6

Resilience, Reworking, and Resistance

Hidden Transcripts of the Gig Economy

Introduction

In this chapter, we examine how African gig workers exercise agency to earn and sustain their livelihoods in the gig economy. As Chapter 5 has shown, in addition to the monetary and non-monetary rewards reaped by digital workers, they also face significant risks. Gig work platforms and clients/employers exert control over labour power and labour process through the mechanisms of ratings, feedback, payment methods, user profile registrations, and algorithmic workplace monitoring, thus constraining workers' autonomy and bargaining power. In fact, the opportunities for worker action in the gig economy are apparently fewer than in so-called 'Fordist' workplaces. This is even more apparent for remote gig work in comparison to place-based work—e.g. delivery couriers and taxi drivers who can form communities at or near restaurants and traffic junctions (see Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2019). Remote workers, as a result, are expected to have fewer opportunities to exert their agency—particularly so for workers in Africa, where a clear lack of well-paid work locally already constrains workers' ability to earn livelihoods. Further, in comparison to European workers, African workers have less state welfare support to fall back on, which can also limit their agency. In this chapter, we examine how remote gig workers in Africa manage these various constraints on one of the world's biggest gig economy platforms through their practices of everyday resilience, reworking, and resistance (after Katz, 2004).

Drawing from a rich labour geography tradition, which considers workers to 'actively produce economic spaces and scales' (Herod, 2001: 46), this chapter's main theoretical contribution is to offer a reformulation of Katz's (2004) notions of 'resistance', 'resilience', and 'reworking' as everyday practices of agency, best understood as 'hidden transcripts' of the gig economy (Scott, 1990). We documented these hidden transcripts—that is,

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acts and practices of workers that do not directly confront employers—among remote gig workers in Africa, both on and off the platform, to reveal how the socio-technical structures of platforms influence labour agency in the gig economy. In so doing, we contribute to the research on labour geography in the following ways.

First, the literature on the well-being of gig economy workers has grown tremendously in the last few years.[1] However, while gig workers' action and organizing have gained some traction in place-based work (see Cant, 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2019), discussion of labour agency in the remote gig economy has been generally limited to date. Some studies have noted how workers are developing a sense of online community through digital communication Wood et al. (2018). Similarly, Gray and Suri (2019) in their study of platform-based remote workers both in India and the US outlined the deeply intricate and interconnected nature of gig workers, often structured around current communication technologies. But beyond this there is a lack of discussion on what kinds of agency practices workers employ to overcome precariousness and vulnerability in the remote gig economy. This chapter, therefore, contributes to this emerging literature on labour agency and worker actions in the global gig economy by extending the scope of labour geography research from the context of African remote gig workers and its impact on their working conditions.

Second, whereas labour agency is generally understood to involve labour unions and collective bargaining, workers' individual actions are equally important (Rogaly, 2009). In this chapter, we discuss African gig workers' individual everyday practices of resilience, reworking, and resistance, and their consequences for working conditions. Cataloguing how these practices are performed at various scales and places helps us understand how the gig economy is negotiated and challenged by workers in low- and middle-income regions. In studying African gig workers, we advance the idea of 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1990) of the gig economy—that is, workers actions that do not confront clients or are in the public domain—which are attentive to the spatiality of work, socio-economic conditions of workers, and the labour processes guided by the technological structures of platforms.

[1] E.g. on the gig economy in high-income countries, see Berg (2016), Huws et al. (2017), Kessler (2018), Milland (2017), Ravenelle (2019), and Shibata (2019); and on low- and middle-income countries, see Anwar and Graham (2020a), Carmody and Fortuin (2019), D'Cruz and Noronha (2016), Graham et al. (2017), Rani and Furrer (2020), and Wood et al. (2019).

Third, while there is a long history of scholarship on labour studies in Africa (Beckman et al., 2010; Copper, 1987 Freund, 1984; Hilson, 2016), much of this literature is rooted in the mining-agricultural-industry complex. In this chapter, by contrast, we focus on African gig work, which until now has escaped the attention of scholars dealing with labour issues in Africa (for notable exceptions, see Carmody and Fortuin, 2019; Giddy, 2019). While there is already evidence to suggest that informal workers in Africa enjoy various sources of power (Lindell, 2013; Von Holdt and Webster, 2008), the spatially non-proximate nature of remote gig work means that coalitional and associational power are hardly available to these workers. In this chapter, we demonstrate how remote workers use their individual structural power to compensate for their weak associational power.

Conceptualizing Agency in Gig Work

Labour geography as a sub-discipline emerged in response to the Marxian-inspired economic geography literature of the 1970s, and other social science disciplines that neglected the agency of workers in their analyses of political–economic structures (see Herod, 1997, 2001). The basic premise in this 'labour geographies' turn is that workers can create and shape economic geographies through their own spatial fixes, just like capital can. But worker actions are enabled—and constrained—by the social, cultural, and political structures around them (Williams et al., 2017). In other words, agency and structures are intertwined and often influence each other (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011).

Within the labour geography tradition, literature has emerged that asks how worker actions are determined both by their positions in production networks, and by the political systems (e.g. state, society, and labour markets) they find themselves in (Carswell and De Neve, 2013). The labour geography literature has also expanded to include non-standard employment relations in the new information economy (Benner, 2002), new modes of worker organization (see Lier and Stokke, 2006 on community unionism), and new geographical spaces (Lambert and Webster, 2001). Others have documented the influence of identity and intersectionality (gender, migrant status, and race) on agency (Batnitzky and McDowell, 2011). Further works exploring agency in the workplace and beyond it (Dutta, 2016; Hastings and MacKinnon, 2017), as well as individual agency

(Rogaly, 2009) have emerged, alongside the literature on the agency of unionized workers (Cumbers et al., 2010) and non-unionized workers (Benner and Dean, 2000). But the world of work is changing rapidly.

Work has always been connected to a place, e.g. a factory, farm, or home. However, the information-based economy is altering the meanings of employment, work, and workplaces, and how the labour process is organized, as a significant amount of work is now being done on digital labour platforms (Anwar and Graham, 2020a, 2020c; Graham and Anwar, 2018b, 2019 also see Chapter 3). Workers in the global gig economy are engaging in new forms of communication and organization. Thus, worker actions need to be examined in relation to changing work practices and unequal power relations in the gig economy, and how that influences platform structures and labour processes. Put differently, labour agency involves power—and also how effectively that power is wielded by gig workers in the context of their new digital workplaces, and the technological structures that both enable and constrain them.[2]

In studying gig workers in Africa, our point of departure is how labour agency is influenced by the relationship between labour and platforms as 'socio-technical systems' through which workers are brought under the control of capital for productive purposes.[3] Concretely, we show how worker actions are conditioned by platforms' technological controls such as ratings, feedback, monitoring systems, along with workers' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Finally, we will discuss how the gig economy is changing the spatial dynamics of labour agency by examining the social media interaction of gig workers as a useful space of agency, and considering the extent to which this impacts their working conditions.

Practices and Spaces of Labour Agency

We understand agency as a multifaceted concept that refers to both the intention and practice of taking action for one's self-interest or the

[2] Power here refers to the ability of workers to shape the social relations around them. In this context, the impact of agency will vary, depending on the types of power workers have and how that power is influenced and conditioned by the immediate contexts in which they live.

[3] Socio-technical systems refer to a combination of the technological artefacts, knowledge, capital, and human labour necessary for production and distribution of goods and services (Geels, 2004). Gig work platforms can be thought of as social-technical systems since they represent digital workplaces through which labour power performs various tasks.

interest of others (Rogaly, 2009: 1975; also Castree et al., 2004). A helpful way to understand labour agency in the gig economy is through Katz's (2004: 240–241) distinction between 'resilience', 'reworking', and 'resistance' strategies as three everyday practices of workers which emerge as a response to the changing world of work, and the political–economic transformations in their surroundings. In a way, Katz's conceptual distinction was informed by the early debates on resistance found in James Scott's work on Malay peasants (1985, 1990; also see Abu-Lughod, 1990).

Scott (1985) argues that oppression and resistance go hand in hand, and that by only focusing on visible actions and events, the subtle but powerful forms of everyday resistance get neglected. Scott characterized a wide variety of low-profile resistance practices that don't involve the collective defiance of powerful groups, but instead are often cryptic and opaque, and largely geared to the subordinated group's safety (Scott, 1990: 19). He distinguished two types of actions by such subordinated groups. One is the 'public transcript', i.e. open action in front of the other party in the power relationship (Scott, 1990: 2) and the other is the 'hidden transcript'—the discourse (both verbal and non-verbal actions) that takes place offstage so that power holders cannot see it (Scott, 1990: 4). Our concern in this chapter is with the hidden transcript, given that remote gig workers in Africa rarely come face to face with their employers, unlike with place-based work such as food delivery and taxi services. Scott's notion of the hidden transcript is a useful way to examine agency beyond observable actions, by looking into gig workers' daily lives to uncover practices that are not considered to be meaningful strategies for survival. For Katz (2004), not every autonomous act is an act of resistance, because there exists a variety of oppositional practices.[4] It is here that Katz's (2004) categorization of resistance, resilience, and reworking comes into play to understand labour agency in the gig economy.

Resistance, according to Katz (2004: 251), requires 'a critical consciousness to confront and redress historically and geographically specific conditions of oppression and exploitation'. For Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) resistance can also include misbehaviour and counterproductive practices towards work itself and the use of work material for non-work purposes.

[4] Hughes (2020) puts forward a similar argument that research, certainly within the discipline of human geography, has tended to conceptualize resistance by a 'predetermination of form', i.e. certain actions or actors constitute resistance. Instead, Hughes argues for framing resistance as emergent, whereby new actors and categories of resistance do not always cohere to an (expected) resistant form and yet condition the possibility for future claims to be made (pp. 1142–1143).

Thus, resistance can be seen as involving both the direct and indirect confrontation of workers, including challenging and subverting exploitative production regimes. Worker actions such as strikes and demonstrations are more direct forms of resistance, while indirect confrontations include wage negotiations. As employment relations become more contingent, and the workforce becomes unorganized, workers complement resistance with reworking and resilience to maximize their chances of survival (Katz, 2004).

Resilience refers to small acts of 'getting by' or coping with everyday realities without necessarily changing existing social relations (Katz, 2004: 244).[5] These acts include autonomous initiatives like education, training, and taking care of community members; and therefore may be neither progressive nor transformative. Workers also complement these with 'reworking' efforts in an attempt to redistribute resources and power by recalibrating oppressive and unequal power relations to improve their material conditions. Katz understood reworking as focused and pragmatic responses to problematic conditions faced by people. For example when facing eviction, residents of kampongs in North Jakarta use their local environmental knowledge and communal scavenging to rebuild their residences at an elevated site to avoid flooding (Betteridge and Webber, 2019).

Scott's and Katz's analyses both point to an important consideration of 'space'. Space is considered a key element in labour geography research—in particular, a key factor in the organization of production, collective mobilization of workers, institutional and regulatory practices at multiple scales, and labour mobility (Herod, 2001; Peck, 1996). But emerging spaces of digital work are both digitally distinct and digitally augmented (Graham and Anwar, 2018a).[6] The understanding of these digital spaces of production provides us with a way to think about how workers can produce their labour geographies. Since a large part of productive activities in the information economy take place in these digital spaces of work, digital channels have become central to production and reproduction, as well as to worker communication (Gray and Suri, 2019).

[5] For some, resilience can mean putting up with precarious life existence and inequality in society, and relocating the responsibility for well-being and change onto the individual (see Diprose, 2014).

[6] Gig work platforms are *digitally distinct* since they can be accessed from anywhere by anyone with access to a computer and internet connection. Digital technologies such as platforms also *augment* the positionalities of workers by transcending the temporal and spatial boundaries in which labour power is embedded. For example, African gig workers can perform certain tasks for employers in the US from a variety of spaces, which they were previously unable to do.

The proliferation of the internet has coincided with the rise of social media and new communication channels, such as WhatsApp and Skype.[7] These digital tools of communication have given rise to various social movements (Aouragh, 2012; Margetts et al., 2015) and have the potential to strengthen worker mobilization as well. In the age of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016), digital communication channels are fast becoming central to collective organization among workers (Wood et al., 2018), and are also a means to reduce overhead costs, perform work, and develop social bonds and support to make work manageable (Gray and Suri, 2019).

Following Scott (1990: 4) we have characterized remote gig workers' actions as hidden transcripts. We understand these as 'hidden' because workers and employers are rarely in the same location and hence do not confront each other. Also, worker actions will be hidden from employers when they use closed Facebook groups and WhatsApp messages,[8] rather than openly confronting them. For Silver (2003: 35), analysing 'anonymous or hidden forms of struggle . . . where strikes are illegal and open confrontation difficult or impossible', is just as important as analysing open resistance. We catalogue here a variety of socio-material practices of resilience and reworking, which are intended by workers to get by in their daily lives, as well as some resistance practices that are aimed at platform employers without the intention of their becoming full-fledged strikes, as used by factory or shop floor workers.

Katz's categorization further opens up the possibility to produce a revolutionary imagination in the minds of gig workers, who are often fragmented, individualized. and whose power is under continuous threat through the commodification of work (Graham and Anwar, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). While Africa has a long history of militant and progressive trades union movements opposing colonial and apartheid regimes, recent years have seen a decline in trades union movements across the continent (Andrae and Beckman, 1999; Beckman et al., 2010). Therefore, thinking about worker power in the gig economy that can complement labour unions is of utmost importance. The question here is: What types and sources of power do workers have in the gig economy?

[7] WhatsApp and Facebook are two of the most common messaging apps in Africa (Bobrov, 2018).
[8] Some of the Facebook groups used by gig workers are closed to the public; however, it is possible for employers to observe worker communications if they join these worker groups.

Types of Worker Power

Here it is important to think about different types of worker power, and workers' ability to exert agency vis-à-vis employers through a variety of acts (Schmalz et al., 2018). Structural power (Silver, 2003; Wright, 2000) can be used individually and collectively to improve labour's working conditions. Structural power is further divided into marketplace bargaining power (i.e. power derived by workers due to tight labour markets and shortage of skills) and workplace bargaining power (i.e. power derived through the position of workers in the production process), which can disrupt production through workers' collective action (Silver, 2003). Where workers' structural power has been weakened, symbolic power in combination with associational power has been a useful means for workers to articulate moral issues as social claims, and to build wider public pressure (Chun, 2009; Von Holdt and Webster, 2008). Similarly, associational power by workers is attained by being part of organizations—typically trades unions, which can serve as a front for collective action at multiple levels (Schmalz et al., 2018). A strategic combination of these worker powers is critical in order for workers' demands to be met (Mashayamombe, 2019; Webster et al., 2009).

In the near absence of institutionalized labour unions in the remote gig economy, it is crucial to explore how workers exert power in different spaces through individual practices that are informal, unorganized, and subtle, but which can nevertheless lead to positive outcomes. In this chapter we show how workers' everyday resilience, reworking, and resistance practices are built out of their structural power. We examine both productive and reproductive spaces, given that remote workers' daily practices also extend into the realm of social reproduction (Kelly, 2012).[9] Digital communication channels such as Facebook offer them a chance to forge community relations and build collective identity. Social media channels are also spaces where the interaction between markets, workers, civil society, and the state, have come to be made and remade daily, and hence are useful spaces to examine worker actions and labour market outcomes (Fuchs, 2014). Thus, gig workers' use of social media is an important

[9] Social reproduction includes a range of practices that maintain and reproduce production relations along with the material and social grounds on which they are produced (Katz, 2004). Social reproduction, therefore, has political–economic, cultural, and environmental aspects, all of which bear on the everyday lives of workers.

aspect to broaden the perspective of labour agency. The next section gives an account of agency practices undertaken by African remote workers.

The Variegated Landscape of Agency in the Gig Economy

On Upwork, bidding is determined by a worker's subjective perception of their marketplace bargaining power, which tends to be influenced by their awareness of the labour market competition. For example, newcomers tend to place more job bids compared to experienced workers, who prefer to filter jobs. New workers are also likely to bid at lower wages to win contracts. In contrast, experienced workers rely on their skills or reputation to command a higher price. Workers with positive reviews and top-rated status often do not even bid for jobs, since they get invited directly by clients through Upwork.

As part of our study, we examined the factors that enable African workers to succeed on platforms. Upwork categorizes successful workers in the form of 'Top Rated' workers, who maintain a job success score of at least 90 per cent, which is calculated based on both private and public feedback given to workers by clients. Workers with top-rated status often get more work from employers. Upwork also helps employers find top-rated workers based on the requirements of the job, a point made to us by several workers. As we show below, the already existing inequalities off-platform—including workers' education, economic status, and access to digital technologies—impact and influence who succeeds in finding work on Upwork and who does not. We further follow Carswell and De Neve's (2013) 'horizontal' approach to outline how workers' socio-economic status, identities, and livelihood strategies influence their agency.

Significantly different life goals among gig workers reflect the level of importance they assign to their work. In their multi-platform study in the US, Schor et al. (2020) found satisfaction to be higher and autonomy greater for workers with multiple sources of income, where the platform supplied just one portion of their total income. In contrast, those who were entirely dependent on platforms for their livelihoods expressed more dissatisfaction and experienced greater precarity. Similarly, in our sample, workers who were already in regular jobs were more likely to use gig work to earn extra income or simply to do something they are passionate about. Hence,

they are also likely to filter jobs and select clients carefully, even if it took a few weeks to get their first contract. We found that those workers who were primarily dependent upon income from platforms (e.g. migrants) were more constrained in their actions, while educated workers tended to do complicated and highly skilled work such as article writing, and creative and multimedia activities. They were also more successful in setting up their profiles on multiple platforms, applying for jobs, and writing bids—compared with less-educated workers.

In the African context, workers' socio-economic backgrounds influence their ability to get work on digital platforms. We found that workers who were from poor backgrounds, had not completed higher education, and lacked necessary skills, often struggled to find jobs on Upwork. Their poor material conditions also prevented them from finding work on platforms, as they could not afford digital tools such as laptops. By contrast, workers who came from affluent socio-economic backgrounds and who had completed higher education, enjoyed success in winning bids on platforms. For example, Katy, a white migrant living in South Africa, explained that her privileged background, education, and material affordances had a direct bearing on her success as a gig worker. She explained:

> Yes, I have an advanced degree. I have the kind of life where I have always been able to go after something. I did not face racism and substandard education and I have had access to a computer. Whenever I have needed a computer and you know I have a network of friends who if my internet went down I could pick up and go to their houses and use it.
>
> **Interview, pers.comm., Johannesburg, 2016**

Similarly, Dean, a white remote worker in Johannesburg, has done thousands of hours of virtual assistant work on Upwork. He has a regular job as a sales agent in a local travel company. He also reiterated the importance of a worker's socio-economic status in finding work on platforms. He told us: 'I am able to exploit work opportunities on Upwork because I am privileged enough to enjoy all the necessities (internet, laptop, electricity) that are required to work on Upwork which many people in South Africa cannot afford' (Interview, pers.comm., September 2016). He further added that he gets 'paid a good salary from a regular job and has medical aid, pension, and other non-cash benefits. Online work definitely provides a cushion for extra money but if I lose my job on Upwork, which I think I can anytime, I am not concerned because I already have a job and enough money saved to survive'.

Gender and migrant status both shape and limit agency among workers. For migrant workers, gig work represents an alternative to the local labour markets, which can be exclusionary. For female workers, gig work offers freedom from certain forms of social relations, for example independence from male figures in the family. Crucially for migrant women workers, Rydzik and Anitha (2019) argue, agency acts can be differentiated as practices of resilience, reworking, and resistance, since gender, immigration status, and migration history (as well as low-status employment and educational level) shape both their understandings of particular experiences of exploitation and possible responses to these.

We examined a range of everyday individual practices and strategies of African gig workers through which they exert their agency both on and off the platform (Table 6.1). Workers often resorted to resilience and reworking strategies when they first joined Upwork. Those who found success on Upwork were then able to use more resistance strategies. Workers tended to exhibit similar agency 'off the platform', since the participation of workers on social media is less constrained by a platform's control mechanisms.

Remote gig workers' use of everyday reworking, resilience, and resistance strategies help them achieve autonomy at work and better bargaining power—where autonomy at work is understood as the ability of workers to control work intensity and working hours, and bargaining power includes a worker's capacity to negotiate their wages, withdraw from work at will, and control their employment conditions. We now discuss these everyday practices and their limits in the gig economy.

Everyday Resilience and Reworking

The most common everyday practices African gig workers have at their disposal are resilience and reworking, particularly among the new and less-educated workforce. The practices of these groups are often subtle and less confrontational than those of experienced workers or those already employed in their local labour markets. Less-educated workers often come from low-income backgrounds, and undertake insecure and low-paid work in informal local labour markets. Gig work is seen by them as an attractive substitute to the dysfunction of informal labour markets, and a significant livelihood opportunity. Hence, we found them to be less involved in acts of resistance, such as declining jobs or cancelling contracts. The importance of gig work for African labour's subsistence is underlined in both Research

Table 6.1 Heuristic framework for agency in the remote gig economy and its impacts

Spaces of labour agency	Types of agency practices			Agency impacts
	Resilience	*Reworking*	*Resistance*	
On the platform	Sharing computers and account. Buying reviews on platforms.	Negotiating working hours and wages. Creating multiple accounts Using two monitors.	Filtering of clients and jobs. Leaving negative feedback for client. Withholding the output from client.	Breaking barriers to entry. Improved Wages. Control over working hours. Discretion of work tasks. Scheduling of work. Intensity of work. Collective identity formation.
Off the platform	Community formation (e.g. social media groups like Facebook). Advising fellow workers. Running training classes.	Using public Wi-Fi. Re-outsourcing jobs. Buying and selling accounts.	Exposing bad clients. Warning fellow workers.	

Source: Reproduced with permission from Anwar and Graham, 2020c: 1278, tab 2.

ICT Africa's After Access survey (Insight2impact, 2019) and Wood et al.'s (2019) surveys, with a majority of the gig workers surveyed considering it crucial for their daily survival. The key target of gig workers is to break the barrier to entry on Upwork and find their first job, which is crucial for gig work: it helps workers get their first review score which, in turn, enables them to win further contracts. However, as we noted in Chapter 5, finding that first job is one of the biggest hurdles for workers.

In our sample, a majority of the workers (over 50 per cent) revealed that they spent anywhere from a month to a year of constant searching without winning any contracts on Upwork. That said, there are (dishonest) means to circumvent this problem. Newcomers who are starting out on the platform can buy feedback and reviews from clients on the platforms. The client posts a fake job, and workers pay the client in return for good feedback and a 5-star rating. Workers told us that this type of business transaction is undertaken primarily in local and personal networks. Additionally, workers might set up multiple accounts using the names of their family members and friends, thus giving them more 'connects' per month for job bidding.[10] One Kenyan worker, Isa, was using ten different Upwork accounts to increase the number of jobs he could bid for per month. Workers also resorted to sharing accounts with their friends and family members. We found examples of workers looking to buy highly rated pre-approved accounts with locations set for the European Union and the United States. These tend to be especially useful for African workers since it improves their chances of winning a bid, with a few workers reporting that clients seemed reluctant to outsource work to Africa.

Workers also told us how some clients will prey on newcomers with no feedback by demanding that they do free work in return for excellent reviews. Workers preferred jobs involving tasks that require less formal training and skills sets such as image tagging, which is easier than digital marketing, translation, and transcription work. A Nigerian worker, Ifeki, who is an online training instructor and has a university degree in public relations, spent one year bidding on Upwork. His first job was fixing the overheating problem on a laptop for an American client. A Ghanaian worker, Quinn, who primarily does editing and proofreading tasks, started on Upwork by finding the contact details of a South African businesswoman for a client. Both Ifeki and Quinn got paid and 5-star ratings

[10] Connects are like credits required by workers to apply for jobs. Number of 'connects' required to apply for jobs vary. Prior to May 2019, Upwork gave free connects to workers but that changed. Now, workers have to buy connects at US$0.15 per connect.

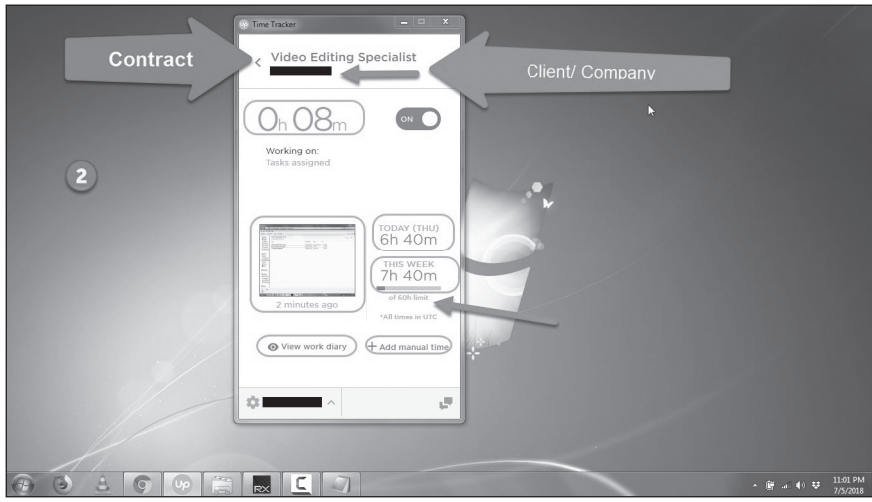
for their work, which led them to win further bids and ultimately several thousand dollars' worth of income through the platform.

Another issue among remote workers is that the gig economy is inherently dependent on internet access and computers, which is an added cost for them. Most workers reported using public internet hotspots such as coffee shops, libraries, and universities, to avoid paying internet access fees. Entry-level workers who could not afford a laptop worked at internet cafes, while others took out loans to buy a second-hand laptop and some even shared laptops in their non-work social networks, that is, with friends and family. An example of this was shared with us by Jess and Kenny, two friends from Ghana who both have undergraduate degrees. Upwork closed Kenny's account and told him that he was placing too many bids without actually winning any contracts. Kenny could not open a new account. Hence, he decided to use Jess's account, and now both share an account and a desktop to do data entry and article writing work (Interview, pers. comm., Takoradi, 2017). This practice has enabled them to overcome both the entry barrier and the technological barriers of platform work. These kinds of practices are also prevalent in place-based gig economy work such as ride-hailing. In a number of African countries, vehicle ownership is low and workers simply cannot join ride-hailing platforms such as Uber or Bolt, or other domestic platforms. However, the owner of a car with an approved account on a ride-hailing platform can add another driver as their 'driver partner' in order to share the car and any earnings (see Anwar, 2020; Graham and Anwar, 2018a; Otieno et al., 2020).[11]

Remote gig workers' problems are further compounded by the high levels of work monitoring on platforms. As discussed in Chapter 5, new digital technologies are enabling employers to exert authoritarian management practices remotely, through a form of 'Digital Taylorism' (The Economist, 2015a). This form of control is very much evident in the gig economy in both remote work and place-based work. Remote workers in our sample reported regular tracking of time and capturing of time-stamped screenshots of their laptops, leading to long working hours due to fear of non-payment of wages (Figure 6.1). Figure 6.1a shows a time-tracker on Upwork which records working hours regularly, and Figure 6.1b is the work diary of a remote worker showing screenshots of their computer captured by Upwork. If a worker's screenshot is captured while they are playing games or using

[11] That said, in practice, car owners have been able to extract rents as driver partners have to pay weekly rents for the car.

(a)



(b)

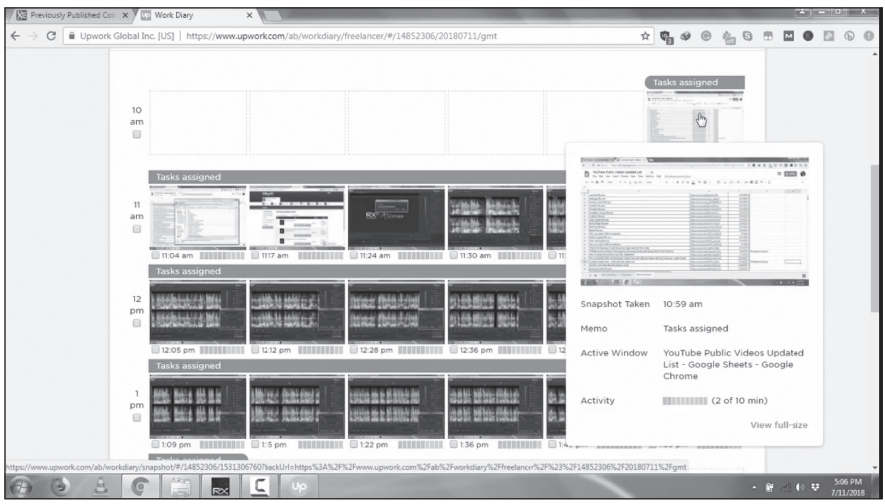


Fig. 6.1 Upwork's time tracker (a) and screenshot capture (b)
Source: Reproduced with permission from Anwar and Graham, 2020c: 1281, fig. 2.

social media, they may not get paid. The workers we spoke to subsequently felt that their client/employer and the platform are always watching them—a modern-day version of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (Semple, 1993). That said, some workers preferred screen-shot capturing, as this allowed regular payment of wages and protection against non-payment as reported by Wood et al. (2019).

To prevent such monitoring of non-work activities, some workers add a second display screen. This act can be thought of as both 'reworking' and 'resistance'. Reworking in a sense that workers tactically avoid monitoring of their work, and resistance because of the counterproductive work practices they do during working hours (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). It also provides workers with control over their pace of work and working hours, a key aspect of autonomy at work. While clients would often resort to regular monitoring of work early in the contract, experienced gig workers told us that once trust had been established, clients rarely tracked their time.

Another form of reworking strategy is to negotiate wages. While negotiation of wages is understood by Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) as an indirect form of resistance, Mann (2007) has argued that settlement of wage disputes is the working class's attempt to alter socio-economic relations from within the capitalist system, rather than by engaging in full-scale resistance. In the context of remote work, wage negotiations are often undertaken by workers to extract higher wages from the client, thus constituting an element of reworking.[12] This is largely possible due to the marketplace bargaining power of certain workers. Kelly, a transcriber from Uganda who has a '96 per cent job success' on Upwork, described how she uses a client's payment history to negotiate wages. She explained,

> If I go to a client's page and it says his average is $20 an hour, even if my profile states $15, I can confidently apply with a $20 an hour rate because that is what he pays . . . Sometimes you negotiate, he says your profile says $15, you are applying for $20. I tell him your page says you pay 20, so why do you want to pay me 15? And he says we compromise at 18, and I can work for 18.
>
> **Interview, pers. comm., October 2016.**

However, wage negotiation is not a viable option for many. The oversupply of labour power in the global gig economy creates a fear of replaceability, which means new workers work for low pay or unsocial working hours (Anwar and Graham, 2020a; see also Chapter 5). Thus, they resort to different types of strategies to cope with the everyday economic realities of low-paid and insecure work. Many of these tactics are built away from the workplace, and extend into the realm of their social and personal networks.

[12] Wage negotiation is not possible for place-based work such as ride-hailing at individual level. But collectively, Nigerian and Kenyan drivers have been able to do this via strikes (Alake, 2021). In call centres, there is a room for wage negotiations through trade unions. However, companies do very well in suppressing unions.

Workers' reliance on many non-work networks is critical to build the community and social relationships necessary for their own survival in the context of the precarious and informal work common in Africa (Lindell, 2013). For example, dockworkers in Durban, South Africa, combine wage labour with informal small-scale entrepreneurialism, pilferage, and petty trade in consumables for their livelihoods (Callebert, 2017). A similar account is given in Cooper (1987) of Mombasa dockers and their reliance on the nearby rural economy within the wider context of family, village, and regional life. The importance of non-work social networks in workers' lives has also become evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. In Kenya and South Africa, after the lockdown, ride-hailing drivers experienced a significant drop in rides and as a result lost their income opportunities. Drivers resorted to various forms of alternative activities to generate livelihoods, for example, street vending and trading in consumables, or had to fall back on family support from partners, parents, and friends (Otieno et al., 2020). The social-economic networks on which informal workers have always depended are therefore extending into the digital sphere as well.

Digital communication technologies have also emerged as important spheres of social connection (Matassi et al., 2019; Miller and Venkatraman, 2018). Wong's (2020) study, on UK and Hong Kong youths who confine themselves to their rooms, reported deep interconnections and attachment to online communities in order to seek solace and solidarity. Social media networks and digital communication channels are also critical sites for political and social activity both globally (Gustafsson, 2012; Margetts et al., 2015; Milan and Barbosa, 2020) and in Africa (Aouragh, 2012; Bosch, 2017; Dwyer and Molony, 2019; Kadoda and Hale, 2015; Kharroub and Bas, 2016; Omanga, 2019). Digital communication tools are already used by civil society organizations and workers to support digital activism (Schradie, 2018; also, Chibita, 2016) and larger social movements (Aouragh, 2012; Margetts et al., 2015), as they enlarge new political space and accommodate new politics (Thigo, 2013). For example, social media networks are critical to the formation of collective identity, associational power, and ultimately in developing revolutionary consciousness (Aouragh, 2012). The significance of digital communications channels and social media networks in offsetting some of the adverse implications of gig work has already been underscored in recent studies (Anwar and Graham, 2020c; Gray and Suri, 2019; Johnston, 2020).

Selwyn (2012) has called for identification of sources of worker's structural power that might be turned into associational power (Selwyn, 2012), and African gig workers have indeed used their structural power to develop 'webs of care' (Katz, 2004: 246). African gig workers' community relations exist both in the digital sphere (i.e. through social media networks) and their immediate locality, i.e. personal networks. Much of the exercise of labour agency in these networks can be characterized as resilience, since these practices are intended to help workers cope with adverse outcomes of remote work such as low wages, exploitative clients, and the uncertainty of jobs. Social media networks among gig workers have become spaces where buying and selling of accounts, sharing strategies on bidding, re-outsourcing of jobs, running skills-training classes, and the discussion of a variety of interpersonal and work-related issues such as life, fair employment relationships, trust, and dealing with bad clients, are common. Our respondents stressed the importance of Facebook groups for worker interactions, where they can actually interact and communicate about their work and personal lives. Dabiku is a successful remote worker from Kenya and a member of a Facebook group in which he often offers tips for securing contracts, and also uses the group to re-outsource some of his work to locals, thus allowing him to manage a large number of contracts.

However, there are limitations to the use of social media by gig workers. Srauy (2015) makes the excellent point that while social media sites can enable community formation and social protest, at the same time these sites are designed to monetize users' labour. Users' activities and data can also be used for nefarious purposes by employers or management, such as monitoring workers and workplaces, and also by governments and the private sector for surveillance (e.g. Zuboff, 2019). Facebook, for example, has data sharing agreements with some of the largest technology companies in the world, including Amazon, which has come under fire for its intense monitoring of workers (Dance et al., 2018; also see Bloodworth, 2016).[13] There is evidence that employers can easily monitor and track workers' activities on social media platforms and take action against them. One case of this is Amazon's secret surveillance of its workers on private Facebook groups (Gurley and Cox, 2020). Similarly, Google has fired workers for engaging in labour activism (Lecher, 2019).

[13] Recently, Amazon had posted two job adverts for intelligence analysts to keep track of organized labour activities (Franceschi-Bicchierai, 2020). These job adverts were later removed from their website, but their archive is available at https://web.archive.org/web/20200901125940/ https://www.amazon.jobs/en/jobs/1026060/intelligence-analyst, accessed 20 July 2021.

Moving beyond social media networks, the non-digital personal networks and friendship circles of workers are also crucial for their survival. During our fieldwork, we met several workers who often helped each other in their local personal networks of friends and family. The case of two Kenyan gig workers, Jumapili and Seghen, from a small town about 100 km west of Nairobi, is a good illustration of such relationships. Jumapili used to be a teacher but after her husband passed away she started doing blog writing and social media marketing through gig work platforms. She later trained Seghen, who had an A-level certificate but could not go to university. She often re-outsources work to him and other workers in the town. In fact, in the north-eastern parts of Nairobi along the Thika Road, there is a small cluster of gig workers who often collaborate with one another and similar networks can be found in Ikeja area of Lagos, Nigeria and Legon in Accra, Ghana (also see Melia et al., 2019).

Everyday Resistance

Besides the important webs of care and support discussed above, targeted actions to disrupt the production process through acts of everyday resistance remain critical to altering the capitalist social relations found in the gig economy. Gig economy platforms exercise 'techno-normative control' driven by algorithms to control labour processes and workers (Gandini, 2019: 1041). Workers' use of resilience and reworking practices of survival go hand in hand with a variety of everyday resistance practices. For example, remote workers rely on personal networks to get by in their daily lives while also attempting to resist unscrupulous clients and platforms' system of control through unique resistance strategies. First, certain workers regularly use their new-found marketplace bargaining power on platforms to filter jobs and exclude clients and decline jobs; though this is mostly confined to workers who have gained some experience on platforms. An example of this is provided by Onochie, a top-rated virtual assistant and internet researcher in Nigeria with '100% Job Success'. He checks whether the prospective client has a verified payment method, reads reviews on Upwork to filter employers he wants to work with, and declines jobs that have unsociable working hours or pay very little. This enables him to eliminate exploitative clients.

The second strategy of resistance is remote workers' use of their marketplace power. In remote gig work, this relates to workers' threats of cancelling contracts and exiting work arrangements (Kiil and Knutsen,

2016). Ben, a virtual assistant in Nairobi, for example, considers himself as belonging to a middle-class family. He was educated in a private school and has an undergraduate degree in business studies. His first job was posting ads on Facebook for US$3 an hour. His first major contract was for a Canadian client as a virtual assistant. He gained the trust of his Canadian client over a year by handling his diary and appointments well. He was therefore able to cancel the contract with this client twice in order to demand an increase in his hourly wage—albeit only by an additional half-dollar. Similarly, a Lagos-based virtual assistant, Debare, informed his EU-based client about his intention to leave if his wages were not raised, and the client agreed to increase his salary from US$400 a month to US$550.[14]

Third, gig workers also withhold finished goods from clients due to non-payment of wages. While workers have some forms of protection against non-payment of wages by clients on Upwork, payment is only guaranteed if clients are satisfied with the work (Chapter 5). However, workers can push back against this practice, as demonstrated by Zain in Ghana. Zain only finished a Matric (equivalent to the UK's O-level) education and was doing odd jobs such as carpentry, selling clothes, and working in a salon. He sold some of his belongings to buy a second-hand laptop and learnt programming languages such as Java through donated books and YouTube. He began working on user interface designs for local clients (e.g. mobile apps for banks) before looking for work on platforms. One of his platform-based clients refused payment after Zain submitted the first batch of completed files through Dropbox. Zain therefore removed the remaining files from Dropbox, preventing the client from accessing them. The client then quickly moved to pay him to access the work files. Parallels can be drawn with the structural power of 'daladala' (minibus) drivers in Dar es Salam, Tanzania, and their ability to bring the city's transport to a halt—eventually resulted in their gaining necessary labour rights (Rizzo, 2013).

There are also other forms of resistance among gig workers that affect employers' reputation on the platform. For example, gig workers can leave negative feedback and give low ratings if clients harass them. Workers regularly share information on social media networks about certain clients that offer extremely low-paying jobs or are harassing them—signalling

[14] Only a handful of workers in our sample transitioned to high-skilled complex work and were able to earn higher salaries.

others to avoid working for that client. That said, negative feedback given by clients hurts the workers more, since it affects their ability to win further contracts.

Identities and Agency in Gig Work

While some of the individual resistance acts discussed above are possible in the gig economy due to workers' structural power, worker agency is also influenced by their sociocultural identities. These identities can lead to the exclusion of certain segments from the local labour markets, such as women and migrants (Maume, 1999). We met eight international migrant remote workers in South Africa, most of whom were excluded by regulations from accessing jobs in the local labour market. Most migrants in the country face underpaid work, and hence gig work becomes an attractive option and even though unregulated, migrant identities are less relevant to source work on platforms. Platforms eliminate some of these identity barriers for workers, since their system of exchange depends primarily on ratings and feedback. For most migrants in our sample, income from remote work was critical for their household livelihoods. Thus, their agency acts were also limited to resilience and reworking strategies. They share computers and user accounts with family and friends and join online communities to find jobs and share best practices. Also, migrants' personal networks are critical for their work and livelihoods.[15] Tiffany, a migrant in Johannesburg who does customer services would seek regular help from her husband with her transcription work. Not only did this help ease the workload, but it also reduced the risk of losing contracts and income.

Similarly, gender also influences the actions of workers. As discussed by Carswell and De Neve (2013: 67), female workers' opportunities in the textile industry in Tiruppur, India, are structured by gendered norms, which constrain their spatial mobility. While spatial mobility is less relevant in the remote gig economy, income from gig work provides women with economic independence from patriarchal figures in the family. The importance of gig work income was highlighted by all the female workers in our sample, along with the development of new skills and future career

[15] To supplement their household income, migrants in South Africa are known for running corner shops or 'Spaza', which depend on dense networks of suppliers and buyers from the locality. Spazas are also the focus of xenophobic attacks in the country.

prospects. As Kenyangi in Uganda, who has ten siblings and economically supports her parents, explained:

> This work has helped me see the world differently and gain new skills (e.g. subtitling videos, annotating data for machine learning). I feel like there are many possibilities. Now I feel like I do not have to sit home and mourn about not having a job. I know there are thousand and one places online where I can possibly look and get a job tomorrow. Skills, however small or big they may be, the ones you pick along the way gives you the confidence to apply for new jobs as they come.
>
> **Interview, pers. comm., November 2017**

However, while female workers might exhibit similar agency potential to their male counterparts—such as filtering of jobs and clients, information sharing, training new workers, and re-outsourcing—they can still be constrained by their household positions and social status. Because remote work can involve unsocial hours, it can lead to an intensification of both productive and reproductive labour, thus limiting women's agency practices (McDowell, 2001). In our sample of remote workers, there were thirteen married women with children who preferred jobs with flexible working hours. Abi, a successful worker in Accra with three children, works from 8 a.m. until 2 p.m. on editing and social media management, which she says are easy to do and have negotiable working hours, even if that means less pay. Since her husband also does remote work, the family is now in a better economic position.

Nonetheless, a woman's agency potential is particularly impacted if she is a migrant and less educated (see Rydzik and Anitha, 2019). For example, Adele, a data entry worker who migrated with her husband to South Africa from Cameroon in 2007, could not find a job in Johannesburg. She therefore decided to work on digital platforms. However, given her lack of education, she resorted to doing menial tasks like document conversion to earn a living. Despite the simple nature of her digital jobs, Adele said it is challenging to care for her two children, do housework, and maintain the motivation and focus required to deliver quality work consistently.

So far, we have shown that despite the lack of opportunities for collective action, remote gig workers are able to exercise individual agency to influence their working conditions. But a fragmented workforce can also be easily stripped of its agency by capital. The high level of fragmentation of tasks in the gig economy is particularly worrying in this regard. Some gig

jobs are one-time and short-term projects and often lack detailed description of the tasks involved, which makes them risky from the perspective of workers.

Commodification of Labour and Worker Power

The global gig economy has intensified the commodification of labour, presenting a challenge to labour agency. In fact, many observers would not expect workers in some of the world's economically marginalized regions to have much agency on platforms. However, gig workers can create their own labour geographies through everyday individual practices that are informal, subtle, and unorganized. This resonates with Rogaly's (2009) assertion that the 'everyday micro-struggles' of workers are critical for understanding labour agency. More importantly, many of the practices we have discussed in this chapter are performed offstage and hence could be understood as 'the hidden transcripts of the gig economy', because they rarely challenge or confront employers openly—unlike, for example, strikes, demonstrations, and protests. By contrast, in place-based work such as food delivery and taxi services, there is an element of 'public transcript' as workers have mobilized to stage strikes and demonstrations (e.g. Cant, 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2019).

By applying Katz's (2004) distinction between resilience, reworking, and resistance as forms of everyday practices, we have explored how gig workers use these strategies to influence their working conditions. Both resilience and reworking strategies were common among workers in our sample. Resistance acts seemed to be largely the domain of those workers who have already found success on platforms. Through these everyday practices, gig workers were able to avoid excessive workplace monitoring, representing a form of job autonomy. However, these resistance practices are largely confined to the domain of experienced remote workers who are able to exert their structural power over clients. As gig workers gain experience on Upwork, they also begin to choose their jobs and clients, are able to get flexible working hours, and even demand higher wages. This is not possible for most new workers who join platforms. In the absence of a collective bargaining mechanism like a union to help them overcome some of the poor practices found on platforms (e.g. inability to negotiate wages, and refusal of wages), workers have few options but to subsist on low wages. Also, digital work is footloose and can move from one location

to the other, thus eroding workers' bargaining power. Therefore, it is important to think about how the structural power workers gain on platforms can be turned in associational power.

However, the agency of gig workers can be constrained by two key factors. One is the socio-economic and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. For the large proportion of the African workforce that lives in working poverty (ILO, 2020c), securing a job and maintaining that source of livelihood is all-important, even if that means working below a living wage. At the same time, workers' identities can also influence their actions. For example, a migrant worker can gain employment through gig economy platforms. But the kinds of platform jobs they can do are largely dependent on their education and family background. A migrant from a poor family and without higher education will generally only be able to do low-paid and low-skilled jobs such as data entry, image tagging, and transcription. Hence, they are likely to exert less agency than an educated worker who performs complex platform jobs such as article writing, web research, digital marketing, and software development.

The second important factor that constrains the agency of gig workers is the agency of capital, which encroaches on the class power of workers. Both clients and platforms have devised various mechanisms to develop the employment relations that suit them. Workplace control and monitoring through digital technologies, the short-term and fragmented nature of platform jobs, and the lack of job detail, are all attempts to curtail workers' autonomy and bargaining power (Figure 6.2). Thus, what opportunities do gig workers have to mobilize and organize themselves?

We are attentive to the fact that the untethered nature of remote work and a fragmented and geographically dispersed labour force makes collective action in the form of strikes or 'logging off' platforms nearly impossible.[16] However, we have also shown in this chapter how worker-led informal organizing can be achieved in digital spaces. There is therefore scope for developing more than just the ideological and materialist grounds for labour movements in the gig economy. African trades unions could engage in the politics of solidarity which speaks to the fragmented workers diverse

[16] Ride-hailing drivers have been able to log off the apps in order to push platforms to introduce surge pricing. This practice has been noted in Kessler (2018). Recently, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic a round of legislation passed by the Nigerian government to tax the driver and not the app companies led Nigerian ride-hailing drivers to log off and go on a week-long strike. The result of logging off and fewer drivers on the street has meant that platforms introduced surge pricing in various parts of Lagos.

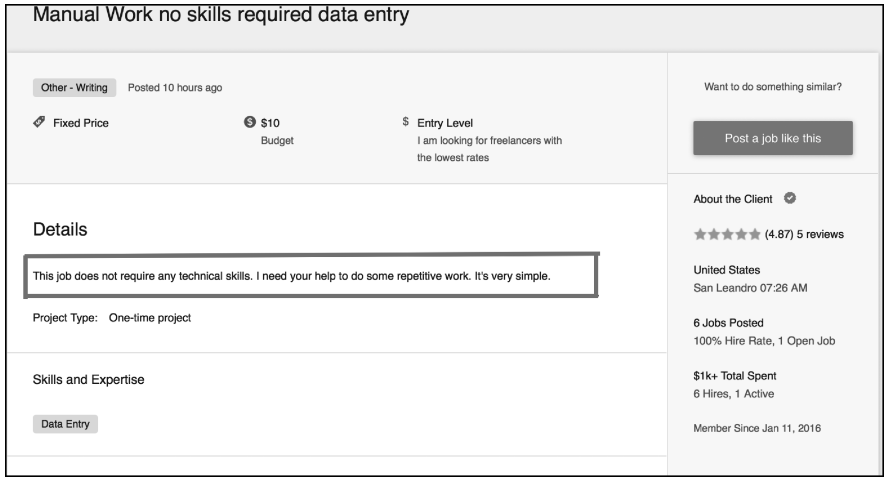


Fig. 6.2 The commoditized nature of jobs lacking details on Upwork
Source: Reproduced with permission from Anwar and Graham, 2020c: 1285, fig. 3.

experience of precarious life situations (Paret, 2016). Geographical diversity of such struggles may not necessarily contradict or be in conflict with each other, instead they can inspire movements beyond immediate and local contexts (Ibid). Unions could also take advantage of new spaces of recruitment for organizing and mobilizing gig workers around common interests. The networks of remote gig workers—both in their localities and on social media—are key to mobilizing workers and developing consciousness for collective action. Facebook and WhatsApp groups here offer a useful digital space for informal organizing, and as tools for new forms of labour movement in Africa. Social media not only have the advantage of enhancing member numbers but can also be used by local unions to tap into new occupational identities to organize workers, e.g. based on work types such as writers, data entry workers, Uber drivers, and delivery workers. Some of these tools are now widely used by African gig workers to engage in community building and to offer help to others, with some Facebook groups for remote gig workers each having thousands of members.

In the end, we want to stress the centrality of human labour to the global gig economy. The evidence of gig workers' everyday actions presented here is one component of a new class struggle of workers pitted against highly mobile capital. This class struggle must be fought in multiple spaces and at various scales—locally, regionally, and globally—for workers to be able to

create their own labour geographies. We ultimately wish to emphasize that there is an urgent need to put the development of workers first. It is here that we want to renew Mario Tronti's call to bring back the role of workers into the mainstream analysis of capitalism:

> We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class.
>
> **Tronti, 1966: 1**