jobs, you know, since the beginning of Uber in 2009, many, many more jobs are becoming

platformised, as we say. So many, many more people are finding everyday jobs through apps, through websites, online and offline.

And you know, we're not just thinking when people think about the gig economy. People think about mostly like Uber or food delivery companies, but actually, tutors and nurses and lawyers and accountants, designers, translators and so on and so forth are increasingly becoming platformised even as a university, we're seeing our job becoming more and more platformised. Being employed on a piece rate to do certain activities within our jobs.

00:02:47 Veena McCooles

And if we think about this from a worker's perspective, Mark, is gig work good for workers?

00:02:54 Mark Graham

It's a good question. So I've been studying this topic for over a decade and I've spoken to workers on every continent all around the world, and one thing that you hear from workers consistently.

There's they're they're grateful for the income that they have. They're often grateful for the jobs that they have.

But the gig economy comes with a lot of issues. One key issue is that when we talk about the gig economy, what we what we often mean is that workers are self-employed, they're not employees of the platforms that they're working through or working for.

And because they're self-employed, that comes with a lot of risks for work.

Workers so workers who are self-employed can't benefit, can't rely on a lot of things that you take for granted if you're an employee of a company. Something as simple as being paid a minimum wage. So if you're self-employed, if you work in the gig economy, you can't rely on that kind of minimum income level.

Usually on most of the platforms that are out there.

There, and there's all sorts of other risks and harms that workers experience. If you're, for instance, food delivery worker in much of the world, you're weaving in and out of traffic there, it's quite unsafe work. If you drive a taxi for ride hail platform. In a lot of the world.

There are risks of robbery or carjacking.

A lot of these platforms, they allow users to rate workers, they allow the consumers to rate workers and this introduces all sorts of biases into the system. So there's research out there that shows that, for instance, women or ethnic minorities will statistically receive lower ratings than other workers.

And many of these workers also don't they can't join collective bodies like trade unions because the companies don't recognise them or there isn't the legal framework for them to be able to do that as self-employed workers.

So is it good for workers? I think there's a lot of issues that we see time and time again that just really aren't being addressed.

00:05:08 Veena McCool

And can you tell us a bit more about the Fair Work project and what it's doing about standards and gig work?

00:05:14 Mark Graham

So the firework, the firework project came about because of a lot. A lot of these risks and harms that we saw happening all over the world. So what we do in the Fair Work project we started out in 2018 and what we what we said was we need to develop some minimum standards, we need to develop some principles.

That define what decent work is, what Fair Work is. So we gathered together some stakeholders in Geneva, the International Labour Organisation. Some representatives from the private sector, from platforms, some representatives from the labour movement, trade unions and workers, and some policy.

Trackers and we basically put this question to everyone. What is Fair Work and what is unfair work.

From that we developed some principles, some basic minimum standards of Fair work, and then we took them to in country workshops around the world. We started out in India and in South Africa. We then had some workshops in Germany and then since then we've really expanded the project around the world. We've done this in 39 countries. Now what we do with these principles.

As we've turned them into a scoring system, so we do research against, we do research on these gig.

Companies and we assess them against these principles and the way that we assess them, we speak to the management, we speak to workers and we examine the contracts and in doing that we give the companies a score of 10 based on these principles and we use that score to tell a story about basically how fair or how unfair the working conditions.

That the work is experienced on that platform are so we're not really interested in telling a story of is the gig economy good or is it bad? It's a more nuanced story than that.

But the score is because we do the research in a comparative way. We were able to show that Fair Work or unfair work. It's there's nothing natural or inherent about it. We show that these are choices that different companies choose to make. They choose to set up contracts that either provide certain minimum standards to workers or don't.

So Fair Work. At its core, it's an action research project. We try and understand the how work is experienced by workers. But in doing this in in, in turning all of this, this research into scores, we also try and change what happens out there.

00:07:45 Alessio Bertolini

Just to build on what Mark has just said, I think an important and sometimes overlooked aspect of the Fair Work project is also the ability to contribute in changing the narrative. A lot of these platforms are, you know, claiming that they are disruptive. You know, they are innovative, so they.

Going to be committing to be, you know, like can we put a brake on on what they're doing? But what we're showing is instead that it's possible, you know, to have a gig economy. It is at the same time innovative and disruptive at the same time, fair. And we're showing this through our scores and we're showing that no platforms are inherently bad, that the uncommon is not inherently bad, but that is, as Mark was saying, you know, there's, it's really a choice that platforms make in having certain limbo standards and not others.

00:08:38 Veena McCool

And it seems like Fair Work research shows generally low scores, which tells us that not enough is being done here. What effect do these scores actually have?

00:08:48 Mark Graham

Or yeah, the the most common score is 0 and UM. If we look at the in every country in which we do the work that we do, we produce a league table and by league table I mean we we just compare the scores against one another. We stack them up from the highest score to the lowest scorer and generally in most countries.

The average is just extremely.

But as unless you were saying there are good examples out there or there are less bad examples out there, we have examples of every single one of the principles being realised somewhere in some company in some place, so none of them are impossible. And I think it's also important to point out that these principles of Fair work that we assess companies against.

We're not setting up a kind of gold standard of work. These are really basic minimum standards like workers should earn at least the local minimum wage that they should be protected from basic harms in doing their job that they should be protected from discrimination, that they should have the right to collective representation and really basic things that most people take for granted.

And and so even despite the fact that the bar is really quite low in these principles, as I was saying, the most common score that that we find out there is a 0.

But in doing the work that we do in publishing these scores, in talking about these scores and maybe most importantly in comparing companies against one another and showing that actually these principles are possible, that they are realistic. We've convinced a lot of companies to make changes to their practises.

So what we typically do as part of the research process or what we always do as part of the research process, is before publishing the scores, we go back to the companies and we say to them, look, here's your score, but here are the sorts of things you would have to change to get a better score.

So we tell that to them on for any of the scores that they haven't achieved. And when we started doing this, there weren't that many companies that really wanted to engage with the suggestions that we've made.

But we're now half a decade into the project and there's now tonnes of companies all over the world that when we make these suggestions to them, they're willing to make changes because they want a better score. So to date, we've had I think it's 304 instances of companies making changes to their policies as a result of engaging with us. This this ranges from introducing.

Minimum wage or a living wage minimum earning level for workers to implementing meaningful anti discrimination policies to all sorts of other things. These are changes that have improved the jobs of millions of workers as a result of the research that we've done.

00:11:39 Veena McCool

What can the listener do here? I mean, how can consumers make a difference when companies like Uber and Deliveroo seemingly hold all the power when it comes to how they treat their workers?

00:11:50 Mark Graham

There's quite a few things that you as a listener, can do. So one thing that you can really do is pay attention to these scores as a consumer, as a user of these companies, you have a

And often it's not that difficult to choose to use one platform versus another platform. It's as simple as installing an app and creating a profile on it. So use better scoring platforms. That's a really important thing that you can do as a user.

Another thing that you can do is communicate with these companies, write to them, communicate with them. Tell them that you demand more from them. Tell them that you care about decent working conditions. Tell them that you're paying attention to their score.

One thing that we have set up in the Fair Work project is something that we call the Fair Work pledge and what we what we ask organisations to do with the Fair Work pledge is simply pledge to use better scoring companies as at an organisational level.

So whether you're a company or a charity, or university, a church, a mosque, or anything else you can say to your members, employees and so on. We encourage you if you're ordering food, use about a scoring platform. If you're getting a building cleaned, use a better scoring platform. If you're taking a taxi somewhere, use a better scoring platform. The pledge is free to sign up to it.

We've had, we've had dozens and dozens of organisations commit to it from the Berlin Senate has committed to it. The Church of England, McDonald's, Germany and a range of other organisations. So as a listener you can get the organisation that you work for to sign the pledge.

Another thing that people listening can do is to vote to vote for representatives who stand on the side of workers. There are there are politicians or political parties out there that have proactive policies that can make a difference for gig workers, and there are those that don't. So I really encourage everyone to do their research and to really look into which politicians out there do stand on the side of workers and especially precarious.

Workers and of course, the really important thing that we we all should be doing is getting organised as workers, as as Alessio was saying earlier, the gig economy, it's here, it might be coming for all of our jobs next. And so the most important thing that we can all do as workers is organise through collective bodies, and if we do that, we will have more, more power when these platforms come for our jobs.

00:14:42 Veena McCoole

And a final question for both of you. I wonder if you can share examples of what good looks like here. Maybe that's a particular principle that has been demonstrated effectively by a company or a company that's adhered to many of these principles. I'm curious to hear what good looks like when it comes to fair.

00:15:02 Alessio Bertolini

Well, I would just to remind kind of the audience, actually our favourite principles are basic, standard the world. So even although we only had one of the 600 and odd platform that we have rated around the world, only one company score 10 out of 10 and that means that this company was the only gig economy company that could claim to satisfy all the basic Fair Work.

However, if you want an example, I could give the one about the for example the living wage. You know, we've seen that only a tiny minority we're talking about a few percentage points of the companies could be claimed, could be evidence to actually have a policy that supports the minimum wage living wage for its workers.

And this is like despite the fact that most of these workers are self-employed. So minimum wage legislation doesn't apply to them, but also to the fact that minimum wage legislation in many countries is not really a living wage legislation. So minimum wage in most countries is below the minimum.

Standard for having a decent standard of living in women working full time, so this is an example where companies have by choice decided to pay the workers or have a policy to make sure that workers work for the company can have a decent standard of living while working for the company.

00:16:30 Mark Graham

Yeah. And I think, you know, in terms of what good looks like and this is really what we've spent years doing with the Fair Work principles is refining them through dialogue with workers, with trade unions, with policymakers and with companies refining them year after year to precisely answer that question.

So the Fair Work principles, as unless you were saying they're not, these are not particularly high bar, but they we would see them as minimum standards of good and sadly, as unless you said we've only ever seen 110 out of 10 company out there, so there's still an enormous amount of work to do to raise standards in the gig economy for workers.

00:17:17 Veena McCooles

Thank you both for joining us on the OII podcast.

00:17:20 Mark and Alessio

Thank you. Thank you.