

Panel II: Migrant Workers in the Gig Economy

Niels van Doorn, University of Amsterdam

Keynote Introduction

After several years of venture capital-driven explosive growth, fierce competition, and hyped-up stories about a new entrepreneurial ‘future of work’ mediated by digital platforms, the dust has begun to settle on the gig economy. Besides market consolidation and generally decreasing wages, as a result of gig companies trying to forge a road to profitability in a challenging investment climate, another prevalent – and indeed related – development has been the increasing share of migrants in the gig economy’s global workforce. Especially with respect to urban food delivery and domestic cleaning markets, gig work by and large is migrant work. Gig economy scholarship has only recently started paying specific attention to the experiences, motivations, and working conditions of migrants, in an attempt to tease out what may explain their ubiquity on certain platforms and what makes their situation different from other gig workers.

However, many pertinent questions remain unanswered. This panel is therefore particularly welcome and urgent, as it presents exciting new research not only on migrant workers’ practices and experiences on gig platforms but also on the impact of migration and its governance more broadly. Regarding the former, the panel examines how different types of gig work entail differential evaluations of (and relationships with) the labour performed (Lam and Triandafyllidou), while also highlighting the importance of diaspora networks in shaping both migratory projects and the composition of urban platform workforces (Orth). With respect to the latter, it critically assesses how a confluence of algorithmic and legal regimes enforce the much-discussed precarity experienced by migrant gig workers, connecting everyday work insecurities to national immigration policies (Lazzolini et al.). Moreover, it shows how state policies regarding welfare and work do not only produce exclusions and “silences” (Webster), but also allow for the partial, equally precarious inclusion of migrant gig workers when this serves nation states’ economic interest (López Villamil and Serrano). As such, the panel broadens the scope of scholarship on the role of migrant labour in the gig economy, highlighting its geographical variegation as well as its embeddedness in life trajectories, institutional settings and political economies.



Wednesday, March 29, 2023

Biography

Niels van Doorn is Associate Professor of New Media and Digital Culture in the Department of Media Studies and the Principal Investigator of the ERC-funded Platform Labor research project (2018-2023). He holds a PhD in Communication Science (2010) from the University of Amsterdam. His research is guided by two main questions: how do people sustain themselves and each other in precarious circumstances?; and how does the notion of value come into being at the intersection of political and moral economies? These questions converge in his current Platform Labor research project, which investigates how platforms are changing labour and social reproduction in post-welfare cities.