

Abstract

At the heart of the platform economy lies the promise of convenience. In the ride-hailing industry, passengers can click a button, and algorithms will go to work seeking potential ride providers. In the food delivery industry, one can order food and get it delivered at your doorstep at neck-breaking speeds. Yet, a deeper look at the digital platforms that make these conveniences possible reveals that the burden of convenience is not evenly distributed. This uneven playfield has been a source of much discontent, as seen in the number of struggles around the world by platform workers.

The struggle of platform workers against platform companies continues to attract growing scholarly attention. Scholars have focused on a range of issues such as how race, gender, and class mediate platform labor and how platformization has redefined the very meaning of labor. Sources of tension between workers and platforms include, among others, issues related to pay, information asymmetries, algorithmic management, and marketplace management. Understandably, most research on platforms has been conducted from the perspective of those most affected by them—platform workers. To understand the working conditions on platforms, some researchers have conducted interviews with platform workers, while others surveyed online forums frequented by platform workers.

This project aims to provide a different perspective of digital platforms. Through a critical analysis of Uber's patents, the researchers aim to view this digital platform from the perspective of its makers. We argue that such a view can supplement existing methodologies for researching digital platforms. While patents are widely used in technology and business environments, these data-rich documents remain relatively under-utilized in the social sciences. However, in recent times, several studies in the social sciences have employed patent data to engage social issues. Similarly, our project will use patent data to probe how discontent is built into the architecture of platforms. While patent data will constitute the backbone of our project, the researchers involved may also supplement with other data sources as they see fit.