

**Just drop everything: The implications of reputation scores for the autonomy of gig
economy workers**

by

Paul Woodhouse

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2017

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Sociology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

June 2021

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled:

Just drop everything: The implications of reputation scores for the autonomy of gig economy workers

submitted by Paul Woodhouse in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

in Sociology

Examining Committee:

Thomas Kemple, Professor, Sociology, UBC

Supervisor

Amy Hanser, Associate Professor, Sociology, UBC

Supervisory Committee Member

Abstract

Gig economy workers are supposed to be afforded some degree of autonomy in exchange for the risks entailed within the independent contractor classification. In the absence of direct supervision and control of the labour process, platforms harness powerful information management technologies to track user activity and counteract worker autonomy through less visible forms of control. Platforms claim to be marketplaces that merely connect clients with workers for a fee, but in practice, their propensity to *monitor work activities, evaluate performance* and *steer behaviour*—actions that constitute workplace control—means they operate like a layer of management. Using interview data with eleven gig workers from online labour marketplaces TaskRabbit and Upwork, their respective profile data, and the platforms' terms and conditions agreements, I adopt Institutional Ethnography to show how workers' behaviours, attitudes and emotions are shaped in response to a myriad of performance metrics that collectively constitute their reputation. I ask, *How are reputation systems configured by gig economy platforms and what are the distinctive features of these systems? How do workers experience and react to these marketplace reputation systems?* Subjective client evaluations converge with the platform's objective metrics to shape reputation scores, creating the conditions under which platforms exert remote control over gig economy workers. Algorithmic management techniques create classification situations whereby workers are sorted and ranked based on the robustness of their behavioural data, bringing more employment opportunities, income and autonomy for those that live up to the expectations of the platforms. Gig workers are expected to behave in ways that align with client and platform interests in order to be visible and boost their reputation scores, yet they surprisingly feel free from the platforms' influence. While

interviewees demonstrate they have increased freedoms and flexibility compared to a regular employee, their experiences fall short of an ideal that encompasses a fuller and richer sense of autonomy in ways that call into question their independent contractor status.

Lay Summary

Gig workers who find employment through online labour marketplace platforms are supposed to be afforded some degree of autonomy in exchange for the risks and responsibilities entailed within their independent contractor classification. Platforms claim to be marketplaces that merely connect clients with workers for a fee, but in practice, their propensity to *monitor work activities*, *evaluate performance* and *steer behaviour*—actions that constitute workplace control—means they operate like a layer of management. Platforms enact these controls and constrain worker autonomy through reputation systems, which score workers based on client feedback, in addition to a myriad of data points tracked and recorded by platform information management tools. Algorithms rank workers based on the robustness of their data. Facing the dual expectations from both clients and platforms, and in order to achieve the high scores that make their profiles visible, workers engage in behaviours that contradict sociological understandings of workplace autonomy.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by author, Paul Woodhouse. The research was conducted with the approval of the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics board (ID# H19-02711-A002).

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my fabulous supervisor, Thomas Kemple, whose encouragement, guidance and enthusiasm helped me to believe in myself, and whose invaluable feedback has challenged my thinking throughout both my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I am thankful to my second supervisor, Amy Hanser, for her detailed feedback, and for introducing me to the work of scholars who became central to my thesis. I have benefited massively from the unwavering support, encouragement and intellect of my close friend, colleague and mentor Margot Leigh Butler, without whom I would never have had the opportunity or confidence to embark on my educational journey at UBC. I am grateful to all the students, staff and volunteers at the Humanities 101 Community Programme, especially Reuben Jentink and Mathew Arthur, my scholarly role-models who have supported me through every step of my studies. Finally, it's been an absolute joy to have written this thesis with the love and support of Sheila Giffen, who listened with open ears, cared with a big heart, and humoured me with her sharp wit.

I was able to write this project thanks to generous financial support from SSHRC (Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada), and the Department of Sociology at the University of British Columbia.

1. Introduction

People think it's [freelancing] so nice. You're a digital nomad. You're on the beach. You're at the park. You and your laptop with an internet connection. And you're just be-bopping from Lisbon to Uzbekistan, to the Philippines and then to Bali. Bull shit. You're looking for clients. You're fighting the clients. You're meeting clients. You're talking to clients. You're marketing for clients. You're stressed about not being paid. You're hoping to get paid. You've got to watch your cash flow constantly, constantly, or you won't have food on the table (Marty, Upwork).

Marty, a 62-year-old veteran freelancer, followed this impassioned rant with a deep breath and a sigh. I sensed a huge weight lifting off his shoulders. Marty recently qualified for social security payments to supplement his income, which has taken away some of the stress around inconsistent income streams. The State's payments mean he is no longer shouldering the burden of generating his entire income through freelancing. Marty's remarks speak to the challenges of meeting his basic subsistence needs and crushes any pre-conceived notions one might have that freelancing affords a footloose jet-setter lifestyle. Later in this conversation with me, Marty explained what motivated his career choice, "And you're probably going to say, okay, if freelancing is so tough, why did you stick with it? I did it for one reason, freedom, that's it.... Freedom to do whatever I want." He contextualized this freedom in terms of routine conveniences like choosing when to get out of bed, avoiding the rush hour commute and working out of a "stuffy" office. However, the most significant advantages to freelance work he recollected were choosing with *whom*, *when* and *how* to conduct his work, and specifically not being "bossed around" by superiors. These same sentiments were echoed by all workers

interviewed for this project, because they are the taken-for-granted conditions that underpin their independent contractor status. Avoiding the constraints of a typical nine-to-five scenario by choosing the freelancer path “gives you control over your own life,” Marty finds. However, in the past two decades, the rise of the digitally enabled platform economy has led gig economy companies to insert themselves as intermediaries that connect freelancers with clients; an intervention that has infringed upon the freedoms afforded to independent contractors like Marty. In effect this platform intermediation has introduced a new layer of management that monitor work activities, evaluate performance and steer behaviour—functions that constitute workplace control (Fuller & Smith, 1991).

The platform business model situates gig economy companies as technological middlemen who connect a ready pool of independent providers of a good or service with a client base (Srnicsek, 2017). These companies appeal to workers by emphasizing the flexible work arrangements that Marty praised. Attesting to their role as an intermediary that connects rather than employs workers, the TaskRabbit and Upwork websites appeal to working people through empowering rhetoric such as, “Be your own boss,” or, “Grow your business” (TaskRabbit Inc., 2021a), and, “Work your way” (Upwork Inc., 2021a). Gig economy companies claim to profit merely by charging a fee to match clients with providers on these platforms, and eschew any control or influence over the labour process or who is employed. This disingenuous framing allows platforms to host workers as independent contractors, a designation that guarantees workers a certain degree of workplace autonomy, broadly understood in terms of freedom from employer supervision and control. The concern for gig economy companies is that adhering to the principles or criteria of worker autonomy has its drawbacks. Economic modeling of the “on-demand” business model suggests that relative to industry standard market wage competition,

companies that adhere to various indicators of autonomy—worker self-scheduling, their right to accept or reject jobs, and so on—can expect smaller profit margins as well as labour shortfall issues that can lead to client dissatisfaction (Shapiro, 2018). Insofar as that independent contractors are not amenable to direct workplace control by a supervisor or through bureaucratic rules, high levels of autonomy accompany the twin problem of the ‘indeterminacy of labour’ and ‘indeterminacy of outcomes’ (Schörpf et al., 2017). To minimize the uncertainties inherent in outsourcing work to the autonomous and unknown masses, gig economy companies utilize the potential inherent in platform infrastructures by imbedding tracking tools that help both clients and platforms to monitor, evaluate and discipline workers. In this thesis I show how platforms employ information management systems to track user activity and render digital records into reputation scores which impact workers’ experiences and opportunities in online labour marketplaces. I use Institutional Ethnography as a methodological framework to address the following questions: *How are reputation systems configured by gig economy platforms and what are the distinctive features of these systems? How do workers experience and react to these workplace reputation systems?*

1.1 Findings

In order to secure employment and enjoy the benefits from the autonomy afforded by independent contracting in online labour marketplaces, workers need to be visible on their respective platforms. Workers’ presence and prominence on these platforms are determined by algorithmic management systems which rank, recommend and make gig workers visible based on the strength of their “reputation.” According to the gig workers I interviewed from Upwork and TaskRabbit, a strong reputation equates with high scores, in the form of a robust job success score (JSS), a talent badge and other recognized metrics that are tied to a worker’s “profile.”

Scholars recognize the importance of these ways of framing reputation for the ability of gig economy workers to secure work because the institutional backing these scores express renders access to users more predictable and thus builds trust in the marketplace (Fourcade & Healy, 2017; Srnicek, 2017; Schörpf et al., 2017; Gandini, 2018; Mau, 2018; Shapiro, 2019; Wood et al., 2019; Zuboff, 2019). Some researchers of the gig economy suggest that reputation defined in these quantitative terms is solely determined by clients (Wood et al., 2019; Schörpf et al., 2017; Gandini, 2018). However, in this thesis I argue that this characterization underestimates the role that platform information management systems and platform staff play in shaping reputation. In conjunction with client ratings, reputation is constituted from digital information about a worker's behaviour, which is expressed through online digital records. In offering a more nuanced and expanded understanding of how reputation systems function and are experienced by workers, I show how the expectations of platforms and clients converge to steer gig workers' practices and emotions. By showing how workers both comply with and resist the expectations rooted in reputation systems, I explore how their chances for success in terms of job opportunities, income and autonomy are shaped in online labour marketplaces. Facing the dual pressures and expectations from both clients and platforms, and in order to achieve the high scores that make profiles visible, workers engage in behaviours that contradict sociological understandings of autonomy in the workplace (see Pichault & McKeown, 2019).

By examining how platforms insert their interests and values through personal reputation systems in order to control workers remotely, I show that online labour marketplaces actually function like traditional workplaces in rendering workers compliant and dependent. While independent contractors demonstrate their ability to make choices to some degree, their experiences fall short of an ideal that encompasses a fuller and richer sense of self-governance.

Independent contractors are supposed to be free from regimes of control commonly found in more traditional employer-employee relations, and in exchange they take on more self-responsibility and personal risk. In taking on the burdens of risk and responsibility within the restricted form of autonomy defined by powerful platforms, the experiences of workers in the gig economy demonstrate they do not entirely align with the conventional criteria of the independent contractor status. Learning from workers the ways in which client ratings converge with platform evaluations to shape their reputation and work situations, I reveal the subtle conditions under which platforms' reputation systems establish a regime of control, and shed light on how autonomy is experienced in this new economy.

1.2 Theoretical and conceptual Framework

In this thesis, I explore questions of workplace autonomy within the non-standard work arrangements found in the digitally enabled gig economy, focusing on observable patterns of supervision and control. The tension between worker autonomy and platform control presents a fateful question for gig economy platforms: “If they are indeed profiting by simply matching supply and demand through digital platforms, then labour laws would continue to allow companies to designate the service providers—the workers—as independent contractors rather than employees” (Shapiro, 2018, p. 2955). To explore the autonomy–control tension I apply a framework created by François Pichault and Tui Mckeown (2019), who developed an analytic matrix to show the varying degrees of autonomy that four different worker types can expect— independent contractor, supported independent contractor, temporary worker, regular employee (see Appendix A). On the one pole are independent contractors, who can expect to experience high levels of autonomy, and on the other are regular employees, who experience low levels. Within each of the four worker types, autonomy is considered across three dimensions: work

status, work content and working conditions. In terms of work status, independent contractors should expect a diversity of clients, as opposed to being dependent on one client, or a single employer, and they actively choose the jobs they want rather than jobs or tasks being imposed upon them—as one would expect from a typical employee. In terms of work content, independent contractors have the freedom to choose how to perform their job (job crafting), and are less likely to follow a micro-managed standardized labour process. They are trusted to engage with the labour process in ways that will generate satisfactory outcomes for their paying client, and therefore the outcome of the work (the end product or service delivered to the client) rather than their engagement with the labour process (how they do the job) is evaluated. This also means independent contractors can expect to work unsupervised. In addition, their workload and work pace are determined at their own discretion. Operating with with no organizational support, independent workers tend to have a strong professional identity and a network of support, which replaces the organization support employees can expect within hierarchical organizations. With regard to working conditions, independent contractors are made responsible for their own skill development, income flow, and time and space arrangements. Gig economy platforms masquerading as intermediaries have introduced specific social processes, relations and expectations that counter the aforementioned dimensions of autonomy in various ways. This thesis explores how reputation systems work to counter these dimensions of workplace autonomy for gig economy workers.

I take up a broad conception of work commonly employed in Institutional Ethnography: “anything that people do that takes time, effort, that they mean to do, that is done under definite conditions and with whatever means and tools, and that they may have to think about” (Smith, 2005, p.151). In the context of the gig economy, this expansive definition of work captures the

unacknowledged labour effort that goes into every ‘project’ or ‘task.’ All work is found and facilitated through an extensive standardized labour process determined by the respective platforms. This process is activated and enabled through a worker’s “profile,” and platforms rely on tools and procedures that track individuals through their profiles in order to assess their behaviour and assign them membership in various categories. Part of a worker’s reputation score originates from these “profiling” techniques. Platform information management systems collect a myriad of data points from the parts of the labour process that go unacknowledged as work, and then algorithmic management tools rank workers based on the robustness of their data. Whereas clients evaluate workers on the basis of the service they paid for, the platform’s objective metrics evaluate various online behaviours, activities and performance levels. Sometimes these indicators capture an essential part of the labour process, like time spent applying for jobs or communicating with clients, yet both gig economy companies and workers disavow this as actual work. Other times, these metrics derive from activities unrelated to job performance or success, like deciding which clients to accept jobs from, or keeping contracts with limited activity or revenue streams open, so that workers feel their reputation is not an accurate representation of either who they, or paying clients, take them to be. This status data functions as symbolic capital, holding the promise of what can be quite substantial reputational gains both socially and materially, and motivating workers accordingly to keep improving their data profiles (Mau, 2019). What I call reputation capital stems from the traditional forms of cultural, social and economic capital identified by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), but it is also distinct from them, in so far as it is constituted by an array of digital traces assembled by the platform, in addition to client ratings. Reputation scores are a form of data-based capital that can be converted into economic capital through the advantages offered in the marketplace where such capital is accrued, for

instance, in the revenue generated on the TaskRabbit or Upwork platforms. This form of capital is an index of a worker's superiority over others, and a key determinant of marketplace outcomes for gig workers and platform owners alike in terms of the autonomy, opportunities and success these platforms afford.

Modern institutions use scoring technologies that organize and rank people in order to create what Fourcade and Healy (2013) call "classification situations." Reputational capital measures a resource to be deployed, and is based on an individual's behaviours or performance, whereas "classification situations are produced with respect to market outcomes and value extractability" (p.14). Fourcade and Healy explore how classification situations treat consumers differentially with respect to the pricing of financial goods and services, based on how they are scored and ranked. Fourcade and Healy elaborate an example of a "classification situations" through credit ratings and show how credit scores opened up credit markets to more consumers by enabling individualized risk-based pricing of financial products like mortgages and loans. My project extends Fourcade and Healy's (2017) theoretical framework to analyze online labour marketplaces, which claim to have brought "visibility and trust" (Upwork Inc., 2021b) to a global pool of labour via scoring technologies that sort and rank producers based on previous work-related behaviours. Based on these scores, workers are treated differentially, especially with respect to job opportunities, income and autonomy. Fourcade and Healy make three key general arguments which I want to explore in this thesis: 1) Modern organizations subscribe to an institutional *data imperative* to collect as much data as possible; 2) Data is used to score and rank individuals who accrue a form of *capital* from their market position; 3) The production, distribution, and accumulation of this capital has *stratifying effects* whereby market players receive differential treatment according to their digitally derived scores.

In examining the classification architecture of modern organizations with respect to the production of digital records from data traces, Fourcade & Healy (2017) identify the technological dimension of classification struggles as a new site for analysis. Contesting how reputation scores are constructed—and therefore symbolic capital—is the stake of the classification struggle (Bourdieu, 1985) between independent workers on the one side, and platforms on the other. Workers' behaviours are quantified through their digital records, which are subsequently ranked by algorithms. Workers refute the logic of algorithms which score and rank them, and show recalcitrance when they do not comprehend, or doubt whether platforms make relevant calculations of their skills, quality of work, or job suitability. On the other side of the struggle are platforms who have the power to classify workers in the marketplace by utilizing information management systems and algorithms in ways that exert less visible forms of control in order to guarantee that workers operate in accordance with their business interests and values.

1.3 Methods

I use Institutional Ethnography to explore the social relations and organization of the digitally enabled gig economy from the standpoint of the workers who participate in these platforms. Institutional Ethnography treats texts as active documents that coordinate action, and assumes an analysis of texts can reveal the interactive processes and 'ruling relations' (Smith, 2005) of a company, or institution. To better understand these relations and dynamics I registered as a client on TaskRabbit and Upwork and hired gig workers for money. By participating as a client in order to conduct interviews, the research replicated the production / consumption processes imposed by the platforms in ways that raise both methodological and ethical issues, as I discuss below.

The primary data for this study comes from six interviews with TaskRabbit service workers (taskers) and five Upwork professional workers (freelancers). With regards to terminology, when I discuss the platforms collectively, I use the general terms ‘online labour marketplaces,’ or ‘platforms,’ and I describe the workers as ‘gig workers.’ When referencing specific platforms, TaskRabbit personnel are called ‘taskers,’ and the work will be referred to as ‘tasks’ or ‘local service work.’ Upwork personnel are ‘freelancers,’ who engage in ‘projects,’ or ‘remote professional work.’

TaskRabbit’s slogan reads “revolutionizing everyday work” (TaskRabbit Inc., 2021b). By “everyday work” they mean household ‘tasks,’ in the sense of odd jobs and errands like mounting a TV, house cleaning, delivering groceries and assembling furniture. Rather than taxi rides (Uber) or accommodation (Airbnb), TaskRabbit trades in the everyday and mundane chores people are inclined to avoid. These task-based platforms operate through an app downloaded onto the user’s smartphone. The service allocated via the app is tangible and delivered to or done for a client in an agreed upon physical location. In 2017 Ikea Group purchased TaskRabbit for an undisclosed fee.

The six taskers all live in Vancouver, B.C. They come from a range of work histories and educational backgrounds: one has two undergraduate degrees, three have an undergraduate degree, one has a college diploma, and the youngest, Marina, is an aspiring entrepreneur who recently graduated high school (see Appendix B for interviewee profiles; all names are pseudonyms). Although the education level of taskers interviewed seems high in relation to the jobs they perform, this is representative of the gig economy generally. In a study with 41 TaskRabbit workers, 35% had a Bachelor’s degree and 22.5% had a graduate degree (Ravenelle, 2019a). In a multiple-platform study Schor et al. (2020) quip that TaskRabbit appears to have an

informal education requirement of at least a college degree, or college enrollment, with nearly a quarter of Taskers interviewed having graduate degrees.

Ages of the Taskers I interviewed range from 20 to 45 years old, with a mean age of 35. Two have stable full-time jobs and use the app for ‘side gigs,’ one has irregular work via a small moving company and makes himself “unavailable” in the TaskRabbit app when working elsewhere, and three earn their entire income by working across multiple task-based apps (including Instacart, Uber, UberEats, Door Dash, Deliveroo, Handy, Hey Brian and Rover). To provide a richer and more robust data set, I sought out workers from a range of job categories, which included delivery, personal assistant, handyman, shopping, and furniture assembly. Although there are 22 categories to choose from, most taskers offered services in three to eight of them. In addition, I intended to recruit taskers with a range of job success scores, which is a key indicator of a worker’s reputation. TaskRabbit only made visible workers with a JSS in the range of 94% to 100%. However, taskers are differentiated and stratified according to an “elite status” badge. Three of the six taskers I interviewed had elite status. Those who struggled with low scores had different experiences from successful gig workers, providing a breadth of stories which explicated the highs and lows of work in this reputation economy.

Upwork’s slogan reads: “In-demand talent on demand.” Upwork is a global freelancing platform that connects businesses and individuals with freelance workers. Established in 1998 under the name Elance (merging with oDesk in 2013 and changing the name to Upwork in 2015), as of 2017, the company had reported 14 million users in 180 countries with \$1 billion in annual freelancer billings (Bier & Pearson, 2017). Upwork connects rather than employs freelancers in order to complete ‘projects’ within occupations that might generally be classified as professional or semi-professional, along with some lower-level secretarial categories. In

project-based platforms like Upwork, the contract is arranged online and the work completed remotely. The intangible good or service is delivered to a client over an Internet connection. Freelancers interviewed for this project described themselves as a graphic designer (Arnold), events planner (Nicola), market researcher (Marty), telemarketer (Jack), and data analyst (Sandy). As you can imagine, the class of clients this varied bunch of professionals work with through Upwork are equally varied—including me, a graduate student researcher. According to freelancers I interviewed, most often clients are small businesses with limited personnel, such as start-ups or sole proprietors, and less frequent work comes through larger organizations.

Freelancers ages ranged from 32 to 62 years old, with a mean of 48. One of the freelancers I interviewed has a stable full-time job and does gig work as a ‘side hustle,’ and the other four are full-time freelancers. All except one use multiple remote gig economy platforms, including Freelancer and Fiver. No freelancers reported using task-based apps, and no taskers reported using platforms that make professional projects available. Two interviewees who engaged in the freelance field prior to the platform age (Arnold and Marty) belong to professional freelancing bodies and get some of their contracts through these established networks. However, both commented that the ratio of contracts is steadily increasing on the platform side, while good paying projects through traditional networks decline. One freelancer has a PhD in mathematics, one has a Master’s degree, two had Bachelor’s degrees, and one has completed three years of a college diploma. The JSS ranged from 56% to 99%, with a mean of 83%. One freelancer I interviewed, Jack, had a top-rated talent badge, which is awarded to the top 10% of performers in each occupation category.

To recruit participants, I registered myself as a client on both platforms and followed the standard sequence of actions—sign up, create job posting, invite participants, negotiate and

confirm terms through the platforms internal messaging service. After agreeing to the contract, I then collected the work (in my case, the interviews), rated and reviewed the interviews by leaving a rating and comment on their platform profiles, released payment and closed off the contract. In the case of TaskRabbit, participants were hired for the hourly rate stipulated on their profile (\$22 CAD to \$35 CAD). Upwork participants were paid a set \$30 USD per hour rate—the amount stipulated on my job posting. My decision to hire and pay participants rather than recruit participants from an off-site forum, for instance, allowed me to participate in the gig economy as a consumer and a client; therefore, the research replicates the production / consumption process and gives further insights into the institutional mechanisms that coordinate the actions of gig workers and clients. My dual role as a student researcher and paying client raised some ethical and political considerations which I address in section 3, “Institutional Ethnography and digital work.” Interviews ranged from 35 to 95 minutes, averaging 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in May 2020 using cloud-based videotelephone and online chat service Zoom. Using semi-structured interviews, my questions addressed six areas: 1) Why participate in gig work; 2) What are the benefits and challenges; 3) How is their relationship with clients; 4) How is their relationship with the platform; 5) What is the significance of the metrics displayed on their profile; 6) How do information communication technologies mediate their work?

1.4 Program of the thesis

The gig economy has emerged alongside other platform business models. In the following section I draw on Nick Srnicek’s (2017) book *Platform Capitalism* in order to situate online labour marketplaces and their data imperative within a broader platform economy framework. I survey scholarly literature which explores how worker autonomy in the gig

economy is negated by various technologies of control, namely reputation scores that originate from client ratings; information asymmetries that narrow workers' decision-making capacities; software programs that track work progress; and the use of game-like features to keep workers attention.

From there I move onto a methodological discussion. Section 3, "Institutional Ethnography and digital work," is divided into three distinct parts. The first part advocates for using Institutional Ethnography as a method of inquiry into digital work: namely due to its emphasis on mapping material processes through the electronic texts—profiles and algorithms—that coordinate action and "work" broadly conceived. Remote professional and local service work seem to occupy different poles in the employment spectrum, yet when mediated by platforms they can be organized in much the same way. While current gig economy scholarship tends to group and analyze gig platforms by the types of jobs they offer, I instead focus on platform design features. In part two I argue that a focus on the technologies employed by platforms, and the social processes they facilitate, offer a more fruitful way to explore institutional dynamics. Third, I tackle the ethical and political challenges posed by my decision to replicate the production / consumption process, especially what it means to pay and publicly evaluate research subjects.

Having established the similarities between two seemingly disparate types of work—remote professional and local service work—section 4, "Mapping the labour process from the standpoint of labour," maps out the labour process from the standpoint of workers and clients. Platform "terms and conditions" are introduced as a way to critique their own claims that they have no control, involvement or influence over the employment relationship, including the work conditions or selection of employee.

The profile is the textually-mediated device which facilitates the entire labour process, and platforms exert their control over workers by embedding features into the profile. In section 5, “What counts as reputation?” metrics which stand in for a worker’s reputation are identified as the most salient features for employment opportunities and platform success. Taskers and freelancers identified the various metrics displayed on their profile as what makes them stand out from other workers, because platforms employ algorithmic management techniques in order to rank workers based on their reputation scores. Reputation scores are symbolic capital expressed in numbers. I explore how this symbolic capital is constituted through a critique of recent scholarship that claims a gig worker’s reputation is at the sole mercy of clients. I discuss how platforms’ use of tracking technologies and algorithms work in conjunction with client ratings to inform reputation and to keep workers compliant.

Having identified the constituent parts of a worker’s reputation, section 6, “Taskers: Trapped in the matrix,” offers a case study of TaskRabbit, with a focus on how taskers experience and feel about the reputation system. Taskers must align their behaviours to meet the demands of their performance matrix. The matrix keeps taskers accountable to platform expectations by tracking behaviours such as their response time to clients’ messages (response rate), how often they accept invites to tasks (acceptance rate), and task completion (reliability rate). Regardless of how they set their “availability,” taskers must be at hand to engage with clients at any time, creating an always on-call workforce. Taskers use the chat function to seek clarity on job details, and negotiate terms, which facilitates their autonomy, but this is often negated by the requirements of the matrix. Operating outside of the recommended parameters set by the platform means it becomes increasingly difficult to succeed in their ecosystem. Bad metrics threaten workers with deactivation, leading to deep levels of anxiety, and changes in

work related behaviours. While taskers feel empowered and connected to their clients as a result of their interactions made possible through the chat function, they feel alienated from their data self—the quantified persona they see reflected back in their profile.

Using Institutional Ethnography’s broad definition of work, section 7, “Freelancers: Obtrusive surveillance, unobtrusive tracking,” shows how a significant part of the freelancer labour process is captured and evaluated by Upwork’s information management systems. Although the tracked activities that take place through the platform require time, energy and resources, freelancers only think of “work” as the actual time spent producing goods or delivering the service they were hired to do. Freelancers feel free from supervision because unobtrusive tracking of online activity is not constituted as oversight. Freelancers criticize the algorithmic black box that calculates their scores, and those with low status point to client evaluations to save face. The reputations scores that are supposed to create trust in the marketplace, because they represent competency and predictability, are deemed illogical and create distrust amongst workers. Remote professional workers believe they should only be evaluated on the work they produce for clients (the work outcome), but in practice they are evaluated on a myriad of activities and behaviours that encompass the extended labour process. This broad-based evaluation situates them more like employees than independent workers.

Workers can end up with poor reputation scores if platform expectations are not met, resulting in fewer employment opportunities, less marketplace bargaining power, poorer working conditions, and less control over their data self. Section 8, “Classification Situations,” explores how low-status workers struggle to find valuable contracts, and are susceptible to scams and sinister clients who use the threat of a low score to exploit their already vulnerable position and extract additional unpaid work. Freelancers have recourse through Upwork’s illusory arbitration

system, which is facilitated by the platform and is therefore not independent. Arbitration, a punitive process that damages reputation scores, demonstrates the power platform staff have over freelancers' reputations. Top-rated gig workers receive more and better job offers, charge more money, negotiate better terms, and they also receive preferential treatment from the platform. Achieving high scores, earning the much-coveted talent badges, and gaining visibility on the platform demands a commitment to platform expectations in a way that counters the notion that independent contractors should not rely on one sole source of income.

Platforms utilize their technologies of power and knowledge to infringe on autonomy in pervasive ways. The concluding comments surmise that gig workers feel a sense of autonomy because they have more freedoms than traditional employees, but their experiences fall short of the freedoms expected within the independent contractor designation.

2. Seeing like an online labour marketplace

2.1 The platform economy

The platform economy refers to businesses that increasingly rely on information technology, data, and the Internet as the basis for their business models (Srnicsek, 2017, p. 14). All platforms share some general characteristics: they extract and analyze data; they rely on network effects, whereby the more users populate a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone; and platform owners set the rules of interaction (p. 70). Platforms are the infrastructure that connects users and records internet mediated activities in the process. Think of a platform as the virtual ground where activities occur or people meet: across this terrain, companies have a panoptic overview of the data traces users leave behind, for instance, records of verbal and text exchanges with clients, time spent browsing jobs boards, or how often potential clients visit a gig workers profile. Data is the raw material that platforms extract, and the activities of users are the natural source of this raw material. For the modern firm to be competitive they must utilize platforms to “intensify extraction, analysis, and control of data” (p. 96). In the modern economy where profits primarily derive from the production, exchange and use of information and knowledge rather than goods, data extraction and control are paramount.

What do market institutions see when they look at people? Economic sociologists Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy (2017) answer that huge quantities of individual-level data stand in for the life and labour of workers and consumers. Use and control over user data allows modern institutions to systematically sort and slot people into new types of market categories with different privileges and rewards attached to them; a process they call “classification situations.” Fourcade and Healy move from a Weberian framework that conceptualizes “class situations” as

“market situations” derived from the distribution of property, skills, goods and other resources that individuals bring to the market, to an emphasis on how market institutions are themselves classifiers who use a multitude of personalized digital records to classify people inside marketplaces. Recent studies of multiple online labour marketplaces consider how class situations—a person’s property, skills and other resources—translate into market situations, and they find autonomy to be a function of an individual’s economic or cultural capital. In an analysis of experiences across four disparate platforms (Airbnb, Uber, TaskRabbit, and Kitchensurfing), Alexandra Ravenelle (2019b) creates three ideal types of gig workers: “Success Stories” are people who leverage their capital or skills to achieve financial security and autonomy; “Strugglers” find low wages, extreme insecurity and instability; and “Strivers” have regular jobs and use gig work to supplement their full-time employment. Ravenelle claims that only those with pre-existing economic capital or a safety net in the form of stable employment are able to flourish in the gig economy. Rather than grouping users into ideal types, Schor et al. (2020) interviewed users of seven platforms (Airbnb, TaskRabbit, Turo, Uber, Lyft, Postmates, and Favor) and concluded that the extent to which workers are dependent on platform income in order to pay basic expenses explains variation in experiences of autonomy. People who use platforms as a means to supplement their income experience greater autonomy than those who are dependent on the income, because they only make themselves available when it suits them, and they feel free to set higher rates because they can afford to take fewer jobs or clients. Essentially, rather than being forced to accept any task or exchange, people with greater levels of economic capital, or a secure permanent job to fall back on, have more freedom to choose; a significant expectation of workers with high levels of autonomy (Pichault & McKeown, 2019). While these studies reveal how social-categorical differences play out or are expressed in

institutions, they merely reaffirm a familiar trait in capitalism: those with capital at their disposal experience more freedoms and choices. In their research on credit markets, Fourcade and Healy (2013) move away from an analysis of how social-categorical differences play out in institutions, to one that considers how markets see and categorize *consumers* based on previously recorded financial and non-financial behavioral data. Adopting a similar approach, I analyze how online labour marketplaces use data traces from previous work-related behaviours to score and rank *producers*, and what these classification situations mean for work opportunities and experiences.

In order to differentiate the ways in which data can be utilized within the platform business model, Nick Srnicek (2017) identifies five platform types: industrial, cloud, product, advertising, and lean. The five platform types are differentiated based on how each refines and uses data to generate revenue. Industrial platforms such as Nissan's robotic production lines, cloud platforms including Amazon Web Services and other data farms, and product platforms such as Evo car sharing own digital infrastructure and assets. They rent out rather than sell their products and services so that they can collect, control and profit from valuable data. Advertising platforms like Facebook and Google rely almost exclusively on advertising revenues and are susceptible to market fluctuations. Nevertheless, these companies have unprecedented control over data and the power generated from such data. Within Srnicek's framework, gig economy companies such as Upwork and TaskRabbit are constituted as lean platforms. They are mostly assetless companies that outsource the majority of costs while retaining ownership over the software and data analytics that enable the platforms to mediate and control worker and client exchanges, while extracting rents from labour.

In outsourcing all costs, lean platforms provide no job training, no physical workplace, nor do they check applicants' work histories; in fact they do no sustained and systematic vetting

of worker skills and abilities. These platforms rely on their own alternative reputation systems that evaluate, score and rank workers as a means to guarantee service levels, or outcomes. In the absence of an employer to guarantee service levels and reconcile mistakes, these scores symbolize trustworthiness. Upwork's website attests to this, claiming their *raison d'être* was a response "to a need to bring visibility and trust to remote work" (Upwork Inc, 2021b). These reputation systems rely on a platform's ability to monitor user behaviour and collect a myriad of data points, alongside client feedback mechanisms. The combination of this data is subsequently used to produce metrics that stratify workers in ways that can make them feature prominently, or render them invisible.

2.3 The rise of the lean platform economy

The lean platform economy services two types of work: first, work that is transacted remotely but delivered locally and requires the worker to be physically present, and second, work that is exclusively transacted and delivered remotely (Huws, 2016). The first, *local* task-based gig work, includes a great variety of manual work such as food delivery, transportation, and house cleaning, via platforms such as Deliveroo, Uber and TaskRabbit. By contrast, *remote* gig work consists of the remote provision of a wide variety of digital services, ranging from data entry to software programming to events planning, via platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Fiverr and Upwork. The major difference between local and remote gig work can be seen in how work is done, and how work is organized. Remote gig platforms represent the digitization of the work itself, as well as how the broader labour process is organized (Huws, 2016). For example, the manager of Sunderland Association Football Club could turn to Upwork to hire a remote worker to design a logo or do data analysis. The work is arranged online through the Upwork platform, and the work or service itself is completed remotely and delivered through the

Internet. By contrast, with local task-based gig economy platforms, only the organization of the task is digitized (Heeks, 2017). In these cases, as with TaskRabbit, the service allocated via the platform is tangible and delivered to a client in an agreed upon physical location. For example, a busy academic might turn to TaskRabbit if they're wanting to hire an individual to clean up their house after a party.

Data measuring the number of gig economy workers using online labour marketplaces is inconsistent. Based on a framework that analyses self-reported tax data, a recent Statistics Canada report (Jeon et al., 2019) found the percentage of gig workers in Canada rose from 5.5% to 8.2% between 2005 to 2016. The report broadly refers to the gig economy as less structured and non-traditional work arrangements. Gig workers are defined as: "people usually not employed on a long-term basis by a single firm, and instead, enter into various contracts with firms or individuals (task requesters) to complete a specific task or to work for a specific period of time for which they are paid a negotiated sum" (p.6). This includes independent contractors or freelancers with particular qualifications and on-demand workers hired for jobs that are mediated through the growing number of online platforms and crowdsourcing marketplaces, such as Uber, Lyft, TaskRabbit, Upwork, Guru, Fiverr and Freelancer (p.7). However, their definition is not limited to individuals working through online platforms, and includes non-platform gigs. The only study of exclusively online platform in Canada was conducted in Toronto, and found that 9% of Greater Toronto Area residents worked through online labour platforms (Block & Hennessy 2017).

In the US, independent contractors remain the largest of four alternative work arrangements (the other three being on-call, temporary help agencies, and contracting via a firm) making up 6.9 percent of total employment in May 2017 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). This

figure only applies to a person's sole or main job, therefore those who do gig work as a side gig are not included. More generous estimates show a rise in contingent work arrangements from 10.7% to 15.8% between 2005 and 2015, which accounts for 94% of all net job growth over this ten year period (Katz and Krueger, 2016). Katz and Krueger (2016) use an expansive definition that covers “temporary help agency workers, on-call workers, contract workers, independent contractors or freelancers.” The Federal Reserve (2016) sponsored a “enterprising and informal work” survey and found 35% of the US labour force engage in alternative work arrangements, but their framework includes anyone who engaged in contingent work over the past 6 months, and includes income from rental income generated through renting or selling assets through platforms such as Airbnb (Robles & McGee, 2016).

Globally, 70 million workers are estimated to have registered with *remote* labour platforms that facilitate remote forms of gig work (Heeks, 2017). In the absence of official employment statistics that measure this emerging employment category, The University of Oxford’s Online Labour Index (OLI), which tracks projects posted on the five largest English-language remote labour platforms and represents at least 70% of the market by traffic (Lehdonvirta, 2018), shows a 20% year-on-year increase since tracking began in 2017. The rapid growth of these platforms has led scholars to characterize this form of employment as an increasingly important model for the future of economic development (Heeks, 2017) as well as the harbinger of what will become the dominant form of labour relations (Huws 2016; Scholz, 2016). Narratives of autonomy, flexibility and choice in these sectors have been associated with professional occupations since the latter decades of the 21st century, with the transition to a more networked economy through the de-hierarchization of organizations in flexible capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018). In corporations’ quest to become lean, and to resolve the

discontent of a management class constrained by rigid hierarchal structures, management literature from the period of 1960 to 1990 indicates a shift to networks as the central organizing figure, granting the *cadre* class much more flexibility and autonomy in the workplace (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018). More recently, driven by advances in information communication technologies and computational power, the rise of the digitally enabled gig economy has extended the scope of flexible capitalism into new markets and occupations.

App-enabled service platforms like TaskRabbit, Uber, and Skip the Dishes are a recent labour marketplace phenomenon. Labour statistics have yet to track the specific employment numbers of this labour sector. However, the swift advance of these apps, many of which are household names, speaks to the ubiquity of this employment sector—TaskRabbit claims to have 160 thousand active taskers in North America (TaskRabbit Inc., 2021c), and Uber has 3.9 million drivers worldwide (Uber Inc., 2021). These apps have replaced traditional employer-employee work arrangements with contingent work arrangements; a change which has ushered in precarious employment situations at the expense of secure and supported jobs. However, as Hatton (2011) reminds us, short-term flexible work arrangements offering autonomy, flexibility and choice are not new to service occupations nor manual work found in the app-based gig economy. Responding to recent scholarship that situates these more recent digitally mediated flexible work arrangements as something brand new, Hatton (2011) invites scholars to think of these market situations as an extension of the flexible work arrangements coming out of post-WWII North America, when temp agencies enlisted previously unassimilated groups to join the labour force—mainly middle-class housewives—but on more flexible terms. This history can also be extended to the flexible labour practices experienced by migrant workers. In an ethnography of undocumented migrants who seek work opportunities by congregating on the

street corners in major US cities, Purser (2009) finds these gig workers experience autonomy and control in their labour despite low wages, as well as highly unstable conditions and unpredictable work schedules. These same flexible labour conditions characterize platform-based gig work, but as a counterpoint to these undocumented mobile workers who generally lack requisite forms of cultural capital, such as language proficiency or recognized academic credentials, app-based gig work tends to attract highly-educated people (Newton, 2016), and the work carries a semblance of refinement due to information communications technologies (ICTs) role in mediating the labour process (Shor et al., 2020). Schor et al. (2020) find platform work yields much higher wages than those that specialize in delivery, driving, or types of manual work migrants can expect to find on street corners, and they propose formal education is likely functioning as a barrier to service work. Despite the sheen brought by mobile technologies, the gig economy platforms have been likened to the early industrial age, when workers expended long hours in a piece rate system, workplace safety was non-existent, and there were few options for redress with employers (Ravenelle, 2019b).

A plurality of terms describe the great range and variation that characterize these platforms and the kind of work involved. These include, ‘sharing economy’ (Botsman, 2015), ‘platform economy’ (Srnicsek, 2017), ‘on-demand economy’ (Shapiro, 2018), ‘crowd work’ (Huws and Joyce, 2016) and ‘online labour markets’ (Graham et al., 2017). In this thesis I use the latter, along with the term ‘gig economy’ (Pichault & Mckeown, 2019), which is synonymous with independent contractor. However, unlike the newer terminologies which arose in direct response to the digital age, the gig economy stretches back to the early twentieth century, when jazz musicians coined the word gig to refer to occasional paid performances

(Wallace, 2019). Despite the varying terms and range of job types offered, all platforms legally classify users as independent contractors.

Although no standard platform model exists within the lean platform economy, a few design features are ubiquitous across the different platform types. First, as previously identified, all platforms extract and control user data. Second, platforms determine the conditions and social processes for the production of work in a single, clearly delimited environment (Gandini, 2019). Third, reputation systems rank workers using various metrics which are displayed on a worker's profile—most often a star rating out of five, or a percentage. Fourth, these computational structures mediate exchanges between workers and clients, matching supply and demand to create two-sided digital-marketplaces for services (Fourcade, 2016; Srnicek, 2017). From a work and labour standpoint, on the one side sits platform labour, and on the other sits client-outsourcing. Outsourcing work means giving up direct supervision, leading to high levels of uncertainty (Felstiner, 2011). To understand how platforms manage this uncertainty, gig economy scholars engage the question of autonomy in the workplace by asking what degree of control do platforms have over labour process?

2.4 Between worker autonomy and platform control

A number of computational tools help outsourcing clients and platforms to manage and control workers remotely: an apparatus that allows platforms to control information flows; software programs that track work progress; reputation scores produced by client ratings; and game-like features used to keep workers attention. How these tools are used to monitor, evaluate and control taskers' and freelancers' behaviours at the expense of their autonomy will come up throughout this paper, but the remainder of this section gives a brief introduction to scholarly discussion of these tools.

Computer control occurs when software automates some dimension of control in the workplace, either by directing, monitoring or evaluating workers (Elliot & Long, 2016). Technologies employed to direct a standardized work flow are ubiquitous in highly routinized jobs like those found in call centres, factory floors or digitized distribution centres such as those used by Amazon. Likewise, they are a common feature of app-based gig platforms, which control by what method information flows into their apps. Through interviews with users of delivery apps Caviar and Postmates (Shapiro, 2018), and Deliveroo and UberEats (Veen et al., 2020), the increased freedom and flexibility on offer to workers were found to be countered by information asymmetries that narrow workers' decision making capacities. Platforms selectively display or obscure certain information which leaves workers guessing about the profitability of each particular delivery task. For instance the delivery destination is only known once the task is accepted. Without full knowledge of how the algorithm allocates jobs, gig workers are unsure of the consequences when jobs are rejected. Unprofitable jobs are accepted as a means to appease algorithms in the hope of ensuring future tasks. This lack of workplace agency extends to Uber drivers, who lack information about a customer's destination before accepting the ride, as well as lacking decision making power about whom to pick up, how much to charge, or even what route to take, which are pre-determined by algorithms (Rosenbalt & Stark, 2016).

In contrast to the minute autonomy afforded to local service workers, based on a combination of survey data and interviews with an international pool of remote professionals using online labour platforms, Wood et al. (2019) found that 72% of respondents felt able to choose and change the order in which they undertook online tasks, and 74% were able to choose or change their methods of work. The remote platform organizational form affords significant autonomy and discretion because clients leave scores at the end of a task or project, and therefore

people were free to choose how they work, as long as they produced the end result to clients' satisfaction. Algorithmic management systems use scores to rank workers, and although this concept connotes technological control, it is framed as a form of customer management (Gandini, 2019) because clients rather than managers or platforms control a worker's reputation, and therefore they must be satisfied. Counter to this claim that the customer is boss, I aim to demonstrate the effectiveness of Upwork and TaskRabbit' information management systems in steering workers' behaviour. Learning from workers the ways in which these dual forces converge to shape reputation, I reveal the subtle conditions under which platforms exert their power in ways which resemble workplaces, not marketplaces.

Remote online labour platforms like Upwork and Freelancer use more overt technologies to monitor the labour process (Caraway, 2010, D'Cruz & Ernesto, 2016, Wood et al. 2019). Software takes regular screenshots of a worker's computer interface, as well as counting keyboard strokes and mouse clicks. When Work Diary is turned on it functions as a time stamp and protects freelancers' pay should a dispute over work hours arise. The protection provided means micro-surveillance is deemed by remote workers as a positive function platform intermediation (Caraway, 2010, D'Cruz & Ernesto, 2016).

In order to heighten productivity and keep users' attention, platforms enlist games, using a technique known as "gamification" (Mason, 2019). Designed to motivate and seduce, gamification is a process that explicitly builds game-like features such as animated graphics and scoring systems into ordinary activities (Nguyen, 2020). These techniques extend from the 1970s factory floor, when Michael Burawoy (1979) identified games as a way to increase motivation and productivity. In the absence of formal constraints—such as management—gig workers chase personal bests and, in the process, stimulate a productive disposition (Lehdonvirta, 2018), all the

while providing valuable data to platform operators under exploitative conditions (Attoh et al., 2019). While these articulations frame gamification as a technique to control workers, in platforms Upwork and TaskRabbit, pursuing high scores is actually a double-edged sword. The data gathered are fed back into organizational systems that allow algorithms to process and stratify workers in ways that offer high achievers greater choice of clients, pay rate, and more flexible terms of service; in short, they gain more autonomy. In this way, the symbolic capital represented by status data can be converted to material and symbolic advantages.

3. Institutional ethnography and digital work

“Ignore the Job Satisfaction Score and please read my feedback—this speaks volumes for the work I do, rather than a mathematical calculation. Seriously!” (Arnold, Upwork)

The opening two lines of freelancer Arnold’s Upwork profile made me want to interview him about his experiences with Upwork’s reputation system. Arnold is inviting potential clients to take a deeper look into his profile, where they will find a truer representation of who he is based on the words of clients he believes are qualified to offer comments on his work. The numbers, he is saying, do not tell you anything about his ability. Arnold’s appeal provokes a question which is central to my research: *How are reputation systems configured by gig economy platforms and what are the distinctive features of these systems?*

This project builds on my undergraduate honours thesis for which I interviewed users of the gig economy platform AskForTask about their work experiences. Discussions about my informants’ reputation scores brought out lively responses and revealed a sense of vulnerability that I wanted to explore further. Based on these encounters, I assumed reputation was in the hands of clients who leave a rating and review upon the completion of a job. However, early on in my thesis research, through interviews, discussion forums and a thorough reading of TaskRabbit and Upwork’s terms and conditions, I was surprised to learn about the numerous ways that platforms themselves collect data and utilize metrics in order to monitor, evaluate and rank workers, especially on activities that seemed removed from the task that clients pay them to do. This other aspect of how reputation is determined is exactly what Arnold is touching on in his quote above: please evaluate me on the outcome of my work, he seems to say, which clients have seen, and not some seemingly arbitrary mathematical calculation that has nothing to do

with the work I do! The discovery and importance of this dual evaluation is voiced poignantly in Arnold's plea. Guided by the standpoint of workers, I listened to their personal experiences of gig work and how they feel about it as a way to explore the relevant structural dimensions of reputation systems and how they coordinate action.

The remainder of this section is divided into three parts. First, I offer reasons for choosing Institutional Ethnography as my research method. Second, I argue that we can learn about institutional dynamics by focusing the analysis on a platform's design and structure, rather than the current scholarly tendency to group and analyze platforms based on the types of work they trade in: *remote* types of work, or *local* service work. Finally, I discuss the political and ethical questions arising from my methodology.

3.1 Institutional Ethnography

My research draws on Institutional Ethnography (Smith, 2005) for three reasons. First, Institutional Ethnography is an important strand of Marxist research for the study of work and institutions. Dorothy Smith, the founding figure of Institutional Ethnography, stipulates that the “institutions relevant to the people's experience, not the people themselves, constitute the object of inquiry” (Smith, 2005, p. 38). Every and any institution can be the object of inquiry, and in this thesis it's the institution of work, specifically digitally mediated gig work. Institutional Ethnography is not a typical ethnography that records biographies and doings of specific cultures, or one that creates analytic categories of users, but instead looks at how macro-level structures of institutions coordinate the local activities of people—what's known as the ruling relations (Smith, 2005). Smith proposes a social ontology that is based in actualities and everyday doings of people as opposed to a social inquiry that affords agency to concepts. The social is simply defined as people's doings or activities and how they are coordinated with others

(p. 227). Social organization emerges from this coordination, and the sequence of actions embedded in the set of relationships that make up social organization. Smith's (2005) mode of inquiry follows from a materialist approach to ontology outlined in Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology* (1976). Like Marx and Engels, Smith contends research must begin in the real, material processes and be orientated towards individuals and their actual practices, or what she calls actualities (p. 54). This method requires shifting away from sociological approaches that perceive the social world as a set of concepts divorced from everyday experience.

The second reason I chose Institutional Ethnography is its focus on the relationship between texts and material processes. From the standpoint of workers, Institutional Ethnography contemplates how practices are informed and shaped by texts, because texts are material things that have the capacity to coordinate actions. Texts are responsible for producing stability and replicability of an organization or institution, but they are not necessarily conceived of as structure, and instead as a process or relation themselves. Texts are broadly understood as something material and replicable, on paper, film, or electronic-mediums like platforms. The texts themselves are people's doings, because they represent "objectified consciousness" that exists in material form rather than in people's heads, and when activated by the reader or user they lead to action. For instance the stinging text on Arnold's profile activated a sequence of actions that resulted in me hiring him to be interviewed about his gig economy experiences. Texts that coordinate the social are not conceived of as inert words on a page, but lively, activating devices. Texts mediate the 'ruling relations' that researchers should set out to reveal. Ruling relations are the "distinctive 'translocal' forms of social organization and social relations mediated by texts of all kinds" (Smith, 2005, p. 227).

All gig work is found and facilitated remotely—and often completed remotely; therefore, the work is heavily textually mediated at every part of the process. In the gig economy, profiles are the textual devices that are “essential to the standardization of work activities across time and translocally” (Smith, 2005, p.166). Social relations—how people are coordinated—are mediated through the profile, and social organization—how people are positioned—is determined by the status data found on the profile. The profile is a textual device which coordinates the doings of workers and clients. This device reveals institutional decisions about how individuals are categorized and classified. The relations of accountability which gig economy workers are subject to can be found in the profile as well. As a text, the profile functions like an ‘interrogatory device’ which transposes workers’ experienced actualities into textually mediated and institutional realities (Smith, 2005, p 226). These are concretized in the indicators that display a worker’s performance, such as client ratings, platform performance metrics and talent badges that are all mechanisms for feedback and evaluation. The profile is therefore an impacted text compounded by the combined effect of algorithms, platform staff, clients and workers themselves.

This project primarily focuses on the numerical text and symbols featured on worker profiles and the mechanisms responsible for this lively data. In recent decades, these digital devices and mechanisms have transformed how independent contractor work is coordinated, particularly the triangular relationship between the worker, the client, and the platform. The profile facilitates standardization across highly disparate job types, practices, and spaces. Since all encounters and interactions are performed through a worker’s profile, it serves as the focal point of my interviews. By following the doings and actualities of workers, I was able to “marshal material evidence to support an alternative analytic account” (Ranking & Campbell

2006, p. 167) of how online labour marketplaces create conditions of dependency and compliance that upset notions of independence and freedom inherent in the independent contractor classification.

Third, Institutional Ethnography has a mandate to explain *how* things work. In doing so, the mapping of different and particular work knowledges and processes offers a guide to general institutional dynamics. The protocols of Institutional Ethnography invite researchers to learn from people's experiences regarding what they actually do, how their work is organized, and how they feel about it (Smith, 2005, p.31). Whereas work usually refers to what people are paid to do, in Institutional Ethnography the concept is understood in a more capacious sense where work is "anything that people do that takes time, effort, that they mean to do, that is done under definite conditions and with whatever means and tools, and that they may have to think about" (Smith, 2005, p.151). This conceptualization is especially useful for analyzing the gig economy where so much unpaid, unacknowledged and emotional work goes into the labour process. Drawing on Smith's definition, I am able to show how two aspects of gig work are intertwined. On the one hand is the paid labour, which accounts for the labour time expended on the actual task or project the worker is hired to do. On the other hand is the equally necessary but unacknowledged platform labour that precedes or follows any paid work. In addition is the emotional work required to mediate the expectations of clients and platforms, both of whom have direct influence over the workers' reputation score. Through an analysis of interviews and text message exchanges, and my engagement with the transcribed interview data, I construct a comprehensive map of the entire labour process from the work knowledges of a diverse range of workers (including a delivery driver, events planner, handyman, graphic designer, cleaner and a market researcher). Learning with people from a diverse range of occupations and work

histories, combined with looking across two gig economy platform sites, revealed differences in experiences within the shared and standardized labour processes established by the two platforms.

3.2 Toward a lean platform framework

Scholarship on the gig economy tends to focus on platforms that deal with *remote* gig work, like Upwork and Freelancer (Caraway, 2010; D’Cruz & Noronha, 2016; Schörpf et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2019), or *local* task-based gig work like TaskRabbit and Uber (Veen et al., 2020; Shapiro, 2019; Attoh et al., 2019; Shor et al., 2020; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). I bridge this divide and propose that platforms with similar design features offer an alternative analytic approach. Regardless of the type of work and workers in supply, platforms that share similar design features enable similar social processes and social relations. Approaching an analysis of platforms in this way offers insight into the broader institutional dynamics facilitated by the particular technologies of power and knowledge underlying these features, and how these technologies bring about tensions between worker autonomy and platform control.

On the surface, the low-skilled local service work of TaskRabbit and the professional remote work of Upwork appear to have little in common. Nevertheless, they purportedly share the following features: workers can set their own pay rate, decide on their availability to work, select from a wide scope of job categories and choose whom to work with. On both platforms, workers engage in conversation with clients through in-platform chat functions prior to agreeing to work, and frequently when the work is taking place. On both TaskRabbit and Upwork, the task or project is performed out of the client’s purview, so the outcome of their work rather than their doing of the work is what’s evaluated by clients, which affords freedom over how they execute the job. This creates an expectation that independent contractors are freed from bosses

and direct oversight. Having the freedom to make these choices and being free from supervision and control correlates with notions of workplace autonomy (Pichault & McKeown, 2019). These features are analyzed in greater detail throughout the paper, and then critiqued to show how notions of freedom and independence come under question through platforms' interference in the labour process, especially through their use of obfuscated data tracking mechanisms and algorithms—both of which coordinate workers' actions and shape behavioural expectations. Upwork, a remote platform, and TaskRabbit, a local task-based platform, share much more in common than other platforms they are typically grouped with and analyzed in relation to. This commonality between Upwork and TaskRabbit can be demonstrated by contrasting each of them with a platform of their own type—remote platform and local task-based platform respectively.

Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) is a remote labour platform that specializes in simple processes like transcribing receipts, doing surveys or classifying images and videos. The Oxford Internet Institute's Vili Lehdonvirta's (2018) study of these “click-work” platforms show that the work involves low-paid piece rates for fast-paced repetitive tasks with little variation, creative input, or freedom to negotiate contract terms. When workers sign in and activate their profile, tasks are automatically assigned in an unbroken sequence, much like how call centres assign calls to telephone operators. However, workers experience some autonomy insofar as they are not directly supervised, and they have some flexibility in choosing when they are available.

TaskRabbit is an app-based platform, whereby tasks are coordinated through an app on a cell phone, and yet the labour process works significantly different from other apps that offer local service work. Task-based platforms that intermediate a local connection of a specific service like taxi driving (Uber) or food delivery (Deliveroo)—which happen to be sources of income for my Vancouver-based interviewees—have been shown to afford workers little control

over their work (Rosenbalt & Stark, 2016; Veen et al., 2020). With a simple swipe to activate their profile, these service workers are free to start and end their work shift anytime they choose, and yet they have no control over who they work with or how much to charge, since both are determined by algorithms. Workers on these “customer-led” (Gandini, 2019) platforms are often said to be misclassified as independent contractors. Despite the clear lack of autonomy that these workers have over the labour process, a recent Californian referendum (Proposition 22, in November 2020) to challenge current legal classification of gig workers sided with platforms 58% to 42% (Naughton, 2020), which means gig workers will continue to be classified as independent contractors. While Uber in particular has received a good deal of media and scholarly attention, less attention has been paid to workers using gig platforms such as Upwork and TaskRabbit. Using Institutional Ethnography to explore platform-worker-client relations from the standpoint of local service workers and remote freelancers, I explore the ways in which autonomy comes under question through mechanisms that coordinate workers’ actions and shape their behaviour.

3.3 My dual investment as a researcher and client

Participating in this research as a paying client replicated the production / consumption process, which raised some ethical and political considerations in relation to what it means to both pay and publicly evaluate research subjects, as well as the implications of being accountable to two, sometimes opposing, rules and guidelines: The University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BRED) alongside TaskRabbit and Upwork terms of service. BRED, through which this research was conducted, stipulates the following guidelines in relation to payment for research subjects: “Voluntary consent must be free of undue influence in the form of inappropriate inducements. The amount or kind of payment should not be such that the subject

will base his/her decision to participate on the potential material rewards.” My research subjects unquestionably based their decision to participate on the monetary reward; however, the money offered was appropriate. In the social sciences it is uncommon to pay interview participants, but sometimes it is necessary, especially in situations like mine, when taking on a position in a field comes with clear expectations like paying people for their labour time. In regards to payments, BREB requests researchers be “sensitive to the possibility of undue inducement for participation, such as payments that would lead subjects to undertake actions that they would not ordinarily accept.” The dollar amount offered and paid to research subjects was in keeping with the hourly rate of pay that they stipulated on their platform profile. Therefore it would not be considered an “undue inducement.” What workers were paid was an equivalent amount to what they would typically seek in relation to the time investment of any paid task or project.

A principle of academic research is that there is no obligation for participants to participate: however payments can be interpreted as coercive, which undermines consent (Head, 2010). Uninformed consent is bad practice which risks negative repercussions for research subjects. An example is Lincoln Clarke’s (2002) *Heroines*. The book is a collection of staged photographs of women figured as heroin addicts living in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. With full knowledge of their compromised situations, Clarke exploited the women’s vulnerable position and offered a small sum of cash in return for a staged, “film noir” style photograph and a signed consent form (Butler, 2004). In order to ensure that I received participants’ *informed* consent, I used the platform chat function to address their questions and concerns before they agreed to the interview. Once the interview subjects agreed to participate, I emailed a consent and confidentiality form. The exchanges with freelancers were all straightforward, in that the communications were precise, clear, and a couple of them reminded me of their familiarity with

graduate work. Nicola noted, “I’ve carried out research myself and understand the protocols around consent and confidentiality”. Some of the taskers had more pointed questions in advance of the interview: one participant asked what sort of questions would be asked, and one person wanted to make sure the camera could be off before agreeing. Communicating with me as a client, the workers embraced their autonomy by asking questions and negotiating terms of the job. I recognize that gig workers are precariously employed and may take risks for money, but they are well educated independent professionals in a position to understand the terms of the interview.

BREB stipulates it is considered coercive and thus unacceptable to have payment depend on completion of the project. When participants agreed to be interviewed, all funds were transferred and held in the respective platforms “escrow” payment system. When the interview was complete I approved the invoice, closed off the contract and payment was released. Payment was not dependent on the completion of my thesis. Nor was payment dependent on completion of the interview. All participants received, read and signed a consent and confidentiality agreement which stipulated the nature of my research and their involvement, and this explicitly said they are free to withdraw consent at any time, and are free to leave the interview too—something which I reiterated at the beginning of every interview. However, in practice, the possibility to withdraw from the interview was complicated by my decision to hire and pay people through the platforms, particularly in the case of taskers, who are bound to the platform’s performance metrics.

If a tasker refuses an invitation, their ‘acceptance rate’ will be impacted. If they accept but then later decide to withdraw from the task, their ‘reliability rate’ will decrease. This latter metric is displayed on a tasker’s profile and is something potential clients may contemplate when

deciding whom to hire. TaskRabbit's algorithm uses both metrics to determine the rank of the tasker and how close they sit to the top of the recommendation list, and therefore how visible they are to clients in the first place. Fortunately, the client does have the option to withdraw a task after it has been arranged, without undue harm to the tasker's matrix. All except one tasker accepted the invitation, and for this sole refusal, I revoked the invitation. When rescinding the task, the platform asked for a reason, and I selected say "job no longer needed." This ensured the tasker's metrics were not unduly damaged. In contrast to the sole rejection on TaskRabbit, twelve Upwork freelancers rejected my request; out of seventeen invitations, only five agreed. Some gave a reason, such as "not my area of interest," and others rejected without providing justification. Unlike TaskRabbit, Upwork claims not to penalize workers for rejecting invitations. A query about the impact of turning down offers was raised by a freelancer on a knowledge forum that I read (a place freelancers go to ask questions and seek answers from peers and support staff), and Upwork's position was confirmed by a staff contributor. Taskers may have felt pressure accept the interview gig because they were constrained by the metrics. Despite the fact I would have withdrawn the task without penalty should they decline, I did not make this explicit. My own understanding of these processes was only fully developed by the third interview with Geoffrey, who I kept (and paid) for 45 minutes longer than the one hour in order to really get a sense of how the metrics work. By choosing to operate as a client, as a consumer, I entered into the platforms logic and became embroiled in the workings of their reputation systems. Their regulatory texts, the algorithmic logic, reached into the local and specific setting of my thesis, and engaged processes that were out of my control. In my final two interviews with taskers Charlotte and Rui, they informed me that in certain circumstances, it is possible to reject a task without penalty. If the job is miscategorized, for example the client has requested a task

from the shopping category but actually wants their bathroom cleaned, taskers can reject the invitation and select this option as their reason. Even if the error or mis-match stems from the client, the tasker still must provide written justification to both the client and to the platform. To be interviewed about their work experiences is a mis-categorization. This task is an anomaly that did not fit within TaskRabbit's pre-determined job categories, and therefore research subjects could reject it without penalty, assuming they knew this was a possibility. Another study of app-based gig platforms found workers to not fully understand the consequences of rejecting jobs (Veen et al., 2020), and despite TaskRabbit is being transparent about the metrics it uses to measure performance, taskers may be ambivalent about rejecting jobs because they are so fixated on achieving perfect scores. Despite the option to walk away without consequence, the variation in rejections between the two platforms indicates that taskers may have felt more obligation to participate and speaks to the point of my project: autonomy is restricted by the performative expectations enforced through information management systems, and I myself became implicated in these very systems.

As a client, I actively shaped participants' reputations in ways that could affect the likelihood of securing future work opportunities. This possibility is most obvious through the rating I assigned them after the interview, but also through the objective metrics that measure activity and contribute to the job success score and chances of earning top-rated talent badges. As a client, I became embroiled in the shaping of these workers' reputations. On Upwork's knowledge forums, freelancers discuss how higher value projects carry more weight in the JSS calculation, which indicates that taking on a \$30 contract is not deemed favourable. Small changes in scores can have dramatic impact: for instance, a fall in JSS from 90% to 89% will lead to many missed opportunities as clients have the ability to filter out lower ranking workers.

At no point did any participant I interviewed ask me to rate them favourably, but I chose to assign all workers maximum points, which was an accurate reflection of how I felt about each interview. For such an unusual request, people were extremely open and willing to engage every question I asked. This may shed light on controversies about the ethics of paying research subjects for sharing their knowledge and self-reflections.

Another consideration that I reckoned with is when an interview subject is being paid for their knowledge, what is the status of the truth claims made in the interviews? I'm communicating with people online through the very method that employs them, so how much can the company know about what they are saying, and how does this influence our interaction and the state of the interview data? After all, if the boss is listening are people likely to tell the truth? And what is the likelihood of being reprimanded if they say something that is picked up by and offends the platform moderators? I was concerned was that respondents may give fictional accounts when under surveillance. Platforms record and store data about all activities on the platform, including all the text messages exchanged through the respective chat functions, and recordings of videocalls, as I was reminded by the following automated notification when I typed "Zoom" into the Upwork job posting: "Simplify conversations. Make voice & video calls through Upwork Messages. It's built into your workspace." To protect participants all interviews were conducted on the independent platform, Zoom, which meant that Upwork and TaskRabbit could not capture the interview data. In conjunction with the consent and confidentiality agreement, this decision gave me confidence that participants would respond honestly to my interview questions. The texts exchanged through the respective platform chat functions were limited to setting the terms of the interview, such as when, where, how long, plus any other logistical questions. These messages were irreproachable, leaving the anonymized interview data

as the sole site of condemnatory remarks. All this to say I was confident workers felt that they were in a safe space and protected from any potential repercussions.

4. Mapping the labour process from the standpoint of labour

Collecting an array of work knowledges to map the doings of diverse workers reveals how institutions coordinate people trans-locally (Smith, 2005). This section maps the labour process, first from the standpoint of Upwork freelancers and then from that of taskers. The sections that follow critique the terms and conditions laid out by Upwork and TaskRabbit in order to show the multiplex ways in which workers' own understandings of autonomy are undermined in the face of powerful information management tools that restrain their freedom in reality.

Freelancers Marty and Arnold, both of whom have 30-plus-years of experience as independent contractors, transitioned into the field of platform freelancing around the mid-2000s. Arnold admits the shift to online gig work was not as a choice, but rather a necessity: "So basically they [platforms] massively increased competition that basically forces you to go online" (Arnold). The digital revolution made the transition to remote labour platforms inevitable, but it was not freely chosen by Marty and Arnold. Before the rise of the platform economy, Arnold said, "I have had one or two employees at one time. So, I did have an actual bricks and mortar studio and a business going on." With the rise of online labour marketplaces in the mid-2000s Arnold and Marty both closed up shop and shifted their operations from a rented workplace to their residence. There was no need to continue with renting premises because "a lot of the local and, you know, direct face to face meeting kind of work you know, became fewer and farther between" (Arnold). Describing his transition Marty recounts the time when he noticed his traditional method of finding clients became obsolete: "Around the mid-2000s I suddenly realized, you know, why aren't my Yellow Pages ads working anymore? Obviously

that's not working 'cause you're just in a sea of other graphic designers." Upwork offers freelancers benefits in the form of a "ready-pool of clients" (Arnold), with "thousands of job postings from companies based in countries around the world" (Nicola). This apparent abundance of opportunities means a time-consuming part of the marketing is taken care of, eliminating the need to engage traditional marketing strategies like cold calling and direct emailing. On the other hand, a ready pool of skilled workers from around the world bolsters competition and reduces potential value for the freelancers. Freelancers noted that projects found off-platform often pay two to three times more than those found through Upwork and similar platforms, which can partly be explained by the ability for freelancers based in countries with a lower cost of living to offer their services for lower wages.

Marty and Arnold initially transitioned to the online labour marketplaces Craigslist and later Kijiji, which both operate much like traditional classified ads. Arnold depicts the momentum of the digital turn; "initially I, as far as an online platform, you know, started searching for jobs on Craigslist and it was probably in the days before Kijiji but, you know, when Kijiji came out I started looking there as well." Arnold continues to say that in the past few years, "postings on Craigslist started disappearing 'cause some companies [clients] would go to these headhunters." Headhunters are platform staff who scrape other online sites like Craigslist and "scoop up projects to present them on their platform" (Arnold). These more professionalized platforms like Freelancer and Upwork stepped in to intermediate the market and change the dynamics of how projects are found, carried out, and evaluated. Like Upwork, Craigslist connects workers with clients, but they take no fee, collect no performance data, offer zero opportunity for public feedback, and exert no influence over the labour process. There are no reputational scores to make a user's prior successes visible; therefore, clients and workers have

less information to determine how trustworthy each might be. Since the mid-2000s, professionalized platforms like Upwork have come to dominate the marketplace for remote labour. They have positioned themselves as increasingly important gatekeepers to freelancer projects. After Craigslist slowed down Arnold “signed up on Freelancer, then there was Elance and then Elance got bought out by Upwork.” Each of these platforms regulates and mediates access to work differently, and all have variations of a reputation system alongside other mechanisms that control and organize workers in their bid to create both trust in the marketplace and competition for jobs.

4.1 Upwork terms of service

Freelancers connect with clients and enter into contracts, but as an intermediary the platform bears no legal liability for any associated actions and outcomes. Upwork’s user agreement firmly states their position and role as an intermediary: “Upwork merely makes the Site and Site Services available to enable Freelancers and Clients to find and transact directly with each other.” In section 2.1, Relationship to Upwork, the agreement stipulates, “You acknowledge, agree, and understand that Upwork does not, in any way, supervise, direct, control, or evaluate Freelancers or their work” (Upwork Inc., 2021d). In an early exploration of Upwork (when it was oDesk) using Institutional Ethnography, Brett Caraway (2010) notes that oDesk is in the business of providing online labour marketplace tools such as protected payments, user profiles and surveillance technologies. To access these “tools,” freelancers must agree to the user agreement, terms of service and privacy agreement, which emphasize the company’s limited liability and responsibilities. Caraway attests to Upwork’s own testimony. The company’s user agreement and terms of service continually restate in numerous ways that they have no “control” over, “involvement” in, or “influence” over the terms and conditions of any employment

relationship that may arise between freelancer and client, including the selection of the employee and working conditions. Caraway (2010) affirms this position; “oDesk is not a labour service company, meaning it is not in the process of directly managing labour, rather the service provided is the creation and maintenance of an online marketplace” (p. 114). From this perspective Upwork is framed as a marketplace that merely connects workers with clients, not a workplace that supervises and controls the labour process. Top-rated freelancer Jack also adopts this perspective:

You're freer than the person who's working in essentially a nine to five job and you have a manager, you have to answer to and you have all these rules, regulations and structure. You don't have independence of their own schedule. They have to deal with office drama, office politics, all of those headaches. (Jack, Upwork).

Jack compares himself to a regular employee to emphasize who might be answerable to the rules and regulations of their employer. He is oblivious to the hundreds of pages of legal documents that govern his relationships to clients and the platform. As the most decorated freelancer I interviewed, Jack's enviable status (99% JSS and 'top-rated' talent badge) means he receives more invites to jobs from clients and headhunters than he can take on, and he's in an advantageous position to negotiate better pay and do work on his terms. As will be explicated in sections five to nine, Jack's experiences are radically different from the other four low-status freelancers who have many grievances about the rules, regulations and structure that constrain their ability to do work. Although Jack feels free from oversight, and Upwork asserts a distance from any sort of influence, control or involvement in the selection of freelancers or conditions of work, the platform is the meeting ground where workers and clients connect, and they set the

rules of engagement. Numerous interactions, exchanges and activities are carried out and recorded here. Freelancers spend many hours every week on the platform: to job search, find clients, communicate with clients, apply to jobs, negotiate contracts, chat, videoconference and more. In addition, Upwork tracks and counts activity in numerous ways. For example, it counts the number of jobs applied to, contracts won, activity levels on open contracts, and response time to client messages to name a few (for a more comprehensive discussion, see section 5, What counts as reputation?). Digital information about a worker's online behaviour is expressed in digital traces that are recorded by algorithms and ultimately made trace-able through the metrics on a profile. When the company claims that they have no influence in the selection of employees, there is no acknowledgement of their algorithmic management systems which sort and rank workers based on their tracked data, in ways that often render low status workers almost invisible. More strikingly, when they say that they have no influence over working conditions, they disavow the work done through the platform as actual work.

4.2 Mapping the freelancer labour process

In addition to carrying out the service clients pay freelancers to do, the negotiation of platform processes requires extensive time, effort, resources and strategy. To stand a chance of admission as a freelancer onto the Upwork platform, applicants must complete and submit a profile for evaluation. Applicants receive a decision in just 24 hours. Successful freelancers must upload their banking information, consent to the terms of service, user agreements and privacy policy. All of these are lengthy texts that detail the laws, regulations, policies and procedures that govern the use of platforms. Yet, as one might expect, none of the participants I interviewed had bothered to read these texts. Although these legal documents explicate institutional rules and protocols, when freelancers face uncertainty around platform operations they prefer to seek help

from ‘knowledge bases’—community forums for freelancers to raise questions and contribute solutions amongst themselves, with occasional moderation from Upwork support staff. Arnold describes these virtual community spaces as, “their sort of pseudo-water cooler forum; you know, freelancers can just sit around and chew the fat.” He likens these forums to a trend he sees in the computing industry, where users of open-source software contribute to a conversation around the same problem and eventually another person will resolve it. Arnold sees this practice as a way “for Upwork to avoid paying for support,” and then reframing it as a community. He states, “I’m not interested in being on there to be part of a community. I’m interested to get on there and get work. But they, you know, they want you to go into their forums.” What Arnold sees as exploitation of workers Nicola sees as community: “If you have a major problem, it’s much more useful to go right to the forum than to contact the customer service. And we’ll get much more support through the forums, through the community.” This is the extent of the professional community independent workers with high levels of autonomy can expect (Pichault & Mckeown, 2019)—always under the ever-watchful eye of platform support staff, who moderate the discussions and have the power to remove users or delete their comments at any time.

To get new recruits familiar with platform processes, Upwork encourages users to watch a few short training videos all orientated towards navigating platform functions. Upwork’s training is limited to assisting freelancers with building strong profiles and teaching people how to navigate platform functions, pointing to its own function as a marketplace and not a workplace that might offer support with skills to execute the actual job. The first training video explains how to create and optimize a *full* profile. Expressing disgruntlement at some recent communications about his profile, Arnold said, “apparently it’s only 90% complete and I keep

getting these messages, oh your profile is incomplete, blah, blah, blah.” By incomplete they mean “they want me to add a social media account to my profile.” A full profile means identity is verified by—and subsequently connected to—a selection of other popular platforms, like Facebook or Linked-In. Arnold’s response to this suggestion is, “first off there is no way in hell I’m going to connect my Facebook account ‘cause that’s friends and family.” Arnold has clear boundaries between his professional and personal accounts, seeing no reason to blend them. Events planner Nicola had a similar response when I asked her about linking her profile to her LinkedIn account: “LinkedIn, definitely not. I can just tell you that I don’t want to humiliate myself with an 88 percent job success score.” Nicola wants to maintain boundaries between two separate professional accounts because she is ashamed of her Upwork reputation score, and expects this low-status would impact her employment opportunities in other realms.

Both Nicola and Arnold have valid motivations for keeping their online identities and roles autonomous from one another, which they appear to on the surface. However, the platform economy is driven by a data imperative, and what seems independent on the surface is interdependent below. Should either of them read the privacy agreement, they will see a two-page table detailing all the ways their user data is being shared by powerful third parties, contributing toward their “Ubercapital” —a meta-, generalized transcendent form of capital arising from one’s position according to various databased scoring, grading and ranking methods (Fourcade & Healy, 2017, p. 14). In order to earn the reputation capital necessary to really succeed in this ecosystem, they must bend to Upwork’s wishes and merge accounts. A full profile is one of the non-performance criteria necessary to be eligible for the much-coveted talent badges that contribute towards better opportunities and afford a fuller, richer experience of autonomy (for discussion, see section 8 on classification situations). The remaining training

videos cover job search strategies, ‘escrow’ pay system, and ‘Work Diary.’ Work Diary’s supervisory role represents the most blatant contradiction of Upwork’s’ claim to not influence work conditions.

On Upwork, jobs can be found in four ways: on job boards, via direct invitations from clients, through automated email notifications from platforms, or by invitations from a Talent Specialist, which is an Upwork employee group that matches ‘top-rated’ freelancers with clients. Searching the job board is most common, and invitations are rare for anyone without a top-rated talent badge. The ‘job digest’ is an automated artificial intelligence notification system that matches job skills or categories of freelancers with new job postings, but this is another perk for top-rated talent badge holders. Invitations from Upwork’s talent specialists are exclusively for ‘top-rated plus’ (top 3%) and ‘expert vetted’ talent (top 1%).

When jobs are posted, freelancers apply by sending a ‘proposal.’ This includes a cover letter, response to any questions clients asked on the job posting, and often freelancers attach a portfolio of their relevant work. On my job posting, for example, I asked: “have you experience using the Work Diary function?” These responses are attached to the freelancer’s profile, which the client first encounters upon receipt of the job application. With the exception of job invites, which is the method by which all freelancers were employed for this project, freelancers apply to jobs by putting in a ‘bid’ using ‘connects,’ which is a virtual Upwork currency currently costing 25 cents per connect. Arnold reflects on the bidding predicament: “So now it used to be ridiculous, the price of their credits. I think it was 50 cents per credit. So, I mean, you know, I looked at, I go, why would I pay \$6 (12 connects) on a hundred-dollar logo? And then on top of that Upwork takes 20% of that.” The number of connects required to bid is determined by the platform and usually corresponds with the value of the job, although freelancers reported the

number of connects required to bid also increases as the number of applications to the job increases. Therefore, as competition increases, it becomes more costly to apply, despite a lower chance of securing the contract. The job posting will state the value of the ‘fixed price project,’ or the ‘hourly pay rate,’ yet freelancers are free to make a counter bid. The number of proposals made to a posting is made visible, but freelancers cannot see the price of competitors’ bids, unless they pay \$14.99 USD for Upwork’s premium service, in which case they can get insight into competitor ‘bid range’ on jobs. In their ability to control the labour process it can be established that Upwork extracts surplus value from labour in three ways: rent, connects to bid, and premium support fees which guarantee a competitive advantage.

Every client has a profile too, which allows freelancers to make a more informed decision about the job. Nicola outlines her process for reviewing client’s profiles, “first, I need to be interested by the project description. Afterwards, I will load it up. I go to the price. If the price is acceptable, I'm gonna see. And then I look what other employees who have worked for the company. I don't look at the stars because I know it matters nothing. I look for the text.” Nicola has a job success rate of 88%, which she perceives as a misjudgment of her qualities and performance, and therefore does not trust any metrics used by the company.

When a proposal is accepted, terms and conditions of work and pay can be further negotiated if necessary, culminating in a freelancer being ‘hired’ and the start of an agreed upon contract. For large projects, ‘milestones’ are set and funds are released over the course of the project when work is submitted and then approved. Rather than being evaluated solely at the end of a large project, clients rate the worker performance after the completion of each milestone, with the overall score at the end of the contract taking the average score over the project. Freelancers and clients can keep in contact through the text messaging function and the in-

platform video call option—both parties are dissuaded from interacting outside of the platform. Hourly contracts are billed automatically through the Work Diary system, although some freelancers refuse to use Work Diary and therefore bill clients manually. When the work is delivered and clients are satisfied with the outcome, they close off the contract and leave a public rating and private rating. Out of five stars, clients publicly rate the freelancer’s “skills,” “quality of work,” “availability,” “adherence to schedule,” “communication,” and “cooperation.” Privately, the client is asked on a scale of 1 to 10, “how likely are you to recommend the freelancer.” This private / public distinction is actually a contradiction. Inevitably, freelancers who are not highly recommended by clients ‘privately’ will not be recommended by the platform; therefore their profiles will not be as publicly visible.

4.3 TaskRabbit terms of service

Unlike professional freelancing, the concept of app-based on-demand work is only a couple of decades old. TaskRabbit’s professed position as mere intermediary that connects taskers with clients is clearly articulated in the 12th clause of the terms and conditions:

The TaskRabbit Platform only enables connections between Users for the fulfillment of Tasks. Company is not responsible for the performances of Users, nor does it have control over the quality, timing, legality, failure to provide, or other aspect whatsoever of Tasks, Taskers, Clients, nor of the integrity, responsibility, qualifications or any of the actions or omissions whatsoever of any users. Company makes no representations about the suitability, reliability, timeliness, or accuracy of the Taskers requested and services provided by Users identified through the TaskRabbit Platform whether in public, private, or offline interactions. (TaskRabbit Inc., 2021d).

The company's unwillingness to take responsibility for taskers' doings or suitability therefore transfers all the risk onto the clients and workers. To offset potential material or bodily damages, a 15% 'trust and support' fee is added to the client's final invoice. I was surprised to see this additional fee tagged into the final invoice, and taskers were equally surprised to learn about it from me, because none of them had read the terms and conditions. A certain assumption of trust is clearly being repurposed as a pseudo-insurance scheme, with the cost transferred to clients. This outsourcing of costs is another example of how gig companies mimic traditional companies who have legitimate operational costs and employees, yet manipulate the middlemen framing and the illusion that they have no influence over the labour process or workers in order to evade their responsibilities.

4.4 Mapping the tasker labour process

Anybody with a smartphone and Internet connection can apply to participate as a tasker. Like Uber, Deliveroo and other task-based sites, TaskRabbit operates through an app that can and must be downloaded onto a smartphone. Much like Upwork, in order to apply, a profile and not an application form must be completed. Profiles are not evaluated nor accepted based on skills, education or work history. Approval is solely based on passing a police criminal record check, a vetting process which allows TaskRabbit to purport that "clients can trust who they're welcoming into their homes." The profile comprises personal information like name and address, and a list of skills with a corresponding hourly pay rate. Skills are chosen from pre-determined categories, like 'delivery,' 'handyman,' and 'pet sitting.' Taskers are free to set an hourly rate of pay for each selected category. Job categories show a 'skill description' and brief outline of the 'scope of work.' For instance, shopping is described as, "purchasing groceries, clothing, electronics or other items and delivering them." When setting the pay rate, a 'suggested tasker

rate' appears in an approving green circle. The suggested rate of the platform is based on "client's willingness to pay," "market prices" and demands in local area, and "experience," which refers to the number of completed jobs done through TaskRabbit in a given category which are therefore set to zero initially. The rate per hour can be changed in one-dollar increments, with an upper limit of \$500 and a lower limit of \$15 per hour. Anything outside the two-to-three dollar range suggested triggers a skeptical orange circle and beyond that a disapproving flashing red circle. In a small text box taskers can describe relevant skills and experience in each of their skill categories, which constitutes their 'bio.' A geographical 'work area' is chosen by free drawing a perimeter around an interactive map. Availability to work can be set up to a year into the future, and to help manage scheduling, taskers are encouraged to allow the app access to their phone calendar in order to automatically synchronize when jobs are found.

Unlike freelancers, taskers do not look for work on a job board, and instead get connected with clients by invite only. Clients choose from a list of profiles after creating a task. Clients choose the type of task, such as furniture assembly or delivery, using the same job categories taskers use to build profiles, which then facilitates a suitable match between type of work and available workers. Clients enter the task location (typically the home where the work is to be done or where items are to be delivered), select the task size in hours (small: 1 hr, medium: 2-3 hrs, large: 4+ hrs), and provide a written description with any pertinent job details, although I found this can be by-passed by typing only one character. Profiles are listed by "recommendation," with those ranked highest appearing first. A drop-down menu in the top right corner can shift to order by "price." After choosing a suitable worker, the client agrees to release the funds into the platform escrow account, and hits the "confirm & chat" button. The tasker

receives notification of the invitation via a notification on the app and an email. To secure the gig, the recipient has one hour to respond if it's a same day gig, or nine hours for gigs more than 24 hours in advance. Before accepting or declining the offer, the client and tasker have an opportunity to 'chat' about the job specifics using the text messaging function. Upon task completion, the tasker sends an invoice to the customer, which might include additional costs incurred. The client receives a notification, pays the invoice which includes an option to tip, and then has the opportunity to evaluate performance with a rating out of five stars along with written feedback to be displayed on the tasker's profile.

Taskers on TaskRabbit and freelancers on Upwork must continually engage in the laborious process of finding, bidding and negotiating employment contracts. Some contracts encompass one hour of paid work, others can be a few hours, days or even months long, but the nature of gig work means multiple jobs are always active, and it's imperative to perpetually seek out the next pay day. The workers I interviewed come from and practice in a great variety of occupations; therefore what it means to do the paid task varies greatly per contract. This is up to the client to evaluate, whereas the platform monitors other online behaviours through tracking technologies embedded in the workers profile. These technologies of power and knowledge play a significant role in determining a worker's reputation, and their access to employment opportunities. Next, I explore the significance of the profile, and how reputation is constituted.

5. What counts as reputation?

5.1 Data selves

Gig economy workers seeking employment through online labour marketplaces like Upwork and TaskRabbit can earn income and enjoy the autonomy expected of their independent contractor status only if they are visible to potential clients. For gig workers to be seen, their profile must be visible on the platform, and it must stand out from the reserve army of neatly listed workers vying for optimal positions. The profile is the standardized device through which all encounters, exchanges and interactions flow, yet gig workers across both of the platforms I researched see no value in spending time producing a stand-out digital version of themselves. Data analyst Sandy said, “I’ve obviously put a bit of work into it. I’ve got some write ups [professional descriptions], and I’ve got little portfolio screenshots up there, but I don’t put a lot of work into it because I’ve never really seen a lot of value out of that.” Likewise, telemarketer Jack expressly derides the device: “I could write down ‘I’m Batman,’ people don’t read it to be perfectly fair.” This blatant disregard for one’s profile, one’s mode of self-representation, or what new materialist Deborah Lupton (2018) calls a ‘data self,’ is especially surprising considering it is the version of a person that clients encounter when searching job proposals and making judgement calls about a worker’s suitability.

Likewise, tasker Dale says, “I’ve been on here for 15 months and the only thing I’ve updated was my pay rate after getting to elite status.” Once the initial profile is set up, little time or attention is given to the photo, biography, or portfolio in the case of freelancers. These parts of the profile over which users have direct control are perceived to play no part in attracting clients. One tasker noted the profile picture is important, and some taskers and freelancers consider the

written evaluations influential in hiring decisions. The three most significant profile features on both platforms were identified as ‘talent badges,’ ‘job success score,’ and various metrics found on their personalized stats pages. Everyone explicitly and unanimously identified metrics as the primary features that matter most to their hiring. These metrics and badges collectively constitute symbolic capital in the form of numbers. Workers indicate that in the gig economy, what makes them visible is not a finely curated profile picture, a masterful cover letter, or the typical forms of cultural capital that operate as markers of distinction; it is scores, that is, their reputational capital.

Freelancer Marty has somehow managed to fly under the radar to maintain a presence on Upwork despite his meagre JSS of 56%. Through a link to a knowledge forum discussing a recent change to how the JSS is calculated—shared with me by freelancer Arnold—I came across Marty letting off steam about the unfairness of the JSS algorithm. Feeling disheartened about a recent conversation with Upwork’s support team, he recalls, “they told me that if it drops below 70 or 75 percent, you know, you could pretty much throw in the towel.” Marty acknowledged his Upwork days were limited and said an interview with me would be his swan song. Finally he had someone who wanted to listen to his gripes about online labour marketplaces. In the beginning, Marty was very successful: “I had a very negative impression of these types of sites for very good reasons. But I decided to apply for a bunch of different projects [on Upwork] and I was extremely busy.” Marty received reasonable client ratings on completed jobs, which left him upset and bemused as to why his JSS went in the opposite direction from what he’d expected. Comparing himself to the younger generation of digital nomads, he pointed to the qualities he brings: “You would think they'd [Upwork] want to help like somebody with my background. I mean, a truly seasoned researcher with 35 years of experience. I have access to

very expensive high-end subscription databases that I'm going to say ninety nine percent of those people don't have." Years of experience and niche resources supported by "a special certificate in business to business market research" and "a university degree" did not stop Marty from plummeting to the neglected depths of Upwork's database. Marty scored poorly because the indicators Upwork use to measure performance calculated that he is underperforming and needs to improve in order to be considered a high-ranking freelancer. Upwork wants to see improvement not in terms of his approach to conducting market research, such as creating comprehensive spreadsheets that he is often hired to do; these are left to the client's evaluation. Rather, he needs be better at meeting the performance criteria which Upwork has decided constitutes a good worker, such as: spending more time searching jobs boards, responding faster to clients in a courteous manner, securing higher value contracts and improving his ratio of bids to contracts, to name a few. In the intensely datafied gig economy, accurately tracked measures of work-related behaviour are better predictors of job opportunities and success than traditional and broad-based measures like educational attainment or employment history.

Reputational capital overlaps with the traditional forms of capital identified by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and at the same time it departs from them in the sense that it takes a numerical form that represents the accumulated history of a person's recorded actions built from the traces left on the platform. Bourdieu identifies three ways that capital is made material and durable: embodied, objective and institutional. The durable and lasting dispositions embodied in and expressed through a gig worker's habitus demonstrate a fit for independent work. In their communications a lot of the participants were exemplary professionals: courteous, prompt, with excellent use of language. Workers' ability to exhibit their skills and competence in their profession is recognized by clients and rewarded with positive ratings that can ultimately bring

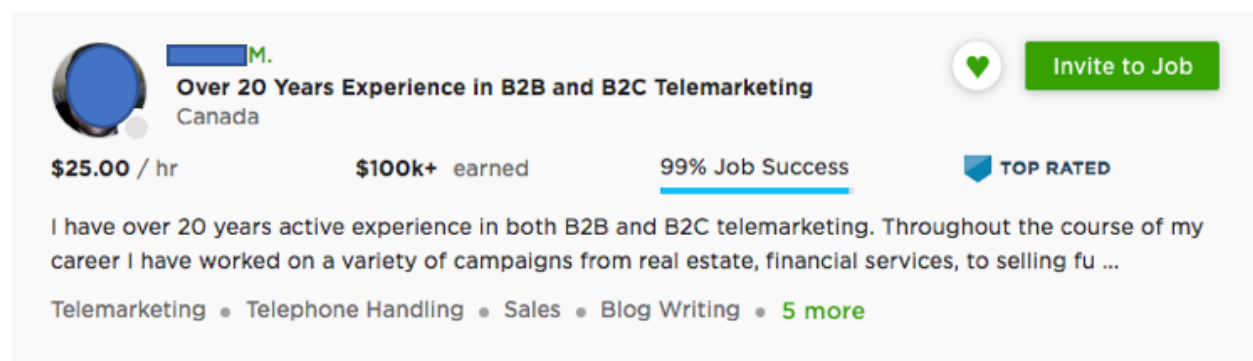
access to certain privileges, like better prices, more job choice, and terms of service. Yet the expectations of the platform are vague, and they are unrelated to the skills needed to satisfy the job requirements and the clients' intentions. Unlike a degree or widely accepted certification, reputation capital is not institutionalized because reputation scores do not travel across sites or institutions, unlike say a credit score, which can be used to get better banking products, to secure rental housing, or to get better car insurance premiums (see Kiviat, 2019). Technologies are moving us towards the direction of a reputation society where data-based scoring is fully coherent across institutions, but no meta-score exists as yet—in North America companies like Acxiom collect data from disparate sources in order to classify consumers into seventy socio-economic clusters (see Mau, 2019), and China is instituting a “reputation state” through its plans to transition from multiple pilot “social credit” scoring programs at the provincial level to a single nation-wide social credit program (Zhang, 2020). However, within the enclosed gig economy platform where reputation capital is earned, it is institutionalized in the sense that talent badges and high scores are recognized as competence and can be converted into economic capital much in the same way higher education credentials can be leveraged to get more desirable jobs on improved terms.

Like consumer credit ratings, a worker's reputation is “a form of capital that arises from one's position and trajectory according to scoring, grading and ranking methods” (Fourcade & Healy, 2017, p.14). Whereas independent contractors of old relied on word of mouth to improve their reputation, they now rely on digitally recorded scores (Gandini, 2018). Such status data can be understood as “symbolic capital expressed in the universal language of numbers” (Mau, 2019, p. 46). A strong reputation can be used to better one's position in the same way a bad image leads to significant disadvantages in the marketplace. This capital is an index of superiority over

others, and a key determinant of marketplace outcomes for gig workers and platform owners alike. As a form of symbolic power, reputation capital is a resource that workers can deploy to achieve more contracts on better terms. It acts as marketplace bargaining power.

5.2 Freelancer profile

To highlight the profile features that are important for a worker's success, I offer an in-depth analysis of two profiles: Upworker Jack and tasker Geoffrey.



The image shows a screenshot of an Upwork freelancer profile. At the top left is a small blue circular profile picture. To its right is the name 'M.' in green, followed by the text 'Over 20 Years Experience in B2B and B2C Telemarketing' and 'Canada'. On the far right of this section is a green heart icon and a green button labeled 'Invite to Job'. Below the name and title, there are four key metrics: '\$25.00 / hr', '\$100k+ earned', '99% Job Success' (with a blue progress bar), and a blue shield icon labeled 'TOP RATED'. A short bio follows: 'I have over 20 years active experience in both B2B and B2C telemarketing. Throughout the course of my career I have worked on a variety of campaigns from real estate, financial services, to selling fu ...'. At the bottom, there is a list of skills: 'Telemarketing • Telephone Handling • Sales • Blog Writing • 5 more'.

Figure 1: Upworker Profile

As soon as a job is created on Upwork clients like me are faced with a seemingly endless list of profiles. It is from this moment that the coordinating work of the profile can be made visible. As you can see in Figure 1, a very small profile picture (anonymized) sits alongside a name (also anonymized), occupation, and location. Clients' eyes are drawn to the salient numbers that take precedence in the centre: pay rate per hour in USD (\$25), total amount of money earned on the platform to date (100k+), JSS (99%) accompanied by a colourful blue bar to grab the reader's attention, and a talent badge (top-rated). "Top-rated" freelancer Jack reports that, "if you're on the top of the search results, chances are somebody will take a look at your profile. So when people review my profile, Upwork gives you metrics." Amongst other things, Upwork counts the number of visits to Jack's profile. As I click into Jack's profile to inquire

more into his work history, another more detailed profile layer is revealed to me, while the algorithm simultaneously notifies Jack that a graduate researcher (the title I gave to my client profile) is delving into his profile. In creating a project and activating the text, a complex series of actions can be discerned. The algorithm had initially ranked and presented Jack's profile near the top of the list; it then notifies him about my engagement with his data self, and his metrics are subsequently updated. Jack was already close to the top of the list of workers that appeared, and my decision to hire him may well bump him further up and increase his visibility to future clients, while my decision not to hire other freelancers whose profiles I visited could have the opposite effect. Although Jack is an Upwork success story, the company's algorithm still sees room for improvement, because he sometimes receives automated messages inviting him to take some training on how to craft a better version of himself: "they have these webinars once in a while of trying to teach people how to write good profiles and things of that nature." Upwork also counts the number of times a potential client has made contact via the chat function, and perhaps a better profile would lead to more of these instances, or higher value contracts and more coffers in the pockets of Jack and Upwork. What this all points to is an aspect of the data imperative highlighted by Shoshana Zuboff (2019) in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. Recording activity is just one aspect of the data imperative: the goal is to intervene in behaviour by nudging people toward actions that are in the interests of the organizations who collect, analyze and own the data.

Those with the highest market reputation are distinguished by one of four talent badges, here listed in order of prestige, starting with the lowest: Rising Star, Top-Rated (top 10% of talent), Top-Rated Plus (top 3%), and Expert-Vetted (top 1%). The Rising star badge is only available to newcomers who have not yet completed the five projects required for a JSS score to

be calculated. Without activity in the field, newcomers are assessed on the overall strength of their initial profile, prior experience and skills, and a “professional test.” As Nicola explains, “I got Rising Star, because in the beginning when I joined the platform, there was a professional test. And that probably helped me to get a couple of first contracts.” These tests have since been removed by Upwork, but Rising Star badges remain, and with enough cultural capital established elsewhere, exciting newcomers to the field can be distinguished. Only when five contracts are completed is a freelancer assigned a JSS. Upwork treats the algorithm that calculates the JSS like a “black box” (Finn, 2017; Christen, 2020) and does not fully disclose how it is weighted. Using the language of gamification, they claim that doing so would make it easier “for users to artificially boost their scores.” Therefore, the company maintains some “privacy with this metric to ensure fairness and accuracy” (Upwork Inc., 2021c). The visibility and transparency expected from workers is not extended to the platform itself. Upwork’s notion of fairness includes denying workers particular knowledge about what counts as reputation, in ways that demonstrate their willingness and ability to exert control over freelancers’ data selves.

Algorithmic management techniques ensure that many low status workers, like Marty, Arnold, Nicola, and Sandy are not even considered for jobs because they are rendered invisible from the outset. When clients create a job, screening techniques are deployed to filter out individuals with certain combinations of characteristics and metrics, including geographical location, value of contracts earned, JSS score, and talent badges. I filtered by geography (Canada only), total value of contracts completed (\$50K+) and number of contracts (20+). Under the ‘visibility’ filter, clients can determine who will see the post based on whether they have a JSS of 90+, 80+, or any score, plus an option to make the post visible to new freelancers without a JSS. Much like the credit scores theorized by Fourcade and Healy (2013), whereby all consumers are

assigned a score based on a combination of previous financial activity, the scoring of freelancers applies calculations to a mass of data and classifies them along a continuum. However, based on this classification, screening techniques then categorize workers in order to divide them into two classes: those included and those excluded—what Fourcade and Healy term a boundary classification.

As Gandy describes, “The fundamental purpose of a profile is the assignment of an individual into a class or category that represents a decision” (Gandy, 2014, p. 1099). Upwork’s decision to classify freelancers by reputation scores means “the visibility of good feedback is integral for future commissioning of new work by the same or other clients” (Alacovska, 2018). Mau (2019) notes that “the particular strength of indicator-based governance thus lies in its ability to render hierarchical control interventions largely unnecessary; instead, such methods act on individuals and institutions by building certain relevance criteria into the DNA of institutional structures and social environments” (p. 121). In the gig economy, workers without status in the form of a strong reputation score are rendered irrelevant.

Recent scholarship (Wood et al., 2019; Schörpf et al., 2017) has argued that reputation scores are the most important resource for gig economy workers, while claiming that these scores are produced solely by clients. This position downplays the significant role that platforms play in shaping reputation scores, and therefore disavows the control they exert over workers who require robust performance metrics to succeed in online labour marketplaces. A critique of this scholarship will serve to demonstrate the power that platforms hold over a worker’s reputation capital.

5.3 Algorithmic management

In a study of an international sample of remote freelancers who use Upwork, four leading scholars at the Oxford Internet Institute argue that these workers experience significant autonomy and discretion in their work because the client is not present for the work being carried out, and therefore do not see how the work is performed. This means the client evaluates the outcome of the work when it's complete, and give the worker a rating which contributes to his or her aggregated job success score (Wood et al., 2019). This JSS score, which they claim is the sole product of client ratings, is the measure of a worker's reputation, and it is what algorithms use to rank profiles in their database. Wood et al. extend an argument from retail service work (Fuller & Smith, 1991), to say that “algorithmic management is an extension of customer management strategies, which entails positioning customers as agents in the management circuit, so that customers, rather than managers, are [...] the ones who must be pleased, whose orders must be followed, whose ideas, whims and desires appear to dictate how work is performed” (p. 62). Wood et al. conclude that reputation is a worker's most important resource because of the visibility it brings them via algorithmic management ranking systems, in addition to being an “emerging form of marketplace bargaining power” (p. 70) used to secure more favourable employment terms. In short, those with high status have much more success and control in their work life—a familiar aspect of worker struggles under capitalism.

Wood et al. identify the monitoring and evaluation of work through information management tools as an alternative—yet less effective—way for platforms to control workers. High levels of monitoring and measurement of work are frames as the ‘Taylorisation’ of white-collar work, whereby “work tasks are subjected to detailed digital measurements and statistical analysis of individual worker performance” (p. 62). Taylorist informational controls monitor the

labour process and therefore offer a different, more direct form of control than algorithmic management. Wood et. al. (2019) identify these tools in terms of the Work Diary surveillance function, which takes photos of the worker's screen every 10 minutes and measures the worker's mouse clicks and key strokes. The images and measurements are relayed back to the platform and client for evaluation. They point out that this form of monitoring lends itself to more repetitive work tasks, like data entry, customer service etc. Like another study of Upworkers in India (D'Cruz & Ernesto, 2016), Wood et al. acknowledge that remote workers can circumvent the Work Diary surveillance function in numerous ways that are often deceptive and imaginative. Freelancers I interviewed also felt like creative work was not amenable to these tracking techniques, especially in being counted. Justifying his reluctance to use Work Diary, Arnold said, "It's counting the time that you're working on that [a project]. I explain to my clients, look, I'm very efficient with my time and very fair with my time. But if I'm in the middle of working on your brochure and one of my clients calls me, or I have to respond to an email." This form of direct workplace monitoring and oversight contravenes any notion that the independent contractors can expect to be free from direct supervision (Pichault & Mckeown, 2019). Because of workers' ability to circumvent the Taylorist tracking functions Wood et. al conclude that "the far more effective means of control was the algorithmic management enabled by rating and reputation systems" (p. 64), because this did not infringe on a worker's autonomy. In limiting their understanding of information management systems, or Taylorist management to the Work Diary function, they fail to recognize how platforms engage in broader tracking and surveillance practices, and how these digital records directly inform reputation scores. In another analysis of how creative platform work is managed and controlled, Schörpf et al. (2017) also made the same distinction and concluded that "when trying to develop an online reputation, workers are

completely and utterly at the clients' mercy" (p. 55). In making their arguments these scholars fail to acknowledge that clients and platform are responsible for shaping the reputation scores and therefore platform and client expectations must be met in order to feature more prominently on the platform, relative to their fellow workers.

Despite Upwork's reluctance to divulge the information necessary to help freelancers strategize how to optimize their reputation, some things are known about what they count, and how they make the calculation. Upwork's JSS and talent badges are based on a combination and convergence of subjective client evaluations and the platform's objective data. Clients have the option to offer a rating after every task, and Upwork does a great deal of counting. Workers' actions inform these metrics, but they only have indirect control over the outcome, in the form of the scores they're assigned. Upwork's tracking technologies collect data on a myriad of online activity, which include but are not limited to the number of job bids, job invites, and accepted invitations, in addition to the ratio of contracts won to those applied for. They keep track of the number of open, ongoing contracts and the frequency and dollar value of weekly payments and hence revenue for the platform. Upwork terms of service attest that projects with no earnings weigh negatively on JSS, as do open projects with no activity, as well as projects where clients leave no feedback. The number of repeat clients are tracked, which indicates client satisfaction. The total value of platform earnings is rounded up and displayed on the profile, as is the availability to work. On their personal stats page freelancers are notified about the number of views they receive, and their response rate to client messages. The exact variables and weighting that make up the JSS are not known—much like the FICO™ (a powerful data analytics company that is focused on credit scoring services) credit score used to determine one's credit rating

(Fourcade and Healy, 2013)—but the company applies algorithmic management techniques to this data in order to rank and organize the list of workers using the platform.

When Upwork terms and conditions state they have no control or influence over the decision to hire, nor do they have control over the working conditions, they disingenuously downplay their power over exactly these decisions and conditions. Algorithmic management tools are a form of algorithmic governance in so far as this governance at a distance influences who gets hired. Tracking technologies also influence the working conditions and outcomes for freelancers. Upwork, like TaskRabbit and other platforms, places a “growing importance on monitoring, registration and the classification technologies” (Mau, 2019, p.143). While users are rendered visible to the platform via omni-present tracking technologies, they simultaneously render their own practices invisible. Pichault & Mckeown (2019) argue that independent contractors should operate free from oversight and only be evaluated on the outcome of their work, but Work Dairy and other information management tools that track the labour process indicate that work does come under supervision, and therefore platforms function more like workplaces in their ability to monitor, evaluate and steer behaviours.

5.4 Tasker profile

S. \$35.29/hr Great Value

- Elite Tasker
- 57 Furniture Assembly Tasks
- 100% Positive Reviews
- 93% Reliable
- Vehicle: Bicycle

[View Profile & Reviews](#)

[Select & Continue](#)

You can chat with your Tasker, adjust task details, or change task time after booking.

How I can help:
Efficient, organized and speedy at following assembly instructions. Experience includes numerous beds, dressers, tables, and shelving units. Also comfortable moving furniture around with care.
[Read More](#)

for super nice and finished the task in no time!
Zahra K. - December 8, 2020

Figure 2: Tasker Profile

A large picture dominates the tasker profile, alongside metrics similar to Upwork: pay rate (35.29 CAD), Job success score (100% positive reviews), talent badge (Elite) and a reliability rate (93%) which indicates the completion rate of tasks. This latter metric is one of three used to measure performance, as described by Geoffrey: “One is your response time and how many times you respond within the timeframe. Another is how many times you accept [a job], and then there is how many times you actually show up to do the job, which is your reliability.” These metrics constitute a tasker’s performance ‘matrix.’ An omnipresent message atop their personal stats page states “if any rate falls below 85%, your ability to access tasks may be limited.” Unlike Upwork, the tasker job success score is exclusively derived from client reviews, not platform metrics. However, the platform still holds a powerful influence over how reputation is measured. When handyman Dale explained his frustration at not having the elite status, he compared himself to the profile of a “competitor” tasker who he has been tracking closely: “And it's that lack of not having elite status for a few months. Falling behind him greatly decreased my visibility and how many jobs I can get.” The much-coveted elite status means that workers feature more prominently and receive more job invitations, and some see it as a means to increase their hourly rate of pay. Explaining the relationship between status and visibility on the platform, Rui explains how “clients can filter by price or by reviews later, but initially it's by recommendation.” To reach elite status certain criteria must be met, as explained by Charlotte: “I think you can turn down like one task a month, like you can't just no show, which I guess happens a lot with this type of thing. And then you have to show up, you just can't have any missed ones, and clients have to give you top marks.” Rui shrewdly set up a client account so he can log on and compare himself to his competition. He noticed, “Elite taskers had a little bit more pricing [higher pay rate] and that made sense.” He continued with this reflection: “I

thought why would someone pay more for someone when they can choose someone a little bit cheaper? But like I said, it depends on how TaskRabbit chooses. 'Cause some people just choose the top one that's recommended and just go with that." His explanation reminded me of the workings of link distribution in the structure of complex networks, which as Jodi Dean argues, "follows a power law where the most popular item generally has twice as many hits or links as the second most popular, which has twice as many as the third most and so on down" (Dean, 2020). She explains what this looks like in statistical terms: "The shape the distribution takes is not a bell curve; it's a long tail—a few billionaires, a billion precarious workers." Rather than links in a hierarchical network, talent badges establish the structure of hits and success comes to those in the top few percent who have high-ranking profiles.

The profile constitutes a technology of knowledge and governance, that is, "forms of language, technologies of representation and communication, and text-based, objectified modes of knowledge through which local particularities are interpreted or rendered actionable in abstract, translocal terms" (McCoy, 2008, p.701). Rather than an inert or transparent text, the profile is an active and coordinating institutional technology, wherein are contained "both the specific tools that workers use to accomplish their tasks and the institutionally organized procedures for accomplishing these tasks" (Corman and Melon, 2014, p. 152). In the context of the gig economy, the profile organizes and coordinates the work of freelancers, and is central to how features of work and the activities of the workers are recorded, averaged, computed and made visible. Online labour platforms insert their own interests and values by tying them to an individual's personal reputation. Succeeding on these platforms increasingly entails meeting both platform and client expectations. How taskers experience and react to this dual pressure is the focus of the next section.

6. Taskers: Trapped in the ‘matrix’

6.1 Accountability circuit

“You're not entirely free when you're doing online gigs [on TaskRabbit]. It's not like Craigslist where you can get hired for a job or hire someone and there's not that accountability, because at least there's accountability here” (Dale, tasker).

Craigslist is the digital equivalent of the street corner where undocumented migrants congregate (see Purser, 2019). Clients can pick up some day labour, pay cash in hand, and drop workers back off without any official records. TaskRabbit, on the other hand, has instituted features and processes that make transactions transparent, and Dale welcomes the accountability this brings to service work. By accountability, Dale means the dual feedback loop from the client and the platform, which ensures that poor work is punished with a blemish to his metrics, and good work is rewarded. Speaking about the JSS Dale said, “You’re tied to it because of the reviews, the ratings, the metrics.” He emphasizes the significance of satisfying clients to maintain a competitive JSS, while being realistic about managing perceptions. He recognizes that he is “not going to please everyone,” or “be everyone’s friend,” despite his attempts otherwise: “Not every one of your encounters are going to be pleasant. There's a lot of pressure to maybe, not be entirely true to yourself in terms of your values or what you agree with, because the metrics require you to sacrifice maybe some of you or your standards.” Renouncing personal standards and values in order to satisfy clients is common practice in standard front-line service-work arrangements (Fuller & Smith, 1991). The emphasis on customer relations requires employees to engage in relational work—work that needs to be done in order to build and maintain strong interpersonal relationships with clients. The relational work takes on extra significance in the

online labour marketplaces because it is made visible through the client scores that contribute towards a worker's reputation and future job opportunities.

The constraint that reputation scores have on the autonomy of taskers is clearly articulated in Dale's recounting of a recent moving job he'd done through a friend's small business: "And I'm like, we can't move this bed with bedbugs. Like, we cannot put their stuff in the truck, put other clients at risk." Dale's refusal to carry out the order from his boss was a moral decision meant to protect the well-being of others, and himself. He continues "and I was able to walk away from that job because I did not have ratings and reviews to tie me down." On the TaskRabbit platform, however, he is "tied" to the metrics and they limit his ability to act in accordance with his own values. Instead, he forgoes his values to satisfy the clients and takes on the values of the platform to meet his reliability rate metric—finish the job no matter what it takes. If he were accountable to his boss or employer, Dale could make a case to walk away. However, objective metrics comprehend code not reasoning, and therefore do not want to know or care about why the decision to walk away was made; they simply register that the action occurred. Dale indicates that when his public reputation is on the line and in the hands of others, he is willing to go against his better judgements and adjust his behaviour in order to achieve optimal scores.

Taskers exude confidence when discussing their ability to complete tasks, even while experiencing deep levels of anxiety around their metrics. For instance, Charlotte said "I enjoy the variety of the work and different clients...building a sense of comfortability and rapport...and getting to know their personalities." Discussing feelings about bad client ratings, her distress is clear: "When you get that bad rating or not perfect rating, you're like, what did I do wrong? You know, and that's where it bothers me, you don't know why. If you don't know, how do you

change your behavior due to a platform?” Although task-based gig work provides workers with a sense of autonomy, the predominant position of clients erodes this sense of empowerment.

Pressure to achieve the best metrics is not limited to satisfying clients; platform expectations must also be met. Describing an incident when she lost her phone on a day with four tasks to complete, Marina expressed her discomfort: “and yet just feeling absolutely screwed because I was so tied to the metrics.” She was making reference to her reliability rate, and how that metric would make her look bad. Reliability rate is the percentage of tasks that a tasker completes out of the total number of tasks they agreed to take on. Marina mainly does grocery shopping, delivery services, or furniture assembly, and she wants to be seen as reliable and better than her competition. She continues: “and wanting to have that perfect performance so that people say you are 100 percent and they want to hire you versus, you know, whatever your competition might be... and so that sense of anxiety to kind of perform at that level was stressful.” The visibility brought by reputation scores creates a desire for well-educated workers pursuing low-skilled jobs to be seen as nothing short of perfect.

Philosopher and cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han (2017) argues that the digital economy deploys emotions as resources to bring about heightened productivity and achievement. In this emotional capitalism, positive forms of power replace negative power by “cozying up to the psyche rather than disciplining it through coercion or prohibitions” (Han, 2017, p.14). In the gig economy, people’s behaviour is guided by the pursuit of scores, the gratification they offer, and the opportunities they afford, rather than a disciplinary regime of overt supervision. Geoffrey’s response to a question about how he feels about negative scores is exemplary: “You know, after I received the rating, you know, it made me question whether I wanted to continue doing that type of task. But then, you know, you keep going and get another good rating or you have, you know,

you keep going, it's okay." From despair to delight, the emotional responses to reputation scores can entail anxiety and stress, yet they condition workers to strive to do more.

6.2 The matrix

"You know, they've actually stated that they'll stop if your 'matrix' drops to a certain point and they'll stop offering you jobs and promoting you" (Geoffrey). Being alert to incoming requests and responding quickly is one aspect of the matrix. TaskRabbit uses the response rate to measure the time it takes a tasker to respond to a client's job invitation. The on-demand nature of this economy makes it difficult for this workforce to construct boundaries between work time and free time. Although taskers can select and make known their job availability, they must always be ready to respond and engage with clients through the chat function. This important prelude to the task goes unacknowledged as work by taskers and the platform, yet it's imperative to the labour process, and it creates a perpetually on-call workforce. Same-day requests require a one hour response. A one-hour time frame can seem reasonable to some taskers, because "who doesn't check their phone every hour?" (Charlotte). Cell phones are always close to hand: "it's always on my body just because if I get contacts, that's very important to me to like, reply right away" (Marina). Freedom from a rigid nine-to-five schedule is replaced with a perpetually available workforce. In the context of a society where smart phones function like prosthetics, it may not be unreasonable to expect a quick response; however, these comments show the fluidity between work and free time. Some taskers do aspire to create boundaries between work and leisure: "I set up a do not disturb timeframe. After 10:00 p.m. and up until like 8:00 in the morning, my phone doesn't beep" (Geoffrey). Boundaries can be enforced by simply deactivating phone notifications. Yet, Geoffrey continues, "you know, sometimes you look at the phone at eleven o'clock and go oh, I should respond to that." For those committed to achieving

optimal metrics, overcoming the urge to respond is too much to resist, in spite of workers best attempts to construct boundaries.

For those who enjoy gig work because of its flexibility, especially night owls like Dale, sleeping-in can lead to problems: “If someone that, say, is looking to hire some help late in the morning or late in the night and you don't see it, by the time you wake up, you can be severely penalized.” He said, “you always have to be thinking about your metrics” and “if you missed a request, that counts against you. It would ding both your response and acceptance.” He found a hit on two metrics—due to one missed notification—too harsh to handle: “I disabled it eventually because it was too hectic to always be prepared to, like, just drop everything and save the day. It was a little too crazy.” Super-handy-man Dale retired his cape by choosing to opt-out of same-day notifications. This meant he would only appear on a client’s listing if they require a service more than 24 hours in advance, which comes with an extended nine-hour response window. For Dale, this leeway “took away a lot of stress and gave me a bit more flexibility and control.” Flexibility and control are the main reasons he chooses to do this work. He goes on to say, “It's not that busy right now. So we're not getting a lot of requests anyways.” Dale attributes this lack of opportunity to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. However, another tasker (Geoffrey) in the same job category as Dale with almost equivalent scores, saw his service requests grow over the same period. As Geoffrey and others concurred “I’d say about 60% of clients are same day requests.” The flexibility to opt-out and the control Dale gained compromised his ability to find work and make money. Thus, we can see that operating outside of the recommended platform parameters and adhering to a self-determined work pace that autonomous workers might expect (Pichault & McKeown, 2019) makes it increasingly difficult to succeed in their ecosystem.

Taskers enjoy the variety and flexibility of gig work. Jim says: “I do not do very well with a repetitive set schedule. And this gives me the customization, the flexibility that keeps it interesting.” These qualities are in stark contrast to the other task-based platforms which specialize in a single service industry, for instance home delivery (Deliveroo), or taxi rides (Uber). On these apps, algorithms determine the value of jobs and who you work for—for instance which passenger to pick up or which customer to deliver to. Movement and actions are also micro-managed. Geoffrey describes a typical sequence when working through the grocery delivery service app Instacart: “You would start when you walk in the building, then you would hit start and then you would start scanning.” All movements and actions are registered in the app. If it’s taking too long, the app alerts him: “the app does time you and it kind of lets you know that, you know, you’re taking kind of a long time. And then you get your matrix. You get kind of bonuses and things like that for being a fast shopper.” On the clock, every second counts. He continues: “Once you’re done scanning all the items, then you would hit stop and then it would tell you, OK, now go pay for it. Once it’s paid for you hit deliver. And then once you dropped it off, you hit ‘done delivering.’” With their sleek, animated app-interfaces, many task-based platforms employ “gamification” (Mason, 2019) techniques to keep users’ attention. Designed to motivate and seduce, gamification is a process that explicitly builds addictive game-like features such as scoring systems into ordinary activities (Nguyen, 2020). For instance, the absence of formal constraints—such as bureaucratic management procedures—induces freelancers to chase personal bests and, in the process, stimulates a productive disposition (Lehdonvirta, 2018).

Compared with sleek, animated interfaces—such as the delivery service Instacart that Geoffrey describes above—TaskRabbit and Upwork’s interfaces are dull. No flashy graphics, timers, real-time maps, or bonus plays absorb users’ attention to get them hooked. In fact,

TaskRabbit offers much more control over how they perform the actual job, which gives taskers a sense of independence. For instance, Marina mused about taking her dog along on deliveries: “The other day I was in the car and I was delivering cupcakes and I was like, what if the icing falls off the cake? Or my dog was in the car and I was like, what if he jumps over and eats the cupcakes just like stuff like that?” Marina was concerned about her dog eating the cakes and the potential repercussions on her reputation, but the fact she can take her dog speaks to a freedom she would not have in most standard employer-employee work arrangements. However, despite these liberties, the TaskRabbit enforces its own basic performance parameters in order to be considered connectable: an omnipresent message atop the performance reports states: “If any rate falls below 85%, your ability to access tasks may be limited.” These metrics keep workers accountable to platform interests by reminding them to respond quickly, accept the job, do not back out, and make sure it’s done correctly.

6.3 The right to reject

Unlike Upwork, where thousands of job opportunities are posted onto jobs boards and freelancers compete to win contracts, on TaskRabbit clients post a task and select whom to invite from the list of profiles made available. The acceptance rate actually means taskers only have the right to reject jobs, but not the freedom to choose from jobs in the marketplace. Geoffrey understands that “if you say no too many times, then your matrix is bad.” Taskers believe their account would be deactivated if they do not meet their matrix—an understanding explicitly confirmed in the TaskRabbit (and Upwork) user agreements. This assumption aligns with a number of scholars who found that gig workers believe that a reputation score below a certain threshold leads to automatic deactivation (Attoh et al., 2019; Rosenbalt & Stark, 2016; Veen et al., 2020). Zuboff (2019) calls this practice of automated deactivation the ‘uncontract,’ “which

abandons the human world of legally binding promises and substitutes instead positivist calculations of automated machine processes” (p. 333). Companies can bypass conventional employer/employee relations in favour of automated machine processes that compute the behaviours of people across all aspects of life—for instance in work, education, health—in order to advance commercial objectives (p. 221). This perceived threat does not prevent taskers from feeling a sense of empowerment and control in their work. For instance, Charlotte screens clients to ensure “they’re not too bossy,” “make sure the task is actually what they say it is,” or to “make sure these people actually need help.”

Multiple taskers adopt the institutional discourse of the ‘sharing economy’ when they frame their work in terms of “help”: “Like I have one lady who just had a baby and her husband has a compromised immune system, so I had to help them” (Marina). Three taskers state “to help people” as their reason for working through TaskRabbit. Geoffrey said “it [TaskRabbit] allows me to do different things and not be stuck in a job that you’re only doing electrical work or you’re only doing plumbing. I get to do a little bit of whatever the customer needs, you know, so I mean, and I like it because I’m a very social person and I like to ‘help’ people.” Re-framing paid work as help situates the task as a favour rather than a hire. This creates a sense of ownership and control over the exchange, as well as a sense of social good.

Though the phrase ‘social good’ hits a kinder note, this sense of public or social good is in stark contrast to a recent study by Attoh et al. (2019). Interviewing Uber drivers led the authors to argue that the solitary nature of the work alienates drivers from the public good. They emphasize this point by claiming drivers would wish for and celebrate the transit breaking down because it leads to fare spikes (p. 1017). Unlike Uber drivers, taskers use the chat function to connect and interact with their clients prior to agreeing to the task. These humanizing

interactions give meaning to taskers' work, even if it is for something as mundane as putting in a "light bulb" (Geoffrey). Being hand-picked from a long list of competing workers rather than assigned to a task creates a different type of relationship and gives taskers a sense of personal worth. Although algorithms play a part in positioning workers, taskers are selected by clients rather than assigned to rides or deliveries determined by an algorithm. A contract—as well as a bond—is forged through these one-to-one interactions, and trust is aided through this practice.

On TaskRabbit, each task is described in writing by the client, and the details are usually sufficient to determine whether or not the job is doable. However, if it is not, more details are sought by the tasker who engages with the client through the private chat function. Clarity can come quickly, but it may also take hours or even days of messaging back and forth, at times for as little as one hour of paid work. When the task description is not clear, taskers take as long as required to confirm they have the necessary skills and tools to complete the job, because if they agree to the task but arrive to realize they cannot do it, it's "a ding to the reliability score" (Dale), and of course, results in a bad client rating. Charlotte's rigorous practice of asking questions serves two main purposes: to determine if the client is well-mannered, and if the job is properly categorized. Charlotte is unwilling to work with "bossy" people whom she perceives as a potential threat to her mental and physical well-being. Beyond these criteria, in COVID-19 times she wants to know the clients' circumstances to evaluate whether they are in need of her help. When I requested an interview, Charlotte took 30 hours and 14 text exchanges until she agreed—even though being interviewed about her work experience had nothing to do with the 'delivery' category where this task was posted. Within a minute of my invitation Charlotte replied with a simple "hello." I replied quickly and waited on tenterhooks for her next reply, which took four hours. It was only after learning about the one-hour response rate that I could appreciate this

clever move: keep the matrix in shape...and deal with the client when I can get around to it. Like the other taskers, by the time the interview came around, I already had a sense of who Charlotte was, and I'm sure she felt a level of obligation to me, if only after signing the official consent and confidentiality agreement. The chat function opens up dialogue and provides the opportunity for Charlotte to engage with clients and take some control over her work situation. For Charlotte this undoubtedly creates a sense of being one's own boss. Despite all the screening and goodwill that Charlotte exemplifies, the right to reject may easily be misconstrued as the right to choose. And when constrained by metrics, this is what autonomy affords Charlotte and other taskers: the right to reject, so long as it's no more than one in nine offers.

Although taskers reported feeling connected with their clients, they feel alienated from their data self—the quantified persona they see reflected back in their profile. Even after receiving a reasonable four out of five stars, Rui said “So yeah, I mean, in the end she gave me a four rating versus five. I tried to solve it, but there's really nothing to solve.” For Rui, there must be a solution to a four-star rating, because that is not representative of who he takes himself to be. Dale had an uncomfortable encounter that led him to secretly record the interaction with an app on his smartphone: “I came to this woman's home to help her install a microwave hood fan.” The item was heavy so Dale had the next door neighbour come lend a hand, and “[the client] was not very pleased with that. She thought I should have come prepared with a second guy.” Dale said he blamed himself for not asking enough questions about the task, but during the task a few other things didn't go as hoped. The exchanges that followed made him feel uncomfortable “so I actually downloaded an app on my phone to record conversations.” Despite this intense encounter Dale recalled that by “the end of it, she was quite pleased. She was like, hey, you did a great job. You know, if I ever need you again, I would definitely hire you again.” As he arrived

at this conclusion, I couldn't help but think it was the ending to a different story. However, Dale was convinced that the client's gesture was genuine: "Then the next day I got a one star. I just got one star and I did try to email customer support." He offered to share the recording, but customer support advised him that "we can't change it because that's someone's opinion and that's just how they feel." Dale said that he "found that very frustrating, I was upset for a while. But I just kind of had to move on." The platform's chat feature facilitates a connection to their clients, whereas the reputation scores create an estrangement from themselves.

Fourcade and Healy (2017) claim that consumers feel credit scores speak to their character because they record behavior, and behavior is seen to flow from conscious choices, so scores become ethically meaningful indexes of one's character (p. 24). This assumption matches the reality, although the extent to which consumers identify their credit score as an index of their character would benefit from further empirical investigation. Consumers do not know how FICO™ calculates these scores and can therefore have some distance from the numeric. In the case of TaskRabbit, the platform is transparent about how scores are calculated. Taskers feel like their reputation scores do speak to their character, to the point where they distance themselves from any negativity. Bad scores produce reactions of disbelief, and a sense of distrust in the clients who assigned anything less than perfect score. As will be shown in the following section, when the algorithms that score freelancers lack transparency (for example when they are treated as trade secrets), the platform rather than the client becomes the object of distrust. An entirely different set of feelings and responses materialize through a classification struggle over what counts as reputation. The following section turns to a discussion of freelancers' experiences with scoring technologies.

7. Freelancers: Obtrusive surveillance, unobtrusive tracking

7.1 Working in plain sight

Independent professionals can expect to conduct their work free from supervision or oversight because they are evaluated on the outcome of their work (Pichault & Mckeown, 2019). In spite of this expectation, Upwork utilizes surveillance technologies to supervise and control the labour process in a variety of ways. Infringement on freelancers' autonomy is most stark when Upwork's Work Diary is activated. This surveillance technology routinely takes screenshots of a worker's interface every ten minutes, and tracks the number of keystrokes and mouse clicks. When Work Diary is activated, payment is guaranteed and therefore some workers have a positive attitude towards it. Others see it as a violation of privacy, or a negation of their autonomy. Events planner Nicola describes how she manages the system: "if I have let's say five hourly contracts, so I cannot track my hours for all the five simultaneously. So, there is a menu. You choose the contractor you're working on and you put on the green button. That means you look for this particular project and the tracking goes to this particular project." Nicola feels like the benefit of guaranteed pay outweighs the cost to privacy: "It does it automatically [takes screenshots]. It's pretty loud. So sometimes you jump. But I think it's a kind of a protection. And I think it is rather a good thing for freelancers." Upwork cunningly puts users in a position to choose between payment protection or privacy, knowing that the most precarious workers will almost certainly choose the former. For Nicola, although she finds it intrusive, and the loud camera shutter is a constant reminder of being watched remotely, payment protection is deemed to be more important than privacy.

Digital surveillance tools disrupt the idea of working on one's own terms: "Those times when my wife will come downstairs just to even ask me a short question, it no longer feels like I'm doing this casual thing for myself. It really does feel like I'm on someone else's clock now...it destroys that feeling of, I work for myself kind of thing. I'm very aware that the timer is on" (Sandy). Here we can see how the home is becoming a site of surveillance, which negates Sandy's sense of working for himself, on his own time. Scholars of the digital economy (Wood et al., 2019; Gandini, 2018) rightfully point out that this form of monitoring lends itself to more repetitive work tasks, like data entry, and gig workers can circumvent the surveillance function in numerous, often deceptive and imaginative ways. Arnold feels undermined by the function and makes it clear to clients he will not turn it on: "I refuse to sit there and be counted like a little monkey" (Arnold). He likens digital work surveillance to being an animal in the zoo gawked at by visitors. However, he simply asks clients to trust him and they go along with his request; he thereby operates outside the platform's recommended parameters and feels free from oversight.

These same remote workers are subject to many other forms of oversight, tracking and measurement that they do not conceive as surveillance. Freelancers may have some choice when it comes to deactivating Work diary, but there is no opt-out option with more covert platform tracking practices. As previously identified, various online activities are tracked for evaluation purposes, such as the frequency of browsing job boards, and ratios of jobs applied to jobs secured. These measurements carry some weight toward a worker's 'job success score,' which is the prime determinant used by clients when making hiring decisions (Gandini 2018). While workers expressed distaste about Upwork's invasive 'Work Diary' system, they are indifferent to being tracked through these other information management tools. They do not perceive unobtrusive data collecting practices as surveillance, and this reinforces their perception of being

free from oversight. Although freelancer activity is under observation, the absence of intrusive cameras as well as direct human oversight creates a sense of freedom.

Freelancers may have an aversion to obtrusive optical surveillance, but are largely incognizant about unobtrusive tracking. When asked how they feel about the ways platforms collect data, common responses across both platforms include, “So I don't share too much” (Arnold), or “I guess it might be interesting to see what data they're collecting” (Dale, TaskRabbit). Sometimes workers joke that they hoped their banking details were safe, or “I do not reveal much in the chat or in the bio, [since] there's nothing really to hide” (Marty). What freelancers comprehend as data are the things they actively volunteer to the platform. Tracked data is not. Although freelancers agree to these conditions when they accept the terms of service and therefore consent to tracking, freelancers are either indifferent or blind to these conditions. Someone like Arnold, who sternly objects to ‘Work Diary’ because he did not like to be “counted like a monkey,” is not fazed by being counted in less obtrusive ways. The repercussions of this unobtrusive counting are wide reaching, because they shape his reputation score. Without being seen to do so, these unassuming tracking practices give platforms the power to influence chances of success in online labour marketplaces.

When I told Sandy about some of the ways Upwork tracks users, he responded, “I know there's nothing really to hide. So, I mean, and you know it, I'm doing it all for work” (Sandy). When asked about being tracked outside of work contexts, specifically through a COVID-19 track and trace app, Sandy replied: “It's weird because this seemed like very probably not aligned with my Upwork answer but, I just feel like it's weird to know that, like I'm being tracked and my data is just out there for other people's consumption.... It feels different.” Yet Upwork users *are* tracked for platform consumption and evaluation, which Sandy justified as “doing it for

work.” He condones Upwork’s surveillance practices using a rationale that validates the site as an actual workplace rather than a marketplace. Yet freelancers only ever imagine Upwork as an intermediary—as a marketplace and not as a workplace. Searching job boards, applying to jobs, chatting with clients, or negotiating contracts are time-consuming processes, but work is only ever conceptualized as the paid portion where freelancers apply their craft. They denounce the platform for having any sort of authority or influence over their work, but the information management tools that collect data and exert control do just that, as Sandy’s statement above attests.

7.2 In algorithms we do not trust

Freelancers are indifferent toward data tracking, but they protest the logic of the algorithms that use this data to calculate their job success score. When Nicola queried Upwork support about the loss of her Rising Star talent badge, it was explained to her that the three projects with no activity and no recent income were lowering her JSS. An Upwork community forum (knowledge base) affirms this position: “Contracts with *no earnings* and *no feedback* can significantly lower the JSS because they indicate client dissatisfaction” (Upwork Inc. 2021e). Inactivity on an open contract is framed as “dissatisfaction,” and negatively impacts reputation. Freelancers challenge this framing. They perceive an open contract to indicate satisfaction because of its potential for future business: “Why would it count against us? We’re keeping the project open on your platform to make you money...that’s the insanity of it” (Arnold). Upwork advised Nicola to contact her clients and ask them to close the contract. She decided “I was not going to contact my client and ruin my [actual] reputation in order to make Upwork happy.” Requesting clients to close the contract not only seems counterintuitive; the act of making this request is also deemed inappropriate, and potentially harmful to a worker’s own understanding of

reputation. Nicola is making a distinction between what counts as good behaviour to the platform, and what counts as good behaviour to her own freelancer sensibilities. Keeping the contract open negatively impacts the job success score and therefore her online reputation, but requesting to close the contract is perceived as being bad for her actual reputation.

The competing frames of platform algorithms and freelancer intuition is most evident in Nicola's predicament since COVID-19: "The events industry is not really flourishing at the moment. And when I finally managed to speak to customer service, they say that it means a project has no activity." Nicola is referring to "it" as the reduction in her JSS as a result of an open contract with no activity, because large-scale in-person gatherings and events that she is paid to plan were immediately cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions. She continues, "It's not the project with no activity. It's just a COVID situation. It couldn't be activity on events. You know, use the logic." Disembedded from real world contexts, and blind to disruptive events, algorithmic logic works to counter to Nicola's intuition. The events Nicola is working on may still take place in the future, physically or virtually, and therefore closing off the contract could mean she loses that future business. Although Nicola and Arnold disagree with the platform's logic, in order to be successful and achieve high status they must align their actions with the interests and values of the platform, even though doing so goes against their better judgement.

Nicola does have the option to close off the contract herself; however, doing so would cause additional damage to her reputation on Upwork. As Sandy notes, "This is the other thing, if I close out a contract, then I'm docked for it. The client has to close out the contract." Freelancers are penalized when no client feedback is left, which is presumed to indicate dissatisfaction. This practice goes against the old business adage that when a client has a complaint, they'll tell ten people, but when they receive good treatment, they tell only one. A

few months into working with Upwork, Sandy had completed a dozen or so contracts, but some remained open: “I think four or five and just wanted to get them out of my queue. And I dropped like 20 percent in my job success score because I didn't have that many jobs at the time. So they looked really bad to me.” Sandy’s score dropped because clients did not leave ratings or reviews. His low number of completed jobs meant the weight of these contracts had a harsh effect on his JSS, and speaks to the vulnerability of new platform workers in establishing a reputation. At the time, Sandy did not know the consequences of his actions. When he called Upwork about the drop in JSS “they were very upfront and saying, look, we will not divulge how the job success score is calculated. They will never tell you the exact way. But that was part of it.” This 20% drop in his JSS, which had nothing to do with his relationship to clients or the quality of his work, indicates the power of platforms to compel workers to comply with their rules and work patterns, much of which go against freelancers’ own intuitions and policies.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that, “As the details of our daily lives become more transparent to the organizations surveilling us, their own activities become less and less easy to discern” (Bauman & Lyon, 2012, p.23). Such “algorithmic processes are increasingly determining which rung we occupy on the social ladder, or how social constructs such as risk and productivity are determined” (Lupton, 2014, p. 103). Despite the pervasiveness and potential consequences of these processes, Lupton (2014) states “the fact that the processing operations performed by computers and software are considered ‘neutral, authoritative and always accurate’ means that they are rarely questioned” (p. 105). For freelancers, when algorithms affect something as important and intimate as their personal reputation, these processes create a sense of intrusion that does bring algorithms into question. While freelancers may lack power to effect changes to the way algorithms calculate scores, at least at an individual level, they have

demonstrated recalcitrance by circumventing platform expectations. For example, some freelancers may refuse to contact clients and ask them to close off a perfectly good arrangement. However, actions that go against Upwork's expectations or interests come at significant cost to opportunities and chances of success in their online labour marketplace.

Opaque algorithms and information asymmetries have hindered freelancers ability to manage their reputations, and this has led to a lack of trust in the company. Upwork's mission statement asserts that the company "responds to a need to bring visibility and trust to remote work" (Upwork Inc, 2021b). Here they take visibility and trust to be synonymous with one another, but this pronounced value of transparency is not extended to workers, who themselves lack trust in the very numbers that encapsulate and represent their personal reputation. Upwork's opaque scoring technology means workers struggle to exert control over or make sense of their very own reputations. Making scores visible by attaching them to a person's profile invokes emotions by design, but rather than emotion spurring on heightened productivity and achievement (Han, 2017), this lack of transparency diminishes trust in the platform. As a PhD in mathematics and a former Olympic athlete, Nicola trusts numbers, and she trusts machines that measure performance, but she has no trust in scores produced by Upwork's algorithm. While I was meeting with her on Zoom, Nicola opened up her profile and read aloud her most recent client feedback: "5 star...5 star...4.25 stars...the system is not logical and not reliable." Nicola's JSS was at 82% at that time, and she observes a disconnect between how clients and algorithms rate her performance. Freelancers are comfortable with being evaluated by clients, but this sentiment from Marty captures the general feeling about being evaluated by algorithms: "That's horrifying, but that's life, right?" Marty calculated his average client feedback score at 84% over the previous 12 months, but "Not according to the crazy algorithm," he said, which had him

down as 56%. This is a predicament not faced by taskers, who know which data-points the company is tracking, allowing them to make informed decisions about strategies that will build their reputation and achieve the illustrious talent badges. Not-knowing does not nudge freelancers toward self-policing, as argued elsewhere (Shapiro, 2018); in fact, it leads to confusion and frustration because their success is decoupled from their work. Algorithms are nothing but opinions imbedded in code (O’Neil, 2016). They consist of some definition of success and tools to capture the relevant data. Upwork programmers responsible for building the JSS algorithms have their definition of success, but their definition contrasts with what workers understand as job success. The quantification practices of platforms come into conflict with the qualities which gig workers expect to inform their reputation. Workers feel deceived that behaviours unrelated to the paid job generate rewards in the form of symbolic capital, and suggest this capital is misrecognized as such, because it does not pertain to competence in their particular field.

The struggle for reputation to be tied to their skills and work output rather than an obscure mathematical calculation is the site of a classification struggle (Bourdieu, 1985) in the online labour marketplace. Bourdieu (1985) argues that the rights to determine the correct symbolic order is conferred to the state, who has the monopoly over legitimate naming, correct classification and the correct order (p.734). The conferral of the official classification of occupations, certifications and academic qualifications are still in the hands of the state; however, in the platform economy the power of naming or nomination is increasingly tied to numerical indicators, which are determined by powerful platforms. Numbers, not titles, are used to determine the official status that people can hold within the field of online marketplaces. Isolated freelancers struggle over “the definition of the legitimate principles of division of the

field” (p.734), such as the correct way to recognize and classify work successes, but the social order is determined by an algorithmic authority.

When platforms fail to disclose how the JSS is calculated, workers with low scores maintain a sense of self-worth and dignity by disavowing the logic of the algorithms. When discussing the stats presented on his profile, Marty states “I think I replied fairly quickly to your message, but I think if you take longer than 24 hours it hurts you, which has nothing really to do with the output of your work...so the algorithm is out of control.” By “hurting” he means his JSS will be negatively impacted, a familiar sentiment that shows how workers see a disconnect between work output, or what they are paid to do, and their reputation. This disavowal also negates the authority of the platform, much like the opening lines of Arnold’s profile, which were displayed earlier: “Ignore the Job Satisfaction Score and please read my [client] feedback - this speaks volumes for the work I do, rather than a mathematical calculation. Seriously!” In another work environment, an act of resistance that undermines the company would count against the worker, but Arnold showcases his position as an independent person without ties or commitment to the platform. However, his infuriation reinforces the importance and power these numbers hold over him. What counts as work to the platform, and more importantly, what counts toward reputation, are not what matter to freelancers. Even so, with little regard for the labour performed, the job satisfaction scores are increasingly orientated around toward satisfying platforms’ interests as well as clients.’

Freelancers question the logic and diminish the significance of algorithmic management by pointing to how actual people’s evaluation of their work matters most. This line of questioning offers freelancers some comfort and helps them save face when platforms evaluate them poorly. However, this separation creates a false dichotomy because both measures count

toward reputation. It is the data from the perceived non-work activities that algorithms can count, and therefore lend themselves to objective measurement and evaluation. Although these activities require time, energy and resources, freelancers follow the same line as the platforms in that they only conceptualize work as the actual paid task that clients hire them to do, rather than an extended understanding that captures these other broader labour processes. Because the platform activities that direct behaviour are not understood to be work, the illusion of freedom from oversight remains while control persists.

Platforms understand that workers are dependent on a strong reputation in order to secure employment, and by inserting their own motives and interests into the mechanisms that shape personal reputation they utilize this power to make workers compliant. If freelancers refuse direction they are penalized. If adhered to they are rewarded. Rather than functioning as intermediaries that merely connect workers with clients, online marketplaces like Upwork behave like workplaces in their abilities to discipline and control behaviours—albeit remotely, through data rather than human supervision.

The previous two sections have demonstrated how reputation scores generate powerful emotive and performative effects on individual behaviour. In what follows, we will see why accumulation of this form of capital is especially important for a gig worker's autonomy.

8. Classification situations

8.1 The talent

Gig workers accrue symbolic and material benefits from the rank and status associated with their reputation score and talent badges, just as people accrue benefits from their social position (Bourdieu, 1986). As a form of symbolic power, reputation capital is a resource that workers can deploy within the parameters of the specific platform where it's accumulated. Whereas this capital represents a worker's value or valuation and is a resource for them to deploy, classification situations refer to market outcomes and value extractability resulting from this capital. Personal worth is encoded in metrics from previously captured and measured activity, and the subsequent valuation produces different market opportunities and outcomes. Not only do the classification schemes bring about reactive and performative effects in workers; Fourcade and Healy (2017) show that in credit markets the consumer data gathered are fed back into organizational systems and processed in ways that differentiate terms of service, and prices of financial products. (p. 14). Across all modern institutions and industries various forms of scores arise from digital records. The digital economy's classificatory architecture produces classification situations based on this data and people are organized into new types of categories that come with different rewards and punishments. In online labour marketplaces, these digital records produce different terms of service, job opportunities and income, along with a promise of a certain degree of autonomy.

Reputation scores matter for gig workers' autonomy in two fundamental ways. First, to secure the contracts where workplace autonomy is experienced, workers need to be visible on the platform, which requires robust metrics because workers' reputation scores are ranked by

algorithmic management tools. Second, as I discuss in this section, gig workers with high scores benefit from terms of service that are in their favour: such as more job offers, choice, flexibility, and control over their data self. As a form of symbolic power, reputation scores act as bargaining power: people with high job success scores appear at the top of client searches and therefore stand a better chance of gaining favourable jobs and negotiating with clients. Workers with low scores, however, experience less favourable conditions. In these instances, a worker's classification produces situations where top-rated workers experience a fuller, richer sense of autonomy. However, as I will show below, new workers, or low status workers, are still valuable from a client perspective. Clients can extract more value and exploit workers who lack reputation capital more intensively.

A comprehensive list of Upwork's talent badge "perks" can be found on their 'help' site (Upwork Inc. 2021f). They include, but are not limited to: access to a specialized customer support team; reduced fees on certain jobs (10% rather than 20%); prioritization for projects (algorithmic management); customized job digest emails; and the option to periodically remove one client's written feedback from their profile and rating from their job success score. For those with top-rated or top-rated plus scores, they also have 'talent managers' searching for jobs on their behalf, also known as "headhunters" (Arnold). In addition, top-rated talent receive more 'invites' to jobs because algorithmic management tools mean they feature more prominently on client search lists. This is not listed as a perk for talent badge holders, but a general system that reinforces the position of those occupying the top rungs of the ladder. Jack, the one top-rated badge holder I interviewed, has not bid on a project in over a year, and has turned down numerous offers. Unlike TaskRabbit, Upwork does not penalize freelancers for turning down job

invites. A query about this practice was raised on a knowledge forum, and Upwork's position was confirmed by a forum contributor.

Jack is a telemarketer. The title does not do justice to the scope of work conducted out of his home office in Brampton, Ontario: "If you look at the clients that are posting the jobs, they'll say what they're looking for. You have to figure out if what you have is going to help them generate money, help them either save money, improve their efficiency or generate money. If you can do those three things, and you can articulate, you can find customers and get things kicked off." Jack develops entire marketing plans from scratch. He's articulate and confident, just like the other freelancers I interviewed, but unlike some of the others he is also successful on the platform, as his 99% JSS and top-rated talent badge indicate. When clients search for promising freelancers, he expects they first look at the JSS score, then hourly rate, and then location: "so I try to keep my initial rate competitive, but then after a conversation, I try to charge much more. I try to charge something which is within the realm of reality-based work being done." What Wood et al. (2019) refer to as algorithmic management Jack calls "search engine optimization." He said "because I'm highly ranked, I appear on the top of searches. When people review my Upwork profile, Upwork gives you metrics. The majority of people who look at my profile reach out to me." His reputation score first of all makes him visible, and then it gives him bargaining power, enabling him to negotiate better contracts, including remuneration. Knowing plenty more invites are on the table, he has the freedom to turn offers down.

In contrast to other freelancers, who find clients and contracts from other sources in addition to Upwork, Jack operates solely through Upwork, but he's under no illusions about their relationship: "It's not so much loyalty" he said, when I asked him about his commitment to Upwork. He goes on to explain: "It's [Upwork] essentially a door-to-door marketplace.

Essentially, they're pimping us out, that's all. We're just human cattle and it's whatever we can generate. It'll probably come to a point where you have to generate a specific amount of money for them or they'll just delete you from the platform.” Jack’s success blinds him to the fact this is already happening. Without generating regular income for the platform, without successful bids or having your profile being overlooked, workers are rendered invisible and the chances of success are slim.

8.2 Door-to-door marketplace

Devotion to one platform compromises the ability to work across multiple platforms, or maintain a more secure part- or full-time job alongside Upwork and TaskRabbit, both of which are common and desirable to many independent contractors. Full-time freelancer Marty insists on using Upwork as “just part of my channel.” This decision seems arbitrary, but he wants to freelance on his own terms: “Give me my freedom, give me my space. I want it to be on my terms.” Being independent but working through a single platform is counterintuitive. The notions of freedom which are important to Marty and others represent a form of self-governance one might expect freelancers to hold dear—to meander, to roam freely and negotiate the world of work on one’s own terms, and importantly, not to rely on a sole source for your entire income—an imperative of independent contractor status (Pichault & Mckeown, 2019). While workers do not profess any loyalty or commitment to their respective platforms, a demonstrated commitment to Upwork is required in order to attain the high status that enables more fully realized work autonomy. Arnold notes how Upwork recently changed their JSS calculation by “giving more weight to higher paying jobs.” Some jobs, like spending one hour being interviewed about gig work for instance, carry little weight, unlike a fixed price job worth thousands of dollars. These larger projects require a certain amount of resources and level of commitment, and as Arnold

points out “a lot of people only do small value jobs because maybe they don’t have as much time to devote to it [the platform].” This weighting creates a bias toward those willing and able to commit time and resources solely to Upwork. Unfortunately for Arnold and other freelancers, embracing their freedom to seek income through multiple marketplaces hinders the pathway to better job outcomes within a single platform ecosystem.

The freedom and desire to move between platforms is not exclusive to professional freelance work. Taskers prefer not to depend on a sole source of work either, because they can optimize their income moving across multiple platforms, and having options lends them a sense of job security. The rise of the app-based gig economy has brought about an abundance of app-based companies to choose from, which enables tasker Geoffrey to make himself available for TaskRabbit from 10 am to 5 pm. After that, to take advantage of Uber’s algorithmic management “surge” pricing (see Rosenbalt & Stark, 2015; Attoh et al., 2019), he turns on his Uber app between 5 to 7 pm. Geoffrey claimed “it’s [TaskRabbit] almost at the point where I could just do it full-time,” but this strategy works better for his income goals.

Contrary to the app-based gig work creating a sense of precarity and vulnerability (Shor, 2020), tasker Marina works across four platforms and says that the range of options brings her security. “If I get a bad reputation on one app there are plenty more,” Marina said. Unlike the FICO credit score, or China’s social credit score, reputation capital is only recognized as symbolic capital in the specific online labour platform where it was accrued, not the marketplace more generally. For this reason, it is not a fully institutionalized form of cultural capital because it cannot be deployed outside of the virtual place where it is accumulated, and it cannot be converted into economic capital outside of a clearly delimited environment. Because reputation does not travel between online labour marketplaces, workers feel protected should there be a lack

of job availability (see Lehdonvirta, 2018), or worse, should their account be deactivated (see Veen et al., 2019).

8.3 The lumpenproletariat

Whereas Jack extracts value from clients through the symbolic power encapsulated in his 99% JSS and top-rated talent badge, clients can extract extra value from low-ranking labour in sinister ways. “It’s kind of why I kinda get into these hourly contracts and then I kinda end up regretting it,” Sandy said. He said there have been times when he has finished the project he signed up to do, and then asked for something completely unrelated to the contract or his skill set. He said it can get “a little weird” when contracts are left open, but he also knows better than to close them out after his previous reprimanding. After completing one contract, something out of the blue was asked “and then I was asked if I could do graphic design work for logos. And I thought, like, no, that’s not even remotely the same thing.” Sandy describes his conundrum: “So you either have to decline them, and then if you decline them, that could hurt your [client] rating.... You also know that they’re the ones holding your reputation.” In this case he declined the logo offer, and the client still gave him 5 stars. However, in other instances he was penalized by clients who gave just one star based on his refusal to do work he never agreed to do in the first place.

Classification situations take power from independent workers and empower the client and platform. Marty recalls a job: “I’m doing something for people where I’m basically creating a customer database for them. I’ll send them the list and I’ll work like 30, 40 hours on it and I’ll show them the work as I’m going along, like in Google Sheets.” Marty likes to reassure his clients by giving them access to his work progress. He goes on, “and then I press the button to kind of end the project. And here it is. Here you go. And they’ll come back and they’ll say, oh,

no, this isn't any good. You need to do more.” This happened to him on three separate occasions, “and each time I complained, they wrote up bad reviews, which were totally untrue. And then you have no recourse.” When Marty attempted to get recourse by raising a dispute through the platform arbitrations process, his complaints led to massive reductions in his JSS, despite Upwork siding with him.

Marty has found himself on the end of some unrealistic client expectations, and paid the price for not playing along. He was hired on a fixed priced market research project developing a spreadsheet of North American footwear companies. After Marty had sent the completed spreadsheet “the guy refused to pay. I had done the work. I sent him the information. And after I sent it to him, he goes, Oh, I made a mistake. Oh, you'll have to redo everything.” The client took full responsibility for the error yet expected Marty to atone for the mistake by doing free labour. Marty can't stand being “bullied” which is one reason independent work suits him. He told the client, “fine so long as they pay for the work done.” But “he said no, he didn't have to do it because he was the client. And he goes, you have a bad JSS score. I'll make it even worse.” Marty's sub-80% score meant he was in a vulnerable position, and the client dangled the threat of a low rating in order to exploit Marty further. But, he had none of it. The dialogue was recorded in Upwork's chat, so feeling confident about a favourable decision, Marty filed a dispute with the communications as evidence. Arbitration decided the client should pay half. But as Marty says, “after you have a problem like that, your JSS score drops by 15 percentage points in general just from me standing up for myself. So you asked me, do I want to be with Upwork? I'd rather be in a prison job.” Here, the platform hierarchy reveals itself as a punitive and powerful agent that shapes reputation. This time, the reputation isn't shaped by algorithms, but rather by human decision-making at the platform management level. This important instance of

platform management intervention clearly contradicts the presumed idea that reputation is at the sole mercy of the client (Wood et al., 2019, Schörpf et al., 2019), and it reveals itself as a ‘confidence trickster’—a person or institution that defrauds or deceives by persuading someone to believe something that is not true. Marty went into the process confident he would get a fair hearing from an independent adjudicator. By nature of its definition arbitration demands intervention from an independent voice; a neutral, impartial body to weigh up the evidence and offer an informed, disinterested decision. Yet Upwork has a vested interest in the outcome, and despite the client’s admission of guilt, and threatening behaviour, Marty was punished. The company manipulates its middleman framing to give a perception of independence, and then uses their position to discipline disruptive workers in ways that damage their reputation and limit future work opportunities.

Even with very low capital, someone may actually be very valuable from the point of view of their classification in the market (Fourcade & Healy, 2017). Here, Fourcade and Healy are referring to individual-level data collected in digital records as capital. As in the credit market, a person with a bad score might be valuable for that very reason to a particular kind of company. For instance charging extortionate interest rates to low scoring and therefore high risk consumers. With his sub-80% score I was curious to know how Marty even secured the footwear contract. Marty tells me “the guy liked my profile.” It surprised me that a client would consider a low-ranking worker, despite the fact Marty has other stand-out credentials and resources to offer, including access to valuable, niche databases and expensive market research software. According to freelancers I interviewed, even relatively low value contracts can receive 20 or 30 bids, and they set their pay rate as low as it can go in order to remain competitive. Then Marty adds, “and this guy didn’t trust me.” He recounts their conversation: “I can hire you as a

researcher, and he said, but you have to get up at five o'clock in the morning and start researching with me.” Marty had mentioned to the client that he is a night owl, and the client said, “I don't trust people who are nighthawks.” But Marty felt that was just an excuse. He thought his low score put him in a position to be taken advantage of. His position meant the client exerted more control over the work conditions. Marty responded in his straightforward manner: “I said if you want that kind of control. You can't be a control freak. You need to hire a person.” Marty is pointing to his legal classification as an independent contractor, and saying if someone wants to exercise such control over him, then they are entering into a different type of relationship.

Clients are in a better position to extract more work from vulnerable freelancers, but Marty is a seasoned freelancer and does not tolerate this sort of behaviour—which he claims only to have experienced in the platform economy: “I'm not kidding. Oh, it's like it's like being in a pool with a bunch of piranhas. It's miserable.” Inevitably, Marty backed out and cancelled the contract, which hurt his score further. Unlike top-rated Jack, who experiences a great deal of flexibility and choice in his work, low ranking and new freelancers without reputation capital are more susceptible to this sort of behaviour. If Jack did find himself in this position, he could have taken advantage of his top-rated status and removed the low rating from his JSS: “If I got a rating today that was one star, I could take it off and be removed from visibility and be taken out of whatever algorithm feeds that job success score.” Here Jack confirms the statement found in the terms and conditions, and is an an example of success breeding success, at the same time as performance is decoupled from success. Talent badges and JSS function like symbolic capital and secure all sorts of material and symbolic profits (Bourdieu, 1985). Only the top 10% (or 3%

and 1% for the premium talent badges) of workers are allocated the badge and with it a symbolic scarcity that governs the rewards of the platform workers.

Marty is on his way out of the working world, but what of people like him who aren't on the road to retirement? Where does a new generation of global freelancers turn when their accounts are deactivated? There is a whole underclass of “lumpenscoretariat” (Fourcade, 2017, p.19) whose resources are below the threshold to be considered connectable by online labour platforms. Arnold recalls some bogus invitations he had received over the past year: “I got sick and tired of people inviting you to chat ‘cause they got such a great project” he said. But these great projects turn out to be “scams” from freelancers who have been removed from Upwork “and you find out they’ve been banned from Upwork” and they say “can you get projects for me and I’ll pay you through Freelancer [a competitor site].” Arnold has learned to ignore these messages, but it speaks to a desperate class of people who need access to work, but the gatekeepers have shut them out. It also speaks to the potential for freelancers to outsource projects to others who face barriers to accessing the platform, operating as an additional intermediary, within the already exploitative platform model.

9. Conclusion

Management and control techniques facilitated through information communication technologies make it possible to outsource work to the unknown masses. Reputation systems are the primary mechanism of control that hold workers accountable to platform and client interests. In the absence of direct supervision, surveillance and tracking features are built into online labour marketplaces, some of which mirror direct supervision (i.e. Work Diary), while others are more subtle (i.e. tracking and measuring response times). Freelancers can circumvent the more obtrusive Work Diary surveillance, which is only activated on the clients' time. However, workers on both platforms are accountable to metrics that surveil behaviours more discreetly. Objective platform metrics that capture activity data converge with subjective client evaluations in order to shape reputation and influence behaviour. Online reputation is not “completely and utterly at the clients' mercy” (Schörpf et al., 2017, p. 55), as some scholars claim.

In order to succeed in the gig economy, workers must establish a strong reputation by meeting the dual expectations of both clients and platforms. However, reputation becomes difficult to manage when confounded by platforms' opaque scoring technologies that fail to disclose how reputation scores are calculated. One's position in objective social space is challenged when a worker's perception of their own self, and place, is distorted by classification systems that decouple work performed from success. Unlike taskers, who have full knowledge of how their reputation is constituted, freelancers in no way perceive their scores as a reflection of their character—though they do recognize that potential clients will base their hiring decisions on the assumption that these representations are accurate—and therefore they direct feelings of frustration and disillusionment at the algorithm that calculates their reputation, rather than

clients. The numbers that are supposed to create trust in the marketplace, because they should represent past work successes and therefore predictability, are deemed illogical and actually create institutional distrust between freelancers and platforms. To their own detriment, workers sometimes act in ways that are counter to what platforms expect. Technology, rather than people, become the target of their frustrations. When gig workers know how reputation scores are calculated, they experience distress at anything less than a perfect score. When scores are less than perfect, clients, rather than technology, are deemed to be illogical in their reasoning. However, the visibility of scores on profiles does spur on a heightened productivity and efficiency—a determination to do whatever it takes for the perfect score.

Gig workers are expected to behave in ways that align with client and platform expectations in order to be visible and boost their scores, yet surprisingly they feel free from the platform's influence. To explain this unexpected outcome I offer five reasons: 1) Workers subscribe to the institutional discourse and perceive the platform as an intermediary rather than an employer, and therefore it is not recognized as an authority. However, operating outside of the 'recommended' parameters set by the platform means they find it increasingly difficult to succeed in the platform ecosystem. 2) Every task and contract must follow standardized processes which are monitored and evaluated by the platform. The tracked activities that take place through the platform require time, energy and resources, but freelancers only think of "work" as the actual time spent producing the thing they were hired to do; therefore, meeting job application quotas and responding to clients speedily evades workers' consciousness as 'work,' despite the time pressures exerted on their work and non-work lives. 3) Unobtrusive data collection means surveillance and oversight are not fully felt. In the absence of a startling camera shutter taking images of the computer interface, or a supervisor looking over one's shoulder,

freedom from supervision and direction is felt, despite the intent of these tracking technologies to ultimately shape behaviours. 4) Opaque algorithms used to score and classify workers are deemed illogical and therefore their influence is undermined. Gig workers believe they should be evaluated on work produced for or delivered to the client—the work outcome—but in practice they are also evaluated on the entire labour process, which aligns more closely with being an employee, and not an independent worker. 5) Gig workers typically like to roam free and find security and better money by sourcing income from multiple sources. Workers feel no commitment to any one platform; however, workers require high reputation scores in order to benefit from a fuller, richer sense of autonomy, and gaining high status entails a commitment to a single platform ecosystem.

Upwork and TaskRabbit afford workers more autonomy than some other gig economy platforms. This freedom is especially apparent in the experience of taskers who find greater independence than other task-based apps like Uber and Instacart. Perceived autonomy exists in relation to what else is available, and on this basis, TaskRabbit offers much greater freedom, especially through the ability to exchange texts with clients. The constraints introduced by platform intermediation are most poignantly articulated by the freelancers who have transitioned from a pre-digital age. While they now benefit from a ready pool of clients, various monitoring, evaluation and disciplinary controls and expectations are channeled through reputation systems in ways that impinge on notions of independence. Freelancers are a class of workers whose freedoms are diminishing as a result of platform intermediation, while conversely, low-skilled workers find increasing freedoms. Without the platform economy, it would have been unfathomable for strangers to connect with other strangers in these ways, and allow people to generate an income. However, while workplace flexibilization has extended to more occupation

types, this freedom and autonomy does not stretch across class lines, as evidenced by the socio-economic status of gig economy workers.

How can we explain the rise and initial success of lean platform companies? Speculating about the future of platform types, Nick Srnicek (2017) argues that lean asset-less companies like Upwork and TaskRabbit have no future because they simply siphon off value rather than create new value. By outsourcing all costs, once venture capital funding slows, in the long run lean platforms will become more expensive than traditional service work (p. 112). Srnicek (2017) identifies the surplus working and unemployed population after the 2009 recession—what might be called the ‘post-industrial reserve army of labour’—as one of the driving factors behind this rise. If his theory is right, then this rise in number of platforms and their soaring market capitalization could be explained in part by a surplus population looking for work as mass layoffs across industries take effect. A shift toward independent contracting saves companies from providing stable jobs and creates the conditions whereby this is the norm, enforcing a market to create precarious jobs. However, over the same nine-month period between March and December 2020, reduced job postings drastically slowed work opportunities for the five Upwork freelancers I interviewed. When clients retreat from the labour marketplace, the conditions necessary for the two-sided market and network effect that platforms rely upon is not met. The effect is an increased supply of labour forcing down the value of labour.

The emergence and success of platforms might be explained by the failure for cities and states to re-classify gig workers as employees, or the wholesale shift to remote work arrangements since COVID-19. The failure to re-classify independent contractors as employees is a major boon for platforms and their funders, who continue to profit from deeply exploitative labour relations—although many lawsuits are in process around the world. The most noticeable

and significant work trend resulting from the COVID-19 crisis is the shift to remote work arrangements. Upwork and TaskRabbit specialize in these work arrangements, and analyzing the conditions of this remote work is highly relevant to understanding contemporary digital labour economies. What Upwork offers is a model for how to monitor and manage remote workers, which is the situation most traditional companies and institutions find themselves in. So even if the intention of organizations is not to transition to an outsourcing model, as IKEA has done with its purchase of TaskRabbit, we still have much to learn about the complex techniques by which workers are managed and regulated remotely. The current pandemic presents an important time to learn how the social relations and organization of remote work in the platform economy are experienced from the standpoint of workers. My thesis documents, contextualizes, and interprets the experiences and expressions of workers caught in the headlights of this new, flourishing and alarming work classification situation, which creates an order of worth unlike anything we've seen before.

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Appendix A: Dimensions of workplace autonomy matrix

High Autonomy ←————→ Low Autonomy			
Work status			
Independent contractor	Supported independent contractor	Temporary worker	Regular employee
Private insurance	Insurance packages via third parties	Discontinuous access to social rights	Continuous access to social rights
Diversity of clients		Economic dependency/ sole client	
Deliberate choice		Forced choice	
Work content			
Broad guidelines allowing job crafting (low vertical division)		Detailed specifications preventing job crafting (high vertical division)	
Work pace, workload at own discretion		Work pace, workload imposed by clients	
Mutual adjustment Standardization of norms	Standardization of outcomes		Standardization of work processes Direct supervision
Strong support and/or access to shared expertise and skills standards, high identification to a professional community		Weak support and/or access to shared expertise and skills standards, low identification to a professional community	
Working conditions			
Self-responsibility for developing skills	Access to functional equivalents for skills development	Customized skills development plans based on ad hoc negotiations	Standardized training policies
Self-responsibility for steady income flow	Financial support offered by third parties	Individualized salary packages from interpersonal negotiations	Standardized salary grids
Self-responsibility for time and space arrangements	Access to shared facilities (co-working)	Ad hoc time and space arrangements resulting from interpersonal negotiations	Predetermined work schedules and space arrangements
High Autonomy ←————→ Low Autonomy			

Source: Pichault, Francois, and Tui McKeown. 2019.

Appendix B: Interview participants' profiles

TaskRabbit: Taskers

Name	Jim	Marina	Geoffrey	Rui	Charlotte	Dale
Age	42	20	45	35	35	33
Gender	M	F	M	M	F	M
Education	Collage Diploma	High School	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree	Two Bachelor Degrees	Some College
JSS	100%	100%	99%	98%	74%	99%
Talent Badge	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Other Platforms used	Uber Eats, Rover	Instacart, Door Dash, Rover	Uber, Instacart, Deliveroo	None	None	Craigslist, Tasker, Handy, Hey Brian
Non-platform work	Occasional Temp agency work	None	None	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Occasional temp jobs via friend

Upwork: Freelancers

Name	Arnold	Nicola	Marty	Jack	Sandy
Age	55	48	62	40	32
Gender	M	F	M	M	F
Education	Some College	Doctorate	Master's degree	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree
Occupation	Graphic Designer	Events Planner	Market Researcher	Telemarketer	Data Analyst
JSS	88%	86%	56%	99%	89%
Talent Badge	No	No	No	Yes: Top-Rated	No
Other Platforms used	Craigslist, Kijiji, Freelancer	Freelancer, Fiverr	Craigslist Freelancer, Fiverr	None	None
Non-Platform Work	Part of a freelancer network	None	Part of a freelancer network	None	Full-time employee