

Worker Voice and Silence in Platform Capitalism: A case-study of UK food couriers

ABSTRACT

This working paper explores workers' self-initiated voice as a reaction to managerial driven silence in platform capitalism. The concepts of 'worker silence' and 'worker voice' are used as they can facilitate an understanding of the way in which workers respond to workplace problems, as well as their capacity to respond within this specific context (Good & Cooper, 2014). In this paper we examine when and how food couriers in a British city exercise voice within platform capitalism as a reaction to managerial driven silence. Under what conditions would such workers initiate and create voice mechanisms as a reaction to managerial silencing, and what might the impact be on their working conditions and relationships with the organisation?

Keywords: employee voice, silence, platform capitalism, gig economy, mobilization, riders

INTRODUCTION

Platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017) has experienced significant growth in recent years (Kenney & Zysman, 2016), and close scrutiny regarding its impact on employment practices. Increased competition in the gig economy forces organisations to remain competitive by cutting costs, especially by reducing their core workforce and replacing them with periphery workers (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018; Hakim, 1990). Platform capitalism includes work that is transacted and delivered remotely, and work that is transacted via platforms but delivered locally, with the worker physically present (Huws, Spencer, & Joyce, 2016). Local gig work consists of food delivery, which is the focus of this study, couriership and other sorts of manual labour (Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2019) and is growing rapidly in recent years. Only in the UK in the last three years it has more than doubled and now accounts for 4.7 million workers, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) finds (Partington, 2019).

Gig economy organisations classify as technology companies (Shapiro, 2018), allowing them to categorise their workers as independent contractors, or suppliers. Organisations can benefit financially from classifying their workforce in such a way, enabling them to alter the supply of workers in accordance to fluctuations in demand (Atkinson, 1984). Further to this point, organisations in the gig economy utilise algorithmic management techniques to manage their disperse workforce (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). This lack of management presence alongside such strict cost cutting methods can help

an organisation to remain competitive but can negatively affect the employment relationship and workers' rights at work, including their ability to exercise voice.

Argyris (1977) notes that organisations have defensive routines and norms that can prevent workers from saying what they know, with other scholars finding that organisations can be intolerant of dissent and criticism and as a result employees might choose to remain silent in order to not create conflict or 'rock the boat' (Redding, 1985; Sprague & Ruud, 1988). However, managerial silencing is the focus of this paper and how workers might react by self-initiated voice mechanisms that are beyond the control of the organisation. In the context of limited scholarship on the topic of managerial driven silence and workers' voice within platform capitalism, this working paper is aiming to make two important contributions. First, using evidence from food couriers in a UK city, it identifies the processes of self-initiated voice mechanisms as a reaction to managerial driven silence. Second, it addresses the call for an exploration of worker silence in variable macro contexts (Donaghey, Dundon, Cullinane, Dobbins, & Hickland, 2019), namely food couriers in platform capitalism, to broaden our understanding of the employment relationship, and addresses two questions:

1. Under what conditions would food couriers initiate and create voice mechanisms as a reaction to managerial silencing?
2. What might the impact be on their working conditions and the employment relationship?

PLATFORM CAPITALISM

The nature of work in society is evolving along with technological advancements, creating a new form of employment which involves the use of online platforms. The 'Gig-economy', or platform capitalism, is what this new digital platform has been dubbed as and its rapid growth suggests that this style of work is popular amongst organisations and independent workers (Horney, 2016; Lobel, 2017). An index measuring how frequently online platforms are used presents that they are 'growing globally at an annual rate of 26 per cent' (Lehdonvirta, 2018, p. 13).

The changing nature of work has also brought about an adjustment in employment status, as organisations within the gig economy hire their workers as 'independent contractors' (Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018). Digital platform organisations define themselves as technology firms rather than

good or service providers which serves the legal argument that workers can be classified as independent contractors rather than employees (Shapiro, 2018). With origins stemming from master-servant law, modern employment law is based on two assumptions, either you are classed as an employee or you are not (Lobel, 2017). If the employee status is not fulfilled, then workers have none of the essential protections provided to employees.

The new form of work has been described as ‘work-on-demand via app’ as workers are able to sign into a mobile application then start to complete different micro-tasks (De Stefano, 2015). This work format is meant to encourage increased flexibility amongst workers as they are able to sign into the organisation’s mobile application when they want to work (Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Albeit, the supposed flexibility this form of employment advocates might not actually be as desirable as stated. Organisations claim that workers have full control over their work, however, surveillance and performance monitoring techniques are used in the workers mobile application, which is then evaluated by firms (De Stefano, 2015).

The lack of clarity surrounding the employment contract coupled with less flexibility than promised can lead to negative experiences from workers. Fluctuating demand allows organisations to allocate work on short-notice, which is commonplace for workers in the gig economy and can interfere with their free time (Prassl, 2018). Zero-hour contracts are clearly defined and are said to allow independent contractors flexibility, yet these two benefits are not attained by riders (Means & Seiner, 2015). The organisations do not allow the supposed flexibility of the employment contracts, as they regard refusal of work by independent contractors as a breach of contract (Huws et al., 2016). This highlights the lack of flexibility on offer in ‘on-demand’ work and indicates that the organisations still dictate work scheduling.

Software algorithms allow organisations to allocate work and evaluate workers’ performance. Their introduction has enabled these contemporary organisations the ability to watch over their workforce through the use of a mobile application (De Stefano, 2016). Rosenblat and Stark (2015) argue that the software algorithms present in gig economy organisations, build new forms of surveillance and control over workers using the systems. Independent workers seek flexibility and autonomy when pursuing employment in the gig economy, which is unequivocally offered by the organisations (Huws et al.,

2016). Shapiro (2018) suggests that workers attain two forms of flexibility; the ability to self-schedule; and the power to accept or decline jobs. However, algorithms flag underperforming workers for warnings or potential dismissal if their acceptance or cancellation rates are not what is expected (Anderson, 2016). The lack of clarity involved in the application of the ratings systems, coupled with no existent voice mechanisms to express concerns, can create a sense of paranoia amongst workers (Lee, Kusbit, Metsky, & Dabbish, 2015; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015).

Platform capitalism encourages competitiveness which is the reason why firms are now offering fewer financial benefits to workers in order to control their costs (Ashford et al., 2018). One way that organisations have managed to eliminate costs is by scrapping traditional workplace management hierarchy's and replacing them with software algorithms to manage workers. 'Software algorithms are changing the way people work, managing distributed workers at a large scale' (Lee et al., 2015, p. 1). Platform capitalism may offer increased freedom and flexibility, however this is countered by less visible forms of surveillance and control (Shapiro, 2018). Gig economy workers' well-being and satisfaction are affected by the way that online platforms are designed. Organisations monitor performance through surveillance on the riders' mobile application, leading to work-related stress and dissatisfaction (Bajwa, Gastaldo, Di Ruggiero, & Knorr, 2018), especially so when workers' voice is silenced along the way.

The rise of platform capitalism has triggered a great deal of public interest as it has generated new implications for rights at work (Wood, 2016). Independent work is growing at a rapid pace as digital platforms are creating large, efficient markets where independent contractors and consumers are connected. Research outlines that up to 162 million people within North America and the EU are employed as independent workers, highlighting the popularity of the freelance work (Manyika et al., 2016). Digital platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo are transforming independent work, enlarging the reach to bigger pools of workers and consumers through the use of mobile applications.

The need for increased flexibility and the measures taken to attain it by organisations has resulted in workers experiencing low levels of job satisfaction amongst gig economy organisations (Graham, Hjorth, & Lehdonvirta, 2017). The attainment of flexibility by firms has brought about implications for digital platform worker's rights. Specifically, the legality of the employment contracts provided to

workers within online platforms has initiated much debate and a conclusion is yet to be reached, causing unrest amongst workers who fear for their security (Cherry & Aloisi, 2016). Online platforms have tried to disassociate themselves from their workers to avoid their responsibilities as employers. One outcome of this effort may be management destroying structures through which types of voice may be expressed (Donaghey et al., 2019). Workers in digital platforms are classified as independent contractors, yet firms exercise significant control over employee rights (Kuhn & Maleki, 2015), eliminating avenues for worker voice.

EMPLOYEE VOICE AND SILENCE

The phrases ‘employee voice’, ‘employee involvement’ and ‘employee participation’ can be seen as umbrella terms that cover a wide range of definitions and practices (Morgan & Zeffane, 2003; Strauss, 2006), though with some ambiguity (Bacon & Storey, 2000; Tony Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, & Ackers, 2005). McCabe and Lewin (1992), in their examination of worker voice, include two broad types. First it is the expression, by workers to management, of grievances concerning work issues and, second, any kind of employee participation in the decision-making processes of the organisation. Within the same scope, Millward et al. (2000) envisioned voice as comprising three distinctive channels: 1) via representation, recognition and union membership; 2) via participation mechanisms (e.g. joint consultative committees) and 3) via direct employee involvement. Dundon et al. (2004, pp.1152–53) propose an analytical framework through which voice can be articulated via four principles: 1) articulation of individual satisfaction, 2) expression of collective organisation, 3) contribution to management decision-making and 4) demonstration of mutuality and co-operative relations.

Different conceptualisations of voice come from different disciplines (Mowbray et al. 2015). Within the HRM discipline, employee voice is seen as mechanisms used to raise complaints about work-related issues and participation in decision-making processes by employees (McCabe & Lewin, 1992). Within Organisational Behaviour (OB), voice is identified as extra-role behaviour where an employee ‘proactively challenges the status quo and makes constructive recommendations for change’ (Van Dyne et al. 1995, p.266). Contrary to HRM and OB, Employment Relations (ER) focuses on worker voice oriented both direct and indirect forms, seeking to capture the depth of voice influence (Nechanska, Hughes, & Dundon, 2018).

On the other hand, there is the antithesis of voice, worker silence. Defined as a worker's 'motivation to withhold or express ideas, information and opinions about work-related improvements' (Van Dyne et al. 2003, p.1361). Within this literature, research has focused on when and how workers exercise voice or opt for silence (Milliken et al. 2003), why would they decide to stay silent, about what types of issues are they likely to be silent and how organisations might address this (Donaghey, Cullinane, Dundon, & Wilkinson, 2011). In its own right, the literature on worker silence is relatively new, seeking to understand the processes behind an individual's decision to be silent about issues that concern them, and what types of issues would those likely be (Donaghey et al., 2011). Specifically, Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008) conceptualise it as information that is held back by workers intentionally, rather than not having anything to say or unintentionally failing to communicate. Focusing on workers' perceptions of their co-workers' impressions, a specific strand of the silence literature examines how an individual's fear of isolation diverts them from expressing true opinions that might be coming from a minority viewpoint (Milliken et al. 2003). A different interpretation sees silence as a survival strategy, where workers, in an effort to cope with the unpleasant aspects of their work, become detached to the organisation and mentally withdraw (Ezzamel et al. 2001). In sum, silence is seen as the result of workers having insufficient avenues to articulate concerns to the detriment of voice and/or as a result of worker disengagement due to cynicism or lack of trust (Donaghey et al., 2011).

While worker silence has been largely conceived as an individual choice, literature recognises that the choice to remain silent can be influenced by management (Donaghey et al., 2011). Workers' decision to voice or remain silent will be influenced by the target of their speaking up, their expectations about truly being listened to and organisational norms that might encourage or discourage voicing (Donovan et al. 2016; Mowbray et al. 2015). For example, a climate of silence might be created in workplaces where speaking up is perceived as dangerous or futile (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). These perceptions are created when management behaviour discourages bottom-up communication and is seen as intolerant of dissent, as a result workers are disinclined from voicing their concerns (Donaghey et al., 2011). Milliken et al. (2003) argue that silence is chosen by workers that believe their voice falls on 'deaf ears'. Indeed, management, through practices and institutional structures can perpetuate silence over a range of issues, thereby organizing workers out of the voice process (Donaghey et al., 2011).

Research so far has focused on silence as something which workers choose, thereby overlooking constraints to voice that might be imposed by management in preserving their prerogative (Donaghey et al., 2011). Management, through practices and institutional structures can perpetuate silence over a range of issues, thereby organizing workers out of the voice process (Donaghey et al., 2011). Allen and Tusek (2009) argue for the important role of management in identifying what can and cannot be addressed by voice mechanisms. In such a context, management might confine workers' voice when it is perceived to raise issues that might be deemed as conflicting the status quo. Thus, even when a voice structure exists but is inhibited by management in terms of its utility, it will become a 'hollow shell' (Charlwood, 2003), enforcing silence instead. Overwhelmingly it seems, management view voice mechanisms as tools to increase firm efficiency and enhancing firm policy understanding rather than a forum where workers can articulate their diverging interests (Donaghey et al., 2011). For example, Donovan et al. (2016) found management willing to act on worker voice when that concerned workplace problems but were very resistant to it with regard to change in working conditions or a manager's performance. Effectively, management can decide to 'create' silence by reducing voice to non-threatening issues, thus preventing workers from having any concerns raised and addressed.

Within this emerging literature, there are still aspects of worker silence that remain unexplored. For example, the state of worker silence in platform capitalism and workers potential reaction to managerial driven silence.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study adopting an interpretivist abductive approach, with our analysis primarily focused on couriers' experiences of a newly created food courier network (FCN) in a British city as a reaction to managerial silence from food delivery companies. Data triangulation protocols were followed (Creswell and Miller, 2000), with four main sources of data: (1) observation and audio-recording of FCN's meetings (n=3); (2) minutes of FCN's meetings (n=4); (3) observations and audio-recording of FCN's leadership meetings (n=5); (4) semi-structured interviews with FCN members (n=20)¹. The authors were also granted access to the network's closed Facebook group page and Messenger chat.

¹ Interviews are ongoing, and it is anticipated they will be completed by end of September 2019.

NVivo is used as a tool to code the qualitative data. Following the Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), through multiple rounds of open coding, we identify concepts, moving from in-vivo (e.g. simple descriptive phase) to second order codes (e.g. thematic coding) (Maanen, 1979; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Observation notes, recordings and minutes of meetings, and online chats will be particularly important for informing interviewees' recollections of events. Interviews and chats complement observations, by giving a rich insight into how workers experienced the network and its meetings.

AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FEEDBACK

Initial findings show couriers' growing frustration due to a) the organisation's perceived secrecy that is perpetuated by the way the 'rider app' works; b) the "management robots" replying to couriers' emails when raising concerns about their work and working conditions; c) scraping the 'courier reps' system and any training provided to new couriers. These are examples of managerial silencing that drove couriers to create FCN, their own voice mechanism:

"They'd only communicate anything to us if it made themselves look good. Anything else we don't get told. This is essentially why we created the network."

According to the leaders/creators of FCN, they created the network in an effort to be able to continue doing the job they "love" with better conditions; "the job is great, but the company isn't".

Currently the authors are analysing observation data, chats and interviews, creating descriptive codes. Initial themes and theoretical implications will be presented in the conference with the hope of gaining feedback for this work-in-progress from knowledgeable colleagues.

The authors would like to seek advice on the following:

- Can this study effectively contribute to the literature on managerial silencing and worker voice?
- Is there previous research which speaks directly to issues of managerial silencing of worker voice in such situated contexts?
- Are the data collection methods used in this study of interest for exploring these issues?
- Are there avenues of integration across the HRM, OB and ER disciplines that might be useful for the development of this study?
- Are there other ways of understanding worker voice and managerial silencing in this context?

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