

How to quantify what is not seen? Two proposals for measuring platform work

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1. What is platform work?

- Platforms: digital networks that coordinate transactions in an algorithmic way. Those that coordinate service transactions that involve labour can be called **digital labour platforms**.
 - Very efficient form of economic coordination, can coordinate massive amounts of small and complex transactions at very low cost. Neither markets nor firms.
- Regular work is structured in jobs, regulated by contracts, incorporated in organisations. **Platform work** is structured by task, unregulated and atomised.
- Platforms own the information generated by the transactions they coordinate and the rules (algorithms) governing them, which are generally opaque to users. They concentrate power, increasing with the size of the network.
- In digital labour platforms, this power can be used for controlling and disciplining the labour process, and to maximise surplus. They become more like firms.

2. Why is it difficult to measure?

- Emerging phenomenon, defies categorisation. Still difficult to define and demarcate.
- Moving target. Names and types of platforms continuously changing, difficult to use examples. Legal challenges add complexity.
- Blurry boundaries. Related phenomena add confusion: use of platforms for coordinating regular work, unpaid platform labour, labour in non-labour platforms.
- Small prevalence makes it a relatively costly phenomenon to study.
- By its very nature, unstructured, atomized and shapeless. No actual “job” to be identified, but scattered activities that only by accumulation may resemble a job.
- The coordination or even service provision being online makes it a somewhat private or even invisible activity. Also, not totally bound by frontiers.
- Platforms have an objective interest in not being seen or categorised.

3. Why is it important to measure it?

- Even though it is a small phenomenon, it is growing. Although in its pure form it may not become very widespread, some of its attributes are likely to spread to regular work.
- The lack of precise information on it allows platforms to circumvent regulation, which can be associated with worse conditions and unfair competition (one of the sources of profitability for the sector?).
- A new form of work and economic activity, requires new categories and indicators, perhaps even new regulation.
- The core business of platforms is amassing and extracting value from information on users, and yet they are opaque to national statistical systems.

4. Proposal 1: as a form of employment

- Can be applied in general adult population surveys, LFS-type.
- First, broad identification of people that have ever gained income providing labour services via digital platforms
 - Scoping helps: ask for different categories of the platform economy (selling products, renting out accommodation, etc.), service provision (on-location or online) being one of them.
- To classify platform work as a form of employment, need to qualify with questions on: 1) regularity; 2) working hours; 3) income generated (% of personal income).
 - Referred to all types of platform work over a reference period (last week?).
- To identify attributes and conditions, need to specify tasks performed, and then focus on main one over reference period.
- To confront blurry boundaries: probing questions for work embedded in other types of platform transactions (Airbnb or Ebay), questions to regular workers on coordination by platform.

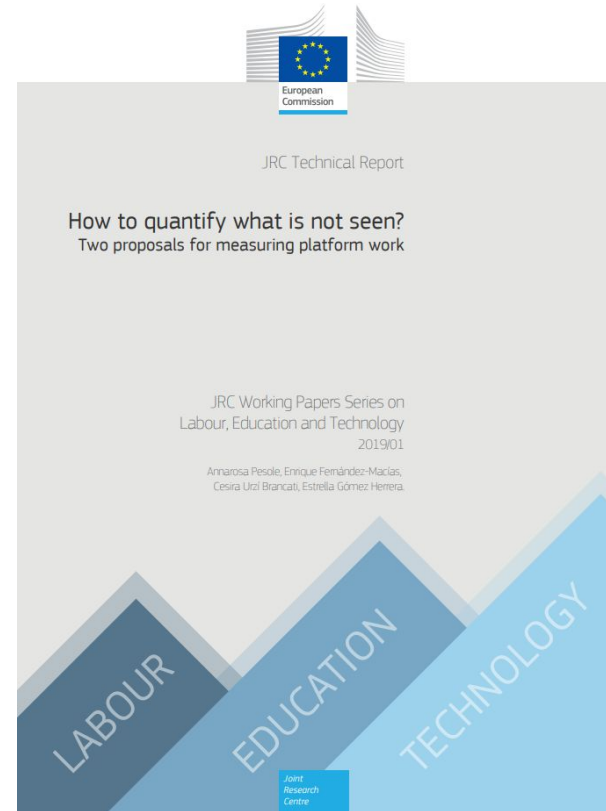
5. Proposal 2: as labour input

- To be collected from the platforms themselves, from their records.
- Main idea: platforms have detailed information on each transaction (it's their business!), and States can use that request that info.
- Potential problems: reluctance by platforms, heterogeneous data, perhaps difficult to assign transactions to people to quantify/classify employment.
- Data platforms collect: id of providers, time of transaction, economic value, type of task performed.
 - Possibly also data on: time spent providing the service (measured or estimated), location, socio-demographics on provider, quality of service, history of provider.
- Some of this data could be collected in anonymised form and harmonised/curated by statistical offices.

6. Some final remarks

- Significant progress in recent years, but still far from adequate. We still do not even know the scale of the phenomenon!
- Fast changing, probably marginal in scale and often invisible: difficult to justify resources for measuring it! Still worthwhile because it is growing, problematic, genuinely different and perhaps precursor of new forms of work.
- Perhaps we should expand the focus, and measure not only platform work in strict terms, but related phenomena:
 - Unpaid work via leisure platforms (social networks)
 - Indirectly paid work in non-labour platforms (selling own products in Ebay)
 - Platformization of regular work (network provision and algorithmic management)

For more info...



Thank you!

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