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D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

Platform Labour Discourse: How Hyr Targets the “Bucket List Generation”

Julian Posada & Leslie Regan Shade

This paper provides an analysis of the discursive contradictions and narratives of labour within Hyr, a location-based freelance platform app that caters to the retail, hospitality, and restaurant sectors in Toronto and New York. The app provides companies with access to individuals with a variety of skills in these sectors and provides workers with access to contract jobs. The paper provides an analysis of Hyr’s promotional marketing, that targets urban “millennials,” and discusses how the platform exerts algorithmic and information control over its workers through their legal documentation and conditions of work within the platform. Situated within the “gig economy,” the paper also reviews current local policy proposals to alleviate the situation of gig workers in the Canadian context.

Keywords: platform labour, discourse, youth, gig economy

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Many individuals searching for jobs discover that digital platforms provide an alternative to traditional employment opportunities because they offer more job flexibility alongside a lower entry cost. These platforms portray themselves as software solutions for self-employed individuals who wish to have access to potential clients. However, these “matchmakers” not only serve as intermediaries between both parties, on top of their economic incentive, since they also regulate — and control — the workers’ behaviour through algorithms and information asymmetries (Rosenblat and Stark 2016).

Platforms are hybrid organizations that combine the characteristics of firms and markets (Casilli and Posada 2019) and coordinate user exchanges through the aid of technological infrastructures, such as mobile apps and websites (Nieborg and Poell 2018). The dual nature of platforms, as firms and markets, means that, on the one hand, they present clear hierarchies, business models, and managerial strategies; for instance, by devising algorithms that serve as managerial control over the workers (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). On the other hand, they coordinate market exchanges and regulate their internal prices. A known example is the surge price algorithm that regulates the fares of ride-hailing platforms such as Uber and Lyft (Rosenblat 2018).

The platform economy is the latest development of an ongoing transformation in labour relations and the nature of capitalist markets. These trends reflect the enduring influence of the Californian ideology in the technology sector and beyond. Dubbed by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron during the early commercialization of the internet, “the California Ideology,” describes “a mix of cybernetics, free-market economics, and counter-culture libertarianism” (1996). These transformations can be traced to the shifting of economic paradigms away from post-war Keynesianism to a more deregulated form of flexible accumulation economics (Harvey 1990). Primarily, these transformations led some national governments to follow austerity measures, the privatization of national enterprises, and the deregulation of their economies (Hall 2011).

These transformations affected the nature of firms and markets that constitute the core of contemporary digital platforms. As a coordination mechanism, markets have become more complex because of free trade, globalization, and the intermediation of technological infrastructures that are detached from human agency (Guyer 2016, p. 320). These characteristics provide contemporary digital platforms with multi-sided capacities that allow them to coordinate market exchanges between different users (Nieborg and Poell 2018).

Firms have transformed into this complex and globalized market. They increasingly shifted from a *retain-and-invest* model, where their assets were re-invested in their operations, to a *downsize-and-distribute* model based on lean management strategies focused on delivering value and optimizing work processes—usually through outsourcing labour and reducing production costs (Segrestin and Hatchuel 2012; Casilli 2019).

From the worker perspective, platforms employ a workforce comprised of self-employed individuals—or just “users”—without considering them directly as workers (Prassl 2018, p. 208). This outsourcing is placed within a general trend of neo-liberalism where the state and the firm, which after the Second Industrial Revolution had provided a safety net for the worker, chose to reduce or eliminate welfare services (Szeman 2015). Contemporary discourses of

entrepreneurship thrive on promises of “flexibility” and “autonomy” but mask a situation in which workers have to bear the financial risks of self-employment, without the potential of creating wealth in the same way as traditional capitalist entrepreneurs (Cohen 2016b, p. 323).

In this context, while these platforms thrive under the assumption that technological “disruption” equates innovation, their approach to work (as flexible, deregulated, and individualized) significantly affects those in vulnerable social and economic positions. This paper focuses on how the Canadian labour platform Hyr uses a shifting discourse to target young individuals who seek supplementary income. Instead of concentrating on other forms of platform control, such as algorithms and interfaces, this paper posits that the shifting discourse of platforms plays an essential role in the unequal power relationships between them and their users. More specifically, in the case of a platform that targets youth specifically, the article highlights how vulnerable populations, in this case, new entrants to the labour market with high financial instability, are the main focus of their marketing activities.

As a labour platform, Hyr is situated at the end of this decades-long economic, social, and political development and transformation. While larger social media platforms like Facebook and Amazon have the power to permeate several aspects of user’s everyday life (van Dijck, Poell, and Wall 2018, p. 240), smaller ones like Hyr, with their hybrid organizational nature and their ownership of the technological infrastructure that mediates their operation, can still exert a significant influence over their workers.

Hyr was founded in Toronto in 2015, and presents itself as “the labour marketplace for today’s new economy,”¹ specializing in the retail, hospitality, and restaurant sectors. It provides companies with access to individuals with a variety of skills ranging from managerial assistants and security personnel to cooks and bartenders. This paper presents an analysis of the discursive contradictions of this particular labour platform. After first defining the characteristics of labour platforms and situating Hyr within the retail and hospitality sector, the paper then presents the narratives of labour embedded within the platform, providing an analysis of its contradictions in terms of both promotional marketing and algorithmic and information control. It also compares this outward discourse with their legal documentation that provides a radically different and more inward definition of labour and the conditions of work within the platform. The paper also discusses current local policy proposals to alleviate the situation of gig workers in the Canadian context.

Hyr in the Platform Economy

“The gig economy was looking for the ‘Uber’ of the labor market and Hyr was the answer” (Erika Mozes, co-founder of Hyr, quoted in Greenwood 2018).

The Aspen Institute, a Washington D.C.-based educational and policy studies organization, defines gig or independent work as “income-earning activities outside of traditional, long-term employer-employee relationships” (Aspen Institute 2019) which is dependent on the working relationship between the contractor and the company or individual that pays them – whether this work is temporary, project-based, or task-based. There are many forms of non-standard work

¹ Quote from the platform’s social media website

arrangements, including freelancing, working through a temp agency, independent work, and subcontracted work. Standard work relationships involve a relationship between the employer and employee, consisting of wage or salary payments, typically on an hourly or yearly basis.

In the U.S. economy, the Aspen Institute notes that gig economy workers comprise more than 1 in 4 for primary or supplementary work in any capacity, 1 in 10 for primary independent work, and less than 1% for work through online platforms such as Uber, Lyft and TaskRabbit (ibid). It is difficult to break down the demographic composition of gig workers by race, gender, age, educational level and geographic location, although a generalization can be forwarded that gig workers are younger, urban dwellers (ibid).

On their website, Hyr boldly declares, “Welcome to the new labour economy,” which they describe as a gig economy that mutually benefits both workers and employers, “outside of the 9 to 5 continuum,” enabled by their platform that “gives them choice and power in the labour market.” For businesses, particularly those in the restaurant and hospitality industry Hyr markets to, they promise to connect them “with great, accountable workers, fast, at the best possible price. So, they can fill any shift. At any time.” For Hyr’s workers (dubbed “pros”), the promise is that their “fully mobile platform allows talented, driven workers an option to choose their hours and pick up shifts in a pinch.” Hyr promotes their services to the “Bucket List Generation,” who they characterize as a restless “younger generation, who value time over money. And value experiences over things” (Hyr, About Us: <https://hyr.work/about-us/>).

Hyr was co-founded by entrepreneurs Erika Mozes and Joshua Karam in 2015, and their app launched in 2017. As of 2018 Hyr reported their company included 215 employers and 10,000 contractors (*Toronto Life* 2018), with the goal to team with “recognizable brands, such as The Thompson Hotel, Bisha, Canadian Tire, Hemingway’s and Carbon Bar” (Joutsu 2019). Hyr is used in major cities in the U.S. (New York City, Miami, Los Angeles, Boston, and Chicago) and in Canada, Toronto and other markets. To date Hyr has raised a total of \$2.4M USD in venture capital from Gaingels (a network of angel LGBT/Ally investors), XFactor Ventures (whose goal is to support female founders), Flybridge Capital Partners, and Newark Venture Partners (*Toronto Life* 2018).

While Hyr’s workers earn “just shy of \$20 an hour, on average,” according to Karam (Eisenberg 2019), the company retains 19-30% of the salary and offsets this via a point system, called UPoints, that counts towards vacation days, health or dental insurance, or retirement savings. Mozes calls this feature a “worker first platform,” arguing that, “if the platforms were not worker focused there could be a future state where workers are no longer employed in more permanent employment and all work is done ad-hoc thereby eliminating the securities they get with a traditional employer/employee relationship” (Warner 2019).

Mozes’ positioning of the worker reflects neo-liberal feminism, which subscribes to the logic of the marketplace and presumes individualization and responsabilization, an assumption embedded in the marketing strategies of “sharing economy” companies (Shade 2018). This discourse touts the empowering benefits of labour flexibility and entrepreneurialism for women, alongside the “liberating” ability to pick up a gig while juggling family responsibilities and contributing to the family income. This is reflected in Mozes’ declaration that, “I have built a brand where our

workers like to share their success stories,” and her account of a woman who “picked up one week of shifts at Hero Certified Burgers before the holidays because she couldn’t afford to buy her daughter the gift she wanted. At the end of the week, she not only was able to afford to buy the holiday gift for her daughter, she was also offered a full-time job” (Joutsu 2019).

Platform Typologies

The ecosystems of labour platforms transcend local and national boundaries, which in many cases renders difficult their regulation, thus hindering effective policy action. There are several typologies of platforms that help us to understand their geographical reach, types of labour and services, and forms of operation (Casilli 2019; Schmidt 2017; Scholz 2012; Srnicek 2016). These typologies recognize that digital labour platforms, such as Uber or Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), are a subset of a larger ecosystem that includes critical players of the technology sector such as the dominant firms Facebook, Google, and Amazon (the owner of MTurk).

The typologies distinguish platforms according to two variables: their geographical boundaries and the specialization of their tasks. For example, in terms of geography, platforms that focus on delivery, ride-hailing, agricultural, or housekeeping connect clients with workers that perform jobs in a particular location, like a house, a city, or a territory. However, in freelancing and “micro-work” platforms, the worker can operate remotely from a computer or mobile in any part of the world, with much of this labour centred in low-income countries, which Nick Dyer-Witford characterizes as “the new frontier of cybernetic piece work” (2015, p. 122).

The second distinction relevant for policy is the fragmentation of tasks, since some jobs can be broken up and performed by a multitude of users (mostly in the case of algorithmic training). In the case of geographically bound labour, for instance, a single worker conducts tasks like delivery services, while location-based crowdsourcing fragment the tasks to hundreds or thousands of users. In the case of work performed on desktop computers, while freelancers often perform skilled jobs (Cohen 2016a), “micro-workers” perform small unskilled tasks such as data labelling, content moderation, or algorithmic training (hence their categorization) (Wood et al. 2018).

Following these two distinctions, Hyr can be defined as a location-based freelance platform. On the one hand, workers provide services that require training, experience, and even certification. Additionally, they serve on single shifts that can last for multiple hours, sometimes repeating over several days. On the other hand, their jobs depend on particular locations within the cities of operation of Hyr across Canada and the United States. These locations can include restaurants, hotels, boutiques or other venues needing catering or hospitality services.

The Platform

In this section, we first describe the main characteristics of Hyr’s website and application, including its design and content. Then, we describe the general user experience in terms of account creation for both workers and labour requesters. Finally, we describe the contradictions in terms of user experience and legal documentation. By correlating the data collected from studying the platform and the publicly available terms and conditions, we describe the platform’s contradictions in the treatment of workers and how the legal documents describe forms of

managerial control that place Hyr far from their purported software solution for businesses and entrepreneurs.

This analysis elucidates that the marketing discourses of the platform target young individuals primarily, from their representation in advertisements to the use of language and content that allude to this particular demographic. Regarding the differences between the platform's discourse towards its workers and clients, examination of the content of their website and application (FAQ pages, blogs, and legal documentation), usually divided between these two groups, highlight dissimilarities in communicative styles. While Hyr focuses on treating their workers as *entrepreneurs* who need software to match them with potential clients, the discourse towards the requesters of labour represents the workers as *young* workers in need of special managerial provisions. Several managerial mechanisms are embedded within the platform, including the introduction of the points systems to keep workers using the platform, and managerial provisions highlighted in the legal documentation, such as prohibiting workers from engaging in long-term professional relationships with the requesters.

Design and Marketing

The platform's website is built mostly to direct users towards the mobile application, which is their primary communication channel. The website, as well as the app, are designed with bright colours, based on a vivid fuchsia. Text is kept at a minimum, while each of the pages presents a background photograph of a young adult, from different genders and ethnic backgrounds. Some of them wear casual clothing, of bright or pastel colours, while others wear aprons or other professional attire from the hospitality sector. All of them are smiling, in a relaxed position, looking directly at the camera.

While further research is needed in order to study the demographics of Hyr's workers, public information available on the workers' profiles indicate that a significant number of its workers are youth. Indeed, Hyr's website features images of attractive, multicultural hipsters (adorned in tattoos, beanies and plaid shirts). Their Instagram feed is a checkerboard of images of young people, with the slogan: "Fill any shift. At any time." In distinct square images, photos depict satisfied and smiling young adults. Through these images and slogans Hyr boasts that by "Promoting their brand to living your dream," they create the financial means for young adults to pursue leisure activities ("Coat check to Coachella," "BA shifts to LGA flights," "Side hustle to main stage," "Dance like everybody's watching," "Bar tending to bar hopping").

Frequently Asked Questions

The "frequently asked questions", or FAQ page, is divided into two sections, one for the workers, who are called "Pros" by the platform, and another section for those who requested their labour, named "Companies." Both are named "Professionals" and "Requesters" respectively in the legal documentation, only available through the app after the account creation. The workers' FAQ page serves as a very brief training on the major elements of the use of the platform: payment (including tips), rating system, job training, points system, notifications, and a question about the platform complying with labour laws (to which the answer is "absolutely").

The "Requester" FAQ section is more detailed but also misleading in some aspects. While

questions about the nature of workers are defined better, as they specify that they be “classified as independent 1099² contractors,” other pieces of information are less straightforward. For instance, related to the question about whether workers of the platform are screened previously (as would typically be the case for an outsourcing firm), the platform answers by describing their service without actually saying (as is stated in the Terms and Conditions) that neither the workers nor the requesters are screened beforehand.

Media and Blog

The media section of the website presents several newspaper articles and press releases that mention Hyr. While the press releases focus on the announcements of new partnerships of the platform with companies that provide software for restaurant management and catering services, the newspaper articles are generally about the “gig economy.” These articles are surprisingly not always in favour of the gig economy, but they all position the platform and Hyr in a positive manner, thus differentiating them from significant players in the labour platform market such as Uber, which has received abundant media attention for their ambitious challenge to the taxi industry and their aggressive business culture (Rosenblat 2018).

The blog section, with original content published or provided by the platform, is primarily destined for the requesters. While these short posts never explicitly mention the platform, focusing instead on general managerial and gig economy topics, they can be read as advice for corporate users of the platforms. These posts are generally about four topics: instructions on how to hire gig workers, how to manage young adults (called “Millennials”), managerial issues in dealing with temporary—or “gig”—workers, and ways in which the gig economy can benefit businesses.

Here, instead of continuing a discourse that refers to the workers as “professionals” and “businesses,” as is the case in the legal documentation, the company treats them as mere workers in need of managerial oversight. Moreover, the blog posts give many examples of how the platform economy benefits businesses that choose to outsource their workers. The posts highlight how companies can save costs by hiring “temporary workers without the financial pressure of onboarding them, providing benefits and insurance or payroll taxes,” while having “highly skilled” individuals that can fill up any shift at any given time.

Finally, many of the posts are about the selection of workers. Typically, outsourcing companies recruit their staff in advance, but the platform does not perform this duty. Instead, they place these tasks onto the requester. They make this explicitly clear in the contracts where they announce that neither the requester nor the workers are screened at all by the platform and that it is their responsibility—and risk—to know to whom they are working with. This is a constant trend in digital labour platforms where the users at the other ends of the multi-sided market (in this case the requesters) also perform “inconspicuous” labour that otherwise should be the responsibility of the firm in a non-platform environment (Tubaro et al. 2018).

² A United States tax form for independent contractors.

The “Hiring” Process

Most of the interactions between the workers and the platform occur in the mobile application. To sign in, workers need to submit their telephone number, email address, and full name. New profiles will automatically obtain fifty points for the reward system, and workers then have to proceed to fill them with other personal information: work experience in the hospitality and restaurant sector, skills, and a photograph.

The available shifts depend on the skills and location of the worker. The “End User Licence Agreement” advises users of the application to maintain their geolocation enabled at all times. The shifts’ information shows the name of the requester, the wage (before taxes), how many “UPoints” are earned after the shift, the address, time, and any further comments. Their rate by workers (based on a five-point scale) and the number of reviews is also shown.

Some platforms, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk (in the past), only allowed “requesters”, and not the workers, to rate (Irani & Silberman 2013), while others like Uber allow both types of user to rate each other (Rosenblat 2018). Nevertheless, even though Hyr presents information on the rate and number of reviews, there is no qualitative assessment on the worker experience available on the application. Moreover, the job descriptions are varied, but they usually explain what is generally required of the worker, inform about any specific requests (for instance, the uniform), and detail whether obtaining tips is possible.

The “UPoint” scheme lies at the core of the gamification system of the Hyr platform. Gamification is a managerial tool in which game systems are used in a non-gaming environment as a mechanism of control (Woodcock and Johnson 2017). This loyalty scheme consists of a collection of points obtained after each completed shift. They are calculated from the payment of the worker at a ratio of two points per dollar earned. Workers can redeem 2,500 points for \$75, or what the platform calls “a paid UDay.” Thus, for this to happen, the worker has to earn \$1,250 before cashing the “paid UDay,” which represents 6% of the total earned.

According to an interview with one of the co-founders of the Hyr platform, Karam, the average wage of the workers is \$20 (Eisenberg 2019), which means that they would have to work 62 hours to get the “free paid day.” Karam claims that workers can choose “where to allocate their points — accruing them for paid time off, health or dental insurance or retirement savings” (ibid.) Nevertheless, even though the interview is recent, there is no mention of this possibility in any of the website or platform documentation.

The Hyr point system does not improve the working conditions of the platform users. Instead of being a way to empower them into allocating their “points” towards services that they need—and would have the right to under an employment relationship—the point system is a gamification strategy that primarily serves a managerial purpose. Work in the hospitality sector is prone to mobilities (Ghazali 2005), and the platform would need to maintain its workers using the platform without, at the same time, creating strong social ties with the requesters, since they would stop using the platform and establish direct contact with the workers. The Hyr platform provides several provisions against this in their contracts and policies; these are explored in the following section.

From Service to Management

The status of workers within the Hyr platform is contradictory as it changes depending on whom the platform addresses. On the one hand, they present blog posts to requesters about how to manage millennial workers, referring to them explicitly as “gig workers.” The platform also uses language related to labour activities to their “professionals”: they talk about “working shifts,” free “paying UDays,” and reassure their compliance with “labour and employment laws.”

On the other hand, the many legal documents available for consultation, including the agreements, licenses, and the privacy policy, explicitly state that none of the users of the platforms are contractual workers. In the agreement with the “pros,” they are instead called “independent professionals” and, following a discourse closer to the general one of the “gig economy,” as entrepreneurs:

By agreeing to this agreement, you are asserting that you are an independent professional and entrepreneur who wishes to: (a) digitize and modernize your business; (b) be introduced to potential new clients by Hyr; and (c) engage Hyr for its service to accomplish these entrepreneurial goals (Hyr, Agreement Between Professional & Hyr, p. 1).

The legal documentation makes a concerted effort to affirm the self-employed status of workers and treats them as “businesses” on their own. In this context, instead of being an outsourcing company, the platform presents itself as merely a software service provider. Furthermore, they state that they do not screen any users that use the service, warning of the potential risks of using it:

Hyr is not responsible or liable for the actions or inactions of a Requester or other third party in relation to Projects as completed by you. You understand, therefore, that by using the service, you will be introduced to third parties for whom Hyr has not conducted any background check, that may be potentially dangerous, and that you use the service at your own risk (Hyr, Agreement Between Professional & Hyr, p. 4).

However, even though the Hyr platform tries to place all the risk with the workers, their legal documentation shows other forms of control towards the workers on top of the gamification system discussed previously.

Several provisions of the legal documentation state explicitly that the Hyr platform is against the development of an employment relationship between the requester and the workers. The platform states that “any interactions or disputes between [the worker] and a Requester are solely between [their worker] and that Requester” (Hyr, Agreement Between Requester & Hyr, p. 3). However, the platform also emphasizes in the agreement for requesters that they must “agree and acknowledge that [the requester] will engage the Professionals as independent contractors. Nothing contained herein shall be deemed or construed to create an employment relationship, partnership or joint venture between [the requester] and the Professionals” (ibid.).

Thus, despite the platform’s willingness to place most of the risks onto the users, they also take precautions so they will not create any long-term relationships that could endanger their business models, either legally (through labour laws) or economically (through the loss of fidelity). Hyr’s

legal documentation, notably the service agreement and the privacy policy, affirms that the platform controls all of the electronic communications between the requester and the worker:

You agree to Hyr's use of a service provider to mask your phone number when you exchange text messages and phone calls with Professionals. Hyr and its service provider will store your messaging and call data (including the time and date of the call or message, each of your phone numbers and the content of any text messages). You consent to this process and Hyr's use and disclosure of this data for its business purposes (Hyr, Agreement Between Professional & Hyr; Hyr, Agreement Between Requester & Hyr).

Hyr's platform, therefore, reserves the right to control the flow of online information between the different ends of its market. Since it cannot—and wishes not to—control the interactions between them at the workplace, the platform deploys other mechanisms to protect its interests while keeping the same business model based on precarious “micro-entrepreneurs.”

Finally, the privacy document of the Hyr platform raises questions concerning the ownership of the data created by the workers. According to the document, all the data that does not constitute “personal data” becomes the property of the firm automatically. Their definition of what constitutes personal information is the following:

“Personal Information” means information about an identifiable individual, including any information that alone or when in combination with other information may be used to readily identify, contact, or locate you, such as: name, address, email address, or phone number. We do not consider Personal Information to include information that has been anonymized so that it does not allow a third party to identify a specific individual (Hyr, Privacy Policy, p. 1).

This information suggests that any content, conversation, location data, or media file that does not fall into the definition becomes the aggregate property of the platform and can be used to their economic and legal gain.

Moreover, the Hyr platform places little responsibility on the correct storage, as it does with any other aspect of its relationship with the workers:

We take steps to ensure that your information is treated securely and in accordance with this Privacy Policy. Unfortunately, the Internet cannot be guaranteed to be 100% secure, and we cannot ensure or warrant the security of any information you provide to us. We do not accept liability for unintentional disclosure. Your information will be kept as long as is necessary to facilitate the service or as required by law (Hyr, Privacy Policy).

In this section, we described the contradictions in the discourse of Hyr. In the case of their marketing, the platform hides any explicit mention of the labour relationship with the workers. Instead, for them, the platform's discourse focuses on the *coolness* of casual work and the easiness in accessing their services, preferring to portray their workers as independent freelancers. However, the platform's discourse changes for those wishing to hire casual workers and in their “terms and conditions.” For labour requesters, the platform provides management

tools and tips, encouraging them to hire gig workers while advising on how to counter the downsides of casual jobs. Moreover, in their legal documentation, the platform discloses managerial practices that include the control of the users’ information flows and communication, as well as other gamification tools to exert control on the workers.

In the following section, we situate the case of Hyr within the general context of the “gig economy,” notably in the Canadian context, and the implication of the platform's discursive contradiction for their workers.

Hyr within the Gig Economy

The legal classification and tax status for independent, gig workers, and platform-based labour is considered to be a non-standard work arrangement. This work is characterized by its precarity, which the Ontario (Canada) Ministry of Labour defines as work that makes it difficult to earn a “decent income,” does not provide “decent working conditions,” and can put workers “at risk in material ways” (Mitchell and Murray 2017, p. 14). A U.S. survey by MBO Partners, the Freelancers’ Union and McKinsey Global Institute indicated that an estimated 25-30% of workers were engaged in some form of independent work on a “supplementary or primary basis in the preceding month” (Aspen Institute, *How Many Workers?*).

A Pool of Young Workers

In Canada, Statistics Canada (2017) estimates that 9.5% of people aged 18 or over participated in the on-demand economy between November 2015 and October 2016. In a survey of 2,304 residents in the Greater Toronto area, Sheila Block and Trish Hennessey of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2017) revealed that 9% work in this sector while 38% have availed themselves of services. These services include car/ride services (25%), cleaning services (27%), home-cooked meals (21%), food delivery (19%), carpooling (19%), and home rentals such as Airbnb (17%). Their survey revealed that workers in this sector are young (71% under the age of 45, with 32% aged 18-29 and 39% 30-44), and educated (90% state they have attended college or university). In terms of gender, 51% are men, 48% women, and 1% transgendered; and 54% are racialized and 46% non-racialized. Half of the survey workers had children, with 48% engaged in this type of work for over one year. The annual salary for workers was under \$80,000 CDN per year, with gig work accounting for 58% of their personal income. Just over 40% stated that the work does not provide as much income as they need. Worker respondents said they engaged in on-demand work to make extra money (64%), because it was the only available employment alternative for them (55%), with 53% stating that they would do it until better work came around. Stated downsides of this work included not being able to make enough money (41%), dealing with customer disputes (38%), inability to secure enough work (37%), lack of sick pay (35%) unpredictable hours (34%), and difficulties with always being “on call” (20%).

Block and Hennessey state that the predominance of young workers in the on-demand service economy reflect general labour trends in the Toronto area, where for millennials, “full-time secure jobs aren’t as readily available so the on-demand service economy is becoming one of the ways in which these workers make ends meet – even for well-educated degree holders” (2017, p. 19).

Insecurity is an endemic element of gig labour. In a literature review about on-demand labour, Uttam Bajwa, Lilian Knorr, Erica Di Ruggiero, Denise Gastaldo, and Adam Zendel at the University of Toronto (2018) assessed and identified three vulnerabilities for gig labour. These include: 1) precarity related to the short-term nature of the work (lack of healthcare benefits or insurance, lack of standardized labour protections, need to provide own tools/supplies); 2) platform-based characteristics (ratings and reputational economy of app design, surveillance built into the app, worker misclassification, fluctuating terms of governance between the app/company and the worker); and 3) occupational (health risks). Young people (millennials) are over-represented in the gig economy, and the authors note that media discourse has “helped to perpetuate the idea that gig workers are young, educated, hip millennials” (Bajwa et al. 2018, p. 6).

The youthful promotional branding of Hyr is reinforced in a hyper-local urban website which characterizes young Torontonians as desperate for gigs to finance their lifestyle: “From picking up extra serving shifts to selling clothes on the weekend, millennials will do just about anything to make those extra dollars. For Toronto’s millennial workforce, ‘side hustle’ gigs are a normal way of gaining a little extra pocket cash to fund the big city lifestyle, which in Toronto counts as rent” (Smith 2018).

The example of Hyr, among many other location-based gig economy platforms, raises questions about the role of the platform in the social reproduction of workers. As Creig Lamb and Sarah Doyle of the Toronto-based Brookfield Institute for Innovation & Entrepreneurship note, the popularity of micro-tasking is experienced differently by young adults depending on their personal financial and family means. Even though it is too early to conclude that Hyr’s workers receive some or most of their income from the service, its advertising targets specifically young individuals who need to complement their income through casual work. Further research will need to elucidate the role of personal networks and settings in producing the social and economic environment necessary for youths to engage in casual work through apps like Hyr and many other location-based gig economy platforms.

Referring specifically to Hyr, Lamb and Doyle note that the digital marketplace “is enabling people to build careers based on short term engagements, while creating more efficient matches between labour supply and market and employer demand” (2017, p. 10). They quote from the Government of Canada’s 2016 Expert Panel on Youth Unemployment, which describes some youth as “thriving” in the gig economy: “excited about forging their own path, these youth have the support they need from friends or family to help them to manage any associated risk” (ibid, p. 10). This situation creates the condition that, for many youths, the gig economy is the “new normal,” especially when “anecdotal evidence suggests that a growing number of Canadian youths are choosing to freelance” (ibid, p. 10). While the extent to which these “friends” or “family”—or other components of their social capital—participate in the platform’s value production requires further research, the situation of young gig workers hints that, instead of platforms placing the risks of micro-entrepreneurship solely on individuals (Szeman 2016), they may also depend on the networks of support for workers looking for a “side hustle.”

A Multi-sided Discourse

Like many other platforms, Hyr takes advantage of its technological infrastructure to operate an internal market with multiple ends. As discussed previously, platforms are flexible organizations that profit from the detachment of markets from personal experience, adopting a “more dynamic (even opportunistic) approach” (Casilli and Posada 2019). As Nieborg and Powell put it, their multi-sided markets depend on *network effects* where one end of its market affects the others (2018, p. 4). For instance, the flow of users from one end influences similar entries or exits from the other. Another characteristic is the *pricing structures* where one end of the market, a “money side,” covers the costs of another “subsidy side” (Evans and Schmalensee 2016).

Although the concept of market multi-sidedness is a purely economic term, its expansion to include social—and discursive—issues allows for a better understanding of Hyr’s contradictory portrayal of its labour services. As presented in the previous section, the platform shifts its discourse depending on which side of its market it addresses. On the one hand, workers confront a “cool” portrayal of casual work, and the platform treats them as “brands” or “entrepreneurs.” On the other hand, for the requesters, they are described as casual “millennial” workers in need of unique managerial strategies and incentives to keep them from leaving the platform and their temporary jobs.

Our findings suggest that these contradictions are deliberate and part of the strategies of information control that the platform implements, together with the intermediation of communication channels, personal data, or user matchmaking. Much as how platforms intentionally manipulate their pricing structures and network effects to maximize profits, by subsidizing one end of its market with others or by increasing user exit costs, Hyr behaves accordingly from its discourse. In its efforts from circumventing the full extent of the social and economic ties with employment, even in the case of casual or part-time work, the platform changes its discourse enabled by the different communication channels and multiple users.

Platform Governance and Policy

In Toronto, the on-demand labour sector is extremely precarious, as workers are considered to be independent contractors without the perks of minimum wage and overtime protections as outlined in the Ontario *Employment Standards Act (ESA)* (Ontario 2000, 2019). The *ESA* sets minimum standards for most workplaces in the Province of Ontario and prohibits any employer from penalizing any employee in their exercise of their *ESA* rights. The *ESA* details employee rights which include clarity about their hours of work and meal breaks, their minimum and overtime pay, payday, vacation time and pay, public holidays, leaves of absence, and termination notice and pay. In the case of Hyr, Hennessey, of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, has asked, who is the employer: Hyr, the app or the business owner that uses Hyr? And, how is the business owner using the app to classify the worker: as an independent contractor to avoid labour laws? (Charles 2018). “By situating workers outside of their boundaries,” write Finn Makela, Derek McKee and Teresa Scassa, platform companies, despite their claims to innovation, externalize their labour costs (2018, pp. 10-11).

Sunil Johal and Jordann Thirgood of the Mowat Centre³, an independent policy forum at the University of Toronto’s School of Public Policy & Governance, recommend a rethink of the

³ In April 2019 the Mowat Centre announced that it was forced to shut down because of provincial cuts to

design of labour and employment legislation in Canada to provide additional supports for independent workers who are vulnerable because of the lack of supports inherent in a standard employment relationship:

Policymakers should explore whether independent contractors in the new gig economy merit additional protections that they have not traditionally been afforded. For example, provisions around minimum wage for Canadians working through sharing economy platforms would help provide a certain level of income security... Extending other partial or full employment protections and minimum requirements to gig workers who are ‘dependent contractors’ could go some ways towards preventing platforms from a classification race to the bottom. (Johal and Thirgood 2017, pp. 44-45)

They further recommend creating “portable benefits” for gig economy workers that can be “transferable between gigs and require contributions from companies” while also “bolstering the protections and insurance options available to independent, gig workers” (ibid, p. 48). This is similar to what Harry Arthurs recommends: the creation of a new legal category that provides the ability for sharing economy/gig workers to bargain collectively, be protected under labour standards legislation and various employment-based benefits packages and have access to the state’s social safety net (2018, p. 58).

Nevertheless, the governance of platforms should also be taken into consideration (Gorwa 2019). Since the inequalities of the platform are a deliberate action from within their design, they have a political responsibility in the wellbeing of workers and policy action should reflect this. For instance, the lack of regulation in many of the newly emerged contexts of non-standard work leaves open many questions about worker rights and benefits. Investigating digitally mediated work, Phoebe Moore (2018) points out to the emerging forms of harassment and violence that workers face. She mentions that algorithmic management of reputation systems on digital platforms fuels stresses and creates risks in workload management, while digital surveillance of working practices may additionally introduce discrimination. Moreover, investigating work quality in the gig economy, Wood et al. (2018) find that while algorithmic management techniques tend to offer workers high levels of flexibility, autonomy, task variety and complexity, these mechanisms can also result in low pay, social isolation, working unsocial and irregular hours, overwork, sleep deprivation and exhaustion (p. 10).

As we have described, Hyr’s platform changes its discourse depending on which end of its market it addresses for its gain, while trying to circumvent the social implications of traditional labour. Thus, on top of policy designed to update gig work into contemporary labour laws in order to provide more benefits for the workers, we argue that policy should also aim to check, advise, and verify platforms in terms of their structural design. From algorithms that manage their workers, to their shifting discourse to attract and retain users, these strategies are created deliberately by the platform. Instead of being neutral intermediaries, these platforms extract value from its users and use their malleability for their profit. For this reason, these organizations

its funding from Ontario Conservative government. See Stephen Cook, “Mowat Centre think-tank to shut down after Ontario government eliminates funding,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 29, 2019.
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-mowat-centre-to-shut-down-after-losing-government-funding/>

should also be guided, and ultimately be held responsible, for their design, behavior, and shifting discourse.

Conclusion

Extolling the “side hustle” to millennials, Hyr’s promotional discourse illustrates Jim McGuigan’s concept of “cool” capitalism: “the incorporation of disaffection into capitalism itself” (McGuigan 2012, p. 431), which reflects “more a sign of compliance than of resistance” (ibid, p. 432), obscured by “dirty little secrets” (ibid) wherein the human costs are hidden and obscured. In our conclusion, we want to bring to the surface a “dirty little secret” of the gig economy that Hyr obscures: a fuzziness of the employee-employer relationship which can skirt labour law in various jurisdictions and thus shift the discourse of the platform depending on the user it addresses.

Theoretically, we positioned Hyr as an example of the labour platform paradigm, within the contemporary phase of the evolution of capitalism. Instead of seeing platforms as software solutions or neutral intermediaries between the supply and demand of labour, this reading regards them as organizations with business strategies that manage internal markets. Moreover, we situate Hyr within its local gig economy market, dominated by middle-aged to young educated workers, with a high proportion of racialized individuals (based on Canadian gig work statistics), who seek flexible jobs as an essential primary or secondary source of income.

By studying the discourse of the platform, notably by comparing it from the experience of multiple users, workers and requesters, we suggest that the economic definition of multi-sidedness could also be expanded to include the communicative exchanges of platforms, on top of the usual service and monetary transactions. In the case of Hyr, the platform shifts its speech depending on which side of its market it addresses, notably by changing the connotation of words associated with contractual labour. In this way, the platform presents its services to its workers—and legal authorities—as a software application for *entrepreneurs* while introducing them to the requesters as *casual millennial* workers. At the same time, the platform chooses not to mention how it uses the communication networks and algorithms to manage these relationships between both ends of its market.

In this paper we maintain that platforms have a political responsibility, in the sense of governance, towards their workers. Thus, any form of regulation should not only seek to empower workers by giving them representation and fair pay but also hold platforms accountable for their managerial practices, and ensure that their communication channels are transparent and unified to the many ends of their market, particularly those on the side of the supply and demand for labour. Moreover, another challenge of platform regulation is to address both workers who use platforms as a primary source of income and those who use them as casual work. Particularly in the case of younger users, a better understanding of the use of platforms as a secondary income source is needed since, in some cases, workers depend on their personal networks for social and economic safety—thus, suggesting that the platform’s value chains could extend beyond the user level.

We therefore are in agreement with Anita Gurumurthy (2019) and her colleagues at IT for Change, who argue that the global intensification of platforms in shaping socio-economic

livelihoods and challenging jurisdictional frameworks demands platform governance that transcends mere technology policy issues, necessitating a “cohesive policy response that can adequately and appropriately reorient the platform mode of economic organization towards a more equitable distribution of the efficiencies of intelligence scale economies” (p.75). Highlighting that the precarity of gig labour and algorithmic control of workers is not yet accounted for in labour law (and in certain jurisdictions, highly contested), they declare that “worker rights will need a back-to-the-basics policy imagination” (p. 91).

On a more general level, even though platform labour is a phenomenon developed in recent years, these organizations are part of a more significant trend in the transformation of labour and employment. The “disruption” of these companies that circumvent existing employment regulations behind the mask of “innovative” technology reverses the existing gains of labour movements in terms of the social security of workers. This paper thus provides a case study of one platform that targets vulnerable populations, in this instance, young individuals, for whom casual employment is an essential source of income. Hyr is characteristic of online intermediaries that are situated between the worker and the client/app, described by Ursula Huws as “logged labour”, with their work governed by algorithms, standardised, deprofessionalised” (Huws 2019, p. 162). In the end, the flexibility that these technology companies offer is a new iteration of the exploitation of workers that characterizes capitalism, and that thrives in cases where law and public policy fail to regulate them.

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