

Algorithmic Management and the Illusion of Autonomy in the Context of Food Delivery Platform Work – A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. This article will review all relevant literature focused on the mechanisms, effects and worker perceptions of algorithmic management within the food delivery platform economy, with the aim of identifying the interaction between the supposed autonomy of platform food delivery work and the control imposed by algorithmic management tools.

The rise of the platform economy could be characterised as one of the biggest disruptors of the global labour market. Tempted by the autonomy and flexibility advertised by online digital platforms (such as Upwork or Amazon Mechanical Turk) or on-location digital platforms (such as Uber or Wolt), workers are entering the world of digital platforms in droves. However, the platforms cannot operate efficiently in a state of absolute worker autonomy, and control mechanisms are essential for the smooth delivery of services they offer. The obscure set of measures aimed at monitoring and controlling platform workers is typically referred to as “algorithmic management”.

Replacing the role of a traditional manager, algorithms within food delivery platforms often determine the workers’ earnings, penalize the individuals who decline tasks or have a ranking deemed as too low, and often automatically deactivate the profiles of said workers. Moreover, platforms use sophisticated coercion tools, such as offering special statuses and other benefits to workers who are active a certain number of hours or accept the most tasks, which contradicts the supposed autonomy of platform work. What makes navigating an algorithm-ran working environment difficult is the inherent information asymmetry in which platforms operate – delivery workers are, for example, often unaware of the destination of their order, making them incapable of assessing the profitability of the task at hand. The information asymmetry of algorithmic management leaves the workers speculating and attempting to find sense in the obscurity of algorithmic management which has a direct effect on their working conditions.

Keywords: platform economy, food delivery, algorithmic management, workplace autonomy