(Re)working for Sustainable Futures: Climate Change and Platform Economies

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Abstract

From HCI and CSCW to labour studies and human geography, disciplines are expanding their scholarly focus to address the increasingly dire consequences of climate change. At the same time, there is growing attention being paid to the rise and ubiquity of platform companies across societal sectors, such as communication, transportation, and work. However, although climate change and platform economies affect one another, they are rarely examined in relation to each other. This multi-part workshop aims to build an interdisciplinary research foundation for critical studies of climate change and platform economies. Participants will critically engage with three intersecting themes in discourses on climate change and platform economies—labour, data, and infrastructure. Through activities such as lightning talks, mapping exercises, and reflective discussions, participants will collaboratively develop a living syllabus and a shared resource database to (re)work and design pathways toward more sustainable futures.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and social computing**.

Keywords

Climate Change, Platform Economies, Labour, Data, Infrastructure.

ACM Reference Format:
Ashique Ali Thuppilikkat, Hiu-Fung Chung, Kaushar Mahetaji, Anubha Singh, Nussara Tieanklin, Isabella Jaimes Rodriguez, Jen Liu, Noopur Raval, and Priyank Chandra. 2025. (Re)working for Sustainable Futures: Climate Change and Platform Economies. In *ACM SIGCAS/SIGCHI Conference on Computing and Sustainable Societies (COMPASS '25), July 22–25, 2025, Toronto, ON, Canada.* ACM, New York, NY, USA, 5 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3715335.3737685

COMPASS '25, Toronto, ON, Canada

ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-1484-9/25/07
https://doi.org/10.1145/3715335.3737685

1 Introduction

From labour precarity to infrastructural breakdown, climate change reconfigures not only our lived environment but also the pillars of our digital economies. Over the past decade, the intersection of climate change and global platform economies has drawn increasing attention from the HCI/CSCW communities, platform studies, digital labour studies, and the field of human geography. Despite overlapping concerns, these disciplines often diverge in how they frame, approach, and intervene in these issues. For example, although platform scholars and human geographers both focus on issues such as worker resistance and climate change, they rarely engage in dialogue [12, 13, 16]. Similarly, while HCI/CSCW communities have explored the application of design to promote sustainability, these efforts remain disconnected from platform studies and digital labour studies [5]. This fragmentation is especially evident when it comes to exploring questions related to the intersection of climate change and its wider implications [17, 33, 38].

However, cross-disciplinary exchange is becoming increasingly important as the climate crisis accelerates and its impacts are unevenly distributed across the planet. Through this one-day hybrid workshop, we seek to foster constructive dialogue by bridging together frontier concepts, approaches, and methods from diverse disciplinary communities. Our goal is to reimagine, and, where possible, rework, research agendas that support socio-ecological sustainability within platform economies. The workshop will facilitate community building, collaborative knowledge production, and the development of shared resources for ongoing research, design practices, and policy advocacy. To encourage community- and action-oriented conversations among researchers, practitioners, and activists working at the intersection of climate change and platform economies, we anchor our discussions in three critical themes: labour, data, and infrastructure.

2 Workshop Themes

2.1 Labour and the Climate Crisis

Platform economies have garnered significant academic and policy interest for their potential to promote environmental sustainability through innovations such as remote work, resource sharing, and logistics optimisation [4, 10, 21, 40]. Corporate digital labour platforms across both the online (e.g., Upwork) and location-based (e.g., Uber) sectors actively promote their sustainability credentials. For instance, both Upwork and Uber have showcased their "green" credentials in public discourse. However, empirical research shows that platforms' net environmental impact remains significant due to their resource-intensive business models [22].

While existing scholarship has critiqued corporate co-option of green discourse (e.g. "green platform capitalism," "green capitalist accumulation," and "green extractivism") [3, 20, 34], a critical gap remains: the compounded impact of climate change and corporate-driven green discourse on labour within platform economies. The environmental impacts of platform models vary significantly depending on the scale, nature, and underlying political-economic values—whether venture capital-led, government-regulated, or citizen-driven/democratically controlled (e.g., platform cooperatives) [9, 11, 35].

Vulnerabilities are particularly severe for precarious outdoor workers in climate-exposed occupations and geographies, groups who remain understudied and underserved by policies [38]. Recent CSCW research has shown that extreme weather and air pollution disproportionately harm platform workers' health, with income insecurity forcing them to prioritise risks over safety [36], while their limited healthcare access exacerbates existing inequalities [24]. These risks are further exacerbated by broader patterns of labour misclassification and inadequate social protections. This intersection of ecological and labour vulnerabilities exemplifies the rise of an "eco-precariat" [23] in the platform economy, and warrants urgent attention.

In this context, the workshop will explore:

(1) How can labour concerns be meaningfully integrated into mainstream climate discourse on platform economies?
(2) How does climate change exacerbate vulnerabilities for platform workers, particularly in the Global South?
(3) What policy interventions, platform designs, and worker-led initiatives can mitigate climate-induced precarity in platform economies?

2.2 Platformisation and Climate Data

HCI and CSCW have developed a substantial body of literature critically reflecting on the power dynamics and social contexts in which climate data is imagined, generated, and appropriated, as demonstrated through the mobilisation of concepts such as "indigenous data sovereignty" [7] and "climate data practices" [31]. However, these problematisations and approaches to climate data have rarely been extended to the critical study of digital platforms, which have increasingly played a central role in shaping both local and global climate change discourses and policy regulations, due to their infrastructural and economic power [25, 26]. In line with recent attention in platform studies to "actually existing platformisation" [37], "platform frictions" [29], and the informality of platform practices [30, 32], the second workshop theme seeks to further interrogate the platformisation of climate data and knowledge, with special attention paid to the tensions, complexities, and power dynamics involved in the making and distribution of climate data and knowledge:

(1) How do platforms collect, govern, and utilise climate data, and what are the implications of corporate climate datafication?
(2) How can workers and unions leverage climate data for data-driven advocacy?
(3) What is the role of platforms in the production, circulation, and consumption of climate knowledge?
(4) To what extent can alternative data practices with and beyond digital platforms foster a "degrowth" future?

2.3 Infrastructure

The discussion of infrastructure in HCI literature often follows one of two threads, examining either (1) the relationship between physical infrastructure (e.g., data centres, networking equipment, cables) and the environment, or (2) the information infrastructure, namely the digital platforms that produce and circulate narratives that have the potential to bolster or hinder climate action. The first thread in the HCI literature recognises that platform companies must work towards energy-efficient data infrastructure to not only decrease the environmental impacts of their computing services but also to increase the resiliency of these infrastructures in the face of climate-related disasters [2, 8]. These HCI scholars, accordingly, propose design changes that concentrate on the sustainability of hardware and software systems [1, 39]. Meanwhile, the second line of inquiry questions how the design and governance of information infrastructure by social media platform companies contributes to mis- and disinformation on climate change [14, 15, 27]. These topics appear to be of interest to both HCI scholars and platform companies. In contrast, there is far less literature on how platform companies have become essential infrastructure across industries, triggering platform dependencies [28], prompting questions as to how platforms, by serving as infrastructure, impact climate action and climate futures.

This workshop considers:

(1) How does platform infrastructure contribute to the climate crisis?
(2) How is climate leveraged as infrastructure by platform companies?
(3) How do we imagine and design alternative infrastructures that are scalable, evidence-based, equitable, and worker-centric?

3 Workshop Goals

This workshop aims to bring critical climate discourse into conversation with scholarship on platform economies. We aim to achieve this through our workshop's three primary goals: (1) encouraging knowledge exchange and community building by connecting a multidisciplinary group of scholars, practitioners, and community members for collaborations before, during, and after the workshop;

(2) developing a shared living syllabus that solicits reading materials,including diverse topics of study, conceptual frameworks, and methodologies; and (3) engaging in mapping exercises that produce a lexicon for studying climate change in platform economies and the power relations that shape corporate discourse and climate imaginaries.

3.1 Workshop Structure

The workshop will be held in a hybrid mode, with both in-person and remote participation. All participants will receive the necessary materials (digital or physical) for collaborative activities, including sticky notes, pens, worksheets, and shared digital documents that include access to a Miro board.

Climate change research on platform economies is an emerging field. Accordingly, the inquiries undertaken in this workshop are primarily *exploratory*, guided by structured dialogue and activities. The day will be divided into a morning session featuring lightning talks, which will set the stage for the afternoon session comprising two interactive group activities.

3.1.1 ***Before.*** Participants must submit short abstracts (250–350 words) before the workshop, outlining their motivations and aims for participation, relevant readings and case studies, perspectives on platform economies, and their interest in one of the three main themes—Labour, Data, or Infrastructure (see "Submission Guidelines" for more details). The organisers will circulate recommended materials as part of a "living syllabus" through a Listserv and a collective Zotero library, and share a database with contact information to facilitate connections for potential collaborations. Both the syllabus and database will also be made available through a public-facing website hosted at https://www.streetlab.tech/

3.1.2 ***During.*** The morning session of the workshop will begin with a welcome note from the organisers, followed by introductions of both participants and organisers. This will provide an opportunity for everyone to briefly share their backgrounds, interests, and expectations for the workshop. The organisers will also share housekeeping announcements to ensure that participants are well-informed about the workshop's structure, schedule, and logistical details necessary for a smooth and productive experience.

The session will then transition into lightning talks, where speakers from diverse disciplines will deliver concise, thought-provoking three-minute presentations to the full group. Each participant will share their primary research interests, highlighting relevant theories, approaches, and examples or case studies that address at least one of the three workshop themes. This conversation will serve as an introduction to the existing climate-related platform literature and help identify areas for further critical inquiry.

The lightning talks will set the tone for the afternoon session—the mapping activity. Based on their disciplinary expertise and interests, participants—both online and in person—will be divided into small groups according to one of the three workshop themes: Labour, Data, or Infrastructure. This small-group format is intended to foster collaborative exploration of research problems, while helping to unpack critical gaps in our understanding of how platform economies intersect with climate-driven challenges.

Each group will participate in two mapping exercises: (1) a lexicon mapping activity that visualises the framing, scope, and application of terminologies across disciplines, and (2) a policy analysis exercise that combines discourse analysis with situational analysis [6, 19] to understand how policy issues are framed, with a focus on the role of platform power. The first activity will use sticky notes and writing prompts to help participants situate their investments and commitments to questions of climate, labour, data, and infrastructure within their specific research contexts and sites. The exercise will begin with the full group collectively generating 10–15 keywords, followed by smaller breakout groups that will pluralistically define these terms. The selected keywords will reflect the disciplinary priorities of the participants (e.g., HCI, platform studies, environmental studies, labour studies). This exercise is designed to surface divergent and contested meanings, without having to generate consensus.

This exercise will underscore the connections, overlaps, and breaks in lexicons, prompting critical reflection on their analytical usages and the role of terminology in both enhancing and limiting our understanding of climate change and platform economies. In the second mapping activity, groups will be provided with excerpts from climate policies issued by platform companies as well as platform alternatives (such as platform cooperatives and worker-owned technology initiatives). Participants will analyse the tone, language, and omissions in these policies. They will then engage in situational mapping to visualise power dynamics, surfacing the actors and geographies implicated in platform policies that attempt to address climate change. These two visually-oriented techniques allow participants to collaboratively trace relationships between labour, data, and infrastructure in ways that static discussions cannot, and in the process, dissolve rigid disciplinary boundaries and foreground fluidity in the research process [18].

In the second half of the afternoon session, groups will reconvene to share and reflect on their findings. These insights will contribute to the ongoing development of the living syllabus, augmenting existing topics of study and expanding to include new topics for exploration. During this time, participants will have the opportunity to engage in both structured and unstructured dialogue.

3.1.3 ***Post.*** To sustain community engagement after the workshop, we will continue to populate our public-facing website with resources such as the living syllabus, a database of scholars and practitioners, and outputs from the workshop—including the glossary from the lexicon and policy mapping activities, as well as a summary of workshop proceedings. Participants will also have the option to stay connected via a dedicated Listserv and through follow-up invitations to virtual meetings aimed at fostering further collaboration.

4 Organisers

- **Ashique Ali Thuppilikkat** is a PhD student at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, Canada. His research examines the role of technology in worker resistance and unionisation amidst the platformization of urban life. Specifically, he investigates how digital tools can support unions and workers in location-based labour platforms to organise

Table 1: Agenda

Time	Activity
09:00-09:30	Welcome, Introductions, and Housekeeping
09:30-10:15	Lightning Talks (3 minutes each)
10:15-11:15	Activity 1: Lexicon Mapping Activity
11:15-11:30	Break
11:30-1:00	Activity 2: Policy Dissection
1:00-2:00	Lunch
2:00-3.00	Groups Report Back & Synthesis
3.00- 3.15	Break
3.15- 4.00	Co-creating Living Syllabus
4:15-4.30	Next Steps & Closing Remarks

around and resist/confront the impacts of climate change on their working conditions.

- **Hiu-Fung Chung** is a PhD student at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, working in sociology, media studies, and Science and Technology Studies (STS). His research explores the intersection of technology, inequality, and social suffering in the domains of work, mental health, and alternative economies. Recently, he has been studying the technopolitics of AI care technologies in East Asia.
- **Kaushar Mahetaji** is a PhD student at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information, specialising in platform governance, platform labour, and the creator economy. Her research explores how platform power is mediated, negotiated, and contested by integrating theoretical frameworks and methods from political economy, information systems, and strategic management. Specifically, she evaluates how social media platforms use digital tools to manage their relationships with content creators and third parties, including partners, data intermediaries, and advertisers.
- **Anubha Singh** is a PhD candidate at the School of Information at the University of Michigan. Her qualitative and interpretive research focused on India, brings transnational attention to how datafication enables new forms of technological governance as it turns to newer sites such as smallholder agriculture.
- **Nussara Tieanklin** is a PhD student focused on environmental health and labour inequities in Southeast Asia. Her work examines how chronic air pollution exposure intersects with the economic vulnerability of marginalised groups and gig workers, particularly motorcycle rideshare drivers in urban Thailand. She explores how income instability, limited health literacy, and policy neglect shape workers' ability to manage environmental risks. She collaborates with local nonprofit organisations to develop public health interventions and advocate for labour policies that recognise and address the lived realities of these vulnerable workers.
- **Jen Liu** is a PhD candidate in Information Science at Cornell University. Her work studies the intertwined ecological, social, and political implications of computing technologies and infrastructures. She employs ethnographic and design methods to understand these challenges and build alternatives for livable and equitable futures.
- **Isabella Jaimes Rodriguez** is a Master's student in Science and Technology Studies at York University, Canada. Her research examines how technologies (from print media to digital platforms) mediate and represent the labour of domestic cleaners. She has explored the experiences of Latinx immigrant house cleaners in Toronto and ride-hailing workers in Colombia, focusing on how digital technologies shape labour, visibility, and inequality at the intersection of technology, gender, migration, and justice.
- **Noopur Raval** is an Assistant Professor in Information Studies at University of California, Los Angeles. Her body of research is devoted to understanding how emerging technologies contribute to people's attempts at crafting a 'good life', especially in majority world settings. She has studied gig economy platforms and is now studying AI tools in the context of education and creative work.
- **Priyank Chandra** is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto and Director of the STREET Lab. His research studies the sociotechnical practices of communities living at the margins of society, with a focus on informality and resistance. He looks at how communities self-organise, the role technologies play, and how we can design to support these processes.

5 Call for Participation

We invite researchers, activists, policymakers, and practitioners to join our interdisciplinary workshop. Participants will contribute to a living syllabus, shared lexicon, dissection of policies/creative outputs while building networks for future collaborations.

Submission Guidelines

(1) Why are you interested in this workshop?
   (a) How does your work intersect with climate change and platform economies?
   (b) What do you hope to learn or contribute?
(2) Readings or case studies that shaped your interest?
   (a) Share 2-3 key texts, projects, or real-world examples that inform your perspective. Or brief case study on designs for sustainability in platform economies?
(3) Your view on platform economies and climate change?
(4) Explore one subtheme (labour, data, or infrastructure).
   (a) What sub-theme closely resonates with you? Why ? or briefly describe how you see climate change intersecting with labour, data, or infrastructures?
(5) **Optional:** Participants are encouraged to optionally submit provocative speculative fiction (e.g., 'What if food delivery workers striked during heat waves?') or zines/comics visualising climate-platform intersections.

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