

Control and Consent Regime Dynamics within Labour Platforms

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Abstract:

Much is known about how labour platforms use ‘algorithmic management’ to implement rules which govern labour by matching workers (or service providers) with clients (or users). But little is known about *whether* and *how* platform workers engage with these rules by manipulating them to their own advantage, and *how* this accounts for wider ‘regime dynamics’ across (and within) different types of platforms (e.g. on-location and online). Based on a comparative analysis of two food delivery (Deliveroo and Takeaway) and two freelancing (Upwork and Jellow) platforms in Belgium, we discuss the rules platforms use to govern labour and examine what role workers have in shaping a ‘space’ of control over the conduct of their work. Drawing on labour process theory, we argue that this space is shaped by the way in which platforms shift risks onto workers by rules governing access to work through rewards, penalties as well as labour deployment reflecting various contractual statuses. Hence, we explain how workers also shape such spaces by organising consent around these rules, pointing to a ‘social space’ for food delivery workers and a ‘market space’ for self-employed freelancers. These spaces refer to different regime types, i.e. ‘pay-based control’ and ‘time-based control’ for food delivery, and ‘customer-based control’ and ‘task-based control’ for online freelancers. These types are shaped by the control and consent dynamics within labour platforms, reflecting the platforms’ labour governance strategies and workers’ attempts to ensure control over these strategies within the distinctive political institutional realm.

Key words: control, consent, labour process, regime, platform work

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Introduction

Labour platforms are considered to be digital intermediaries for the purchase and sale of typically labour-intensive services, matching clients (or users) and workers (or service providers) (Lehdonvirta et al., 2014; Agrawal et al., 2014). The ability to match clients and workers via digital technologies benefits platforms as it does away with the need for and the responsibility associated with an employment contract (Woodcock and Graham, 2020). As such, labour platforms are considered to resemble a specific platform ‘type’ of governance mechanism (Vallas and Schor, 2020). One distinctive feature is that platforms’ use of digital technologies speeds up matching while overcoming geographical boundaries (Grabher and König, 2020; Stark and Pais, 2021).

Nevertheless, matching users and service providers can be a challenge for platforms (Berg et al., 2018), with information asymmetry reducing trustworthiness in the interaction between workers and clients (Akerlof, 1970). The lack of pre-purchase information on whether potential workers are able to deliver a quality service constrains platforms’ ability to ensure the quality of their services vis-à-vis potential clients (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). At the same time, the fragmentation of tasks among a geographically dispersed population of workers makes it more difficult for platforms to assess overall task quality (Kässi and Lehdonvirta, 2018). Platforms adopt labour-governing ‘algorithmic technologies’ (Graham and Woodcock, 2018) to overcome these difficulties, shaping workers’ behaviours and orientations in different ways (Robinson and Vallas, 2020).

Studies have used labour process theory (LPT) to examine how digital platforms subordinate labour through algorithms (e.g., Heiland, 2021; Shalini and Bathini, 2021). As a key resource for the study of production relations at work in industrial capitalism (Smith, 2015), LPT is considered important for expanding our understanding of the role of platforms in mediating the capital/labour relationship by “practices of ‘managerialization’ and the organisation of work” (Gandini, 2019: 1040). One aspect of ‘algorithmic management’ is that platforms set rules as the terms and conditions to which both clients and – more importantly – workers have to adhere. These rules often involve metrics and ratings to monitor and organise work in a way creating incentives to – and introducing sanctions for workers who do not – act in accordance with a platform’s rules and necessities (Shapiro, 2018). For instance, rating systems and algorithmic control help platforms ensure high degrees of service quality (Wood et al., 2019) by making job access conditional upon high levels of individual performance (Ivanova et al., 2018). At the same time, low-performing workers risk losing their work through access to a platform’s clients being curtailed. While the use of performance measurement systems to monitor compliance with the set terms and conditions is not *per se* new – all companies measure their workers in one way or another –, what is new is that compliance and performance are being increasingly monitored by technical devices, whether the algorithms behind the apps used by food delivery couriers, the wearable devices used in Amazon warehouses, the hand-held devices used in parcel delivery services, or the screenshots taken of teleworkers’ screens.

Rules as practices and policies set by employing organisations to organise work are acknowledged as one of the core forces shaping a 'factory regime' (Burawoy, 1985). A factory (or production) regime refers to the overall political form of production, including both the economic effects of the labour process and the political and institutional apparatuses of production, and the state. This raises a fundamental – yet unresolved – question as to how and to what extent the specific platform 'type' of labour governance shapes a distinctive 'regime' and whether and how it takes into account the overall political form of production, incorporating the organisation of consent, the role of 'games' in the labour process and the wider apparatuses of governance rules. Indeed, the organisation of consent within the framework of labour governance by capital is at the centre of traditional scholarly work on misbehaviour and control (see Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999 – 2nd version 2022).

This article addresses this issue by explaining how the 'regimes' we empirically observe result from specific (platform) rules governing workers' behaviour (Edwards and Scullion, 1982; Thompson and Findlay, 1999); yet, we do also look at how the regime type is shaped by the workers securing the 'space' and control necessary for the generation of consent (Beynon, 1973), via work games and/or 'making out' (Burawoy, 1979). Whereas platforms enable and constrain the use, acquisition and access of competences and resources, workers bring their own distinct resources when performing digitally mediated self-employed platform work (Demirel et al., 2021; Sutherland et al., 2020). Moreover, as we explain, the wider regime dynamics of control and consent include a worker's contractual status set by a government and providing the structural conditions underpinning implementation of these rules. In fact, the employment contract represents an important dimension in labour control (Nichols et al., 2004).

Focusing on both on-location (food delivery) (Deliveroo and Takeaway) and online (remote) freelancing (Upwork and Jellow) platforms in Belgium, the article uses a novel comparative sectoral perspective to explore the dynamics surrounding the organisation of consent by workers providing different services across a variety of platforms featuring different labour governance strategies across (and within) different sectors. In our analysis of the issues involved in the different sectoral and organisational context of platforms, we focus on two dimensions to date marginalised in studies of the platform economy (Ravenelle, 2017, Schor et al. 2020, Mateescu and Ticona, 2020 in the US are three exceptions). We start by studying the rules – in the form of rewards, sanctions and contractual status – used by platforms to control access to work, as ways of disciplining a workforce are considered to be at the core of the strategies of employing firms in traditional labour markets (Legge, 1995; Rubery, 2007; Grimshaw et al., 2017). We then examine how workers experience these rules, exploring how and to what extent they are able to manipulate them to their own advantage. Both dimensions touch upon the social relationships between capital and labour, looking at how capital exerts control over working conditions and how workers ensure a space to regain control over these conditions. As part of this framing, the term 'space' identifies the mapping of the social relationships (of production) surrounding platforms' control strategies and workers' organisation of consent in order to gain control. We define this space in line with the nature of the

required workforce competences and skills and a worker's contractual status. We refer to the 'social space' in food delivery, a sector requiring few skills and where workers with different contractual statuses ('peer-to-peer', student self-employed, self-employed and (temporary) employee status) exert control by shielding themselves from the risks (income instability, assignment unpredictability, job insecurity and physical and material safety) of platform work. In online freelancing, we point to the 'market space' where consent is played out by skilled self-employed or student self-employed freelancers exerting control through maintaining their capacity to compete in the market, as selling their services through a platform is usually considered the way in which they can reduce the risks of online freelancing (not finding clients or losing clients, not being able to achieve the prices they wish, thereby facing low pay or no pay at all). We associate each 'space' with different 'regimes', namely 'pay-based control' and 'time-based control' in food delivery and 'task-based control' and 'customer-based control' in freelancing. As we will see, each regime features its own distinct dynamics characteristic of different platform labour governance strategies, across (and within) different sectors, a perspective drawing on labour process theory (LPT) (Thompson and Findlay, 1999; Thompson, 2003).

Framing Control and Consent Regime Dynamics using Labour Process Theory (LPT)

The question at the core of this article is whether and how platform-based labour governance accounts for different labour regimes through which workers secure the space and the control necessary for the generation of consent. LPT considers the organisation of consent as resulting from capital/labour dynamics of control at the workplace. Edwards (1986) talked about the negotiation of order taking place in a 'material context' where consent has to be created and managerial control is 'far from automatic' (*Ibidem*, 188-288). Recent studies on the digital ride-hailing industry (i.e. Uber) conclude that workers are subject to the same capital/labour power dynamics found in more traditional workplaces and frontline service work (Maffie, 2022 in Edwards and Hodder, 2022: 8).

Studies in the sociological tradition of the labour process reflect on the dynamics of control by focusing on 'work games'. In this perspective, games provide a 'cultural-cognitive control function' as they produce consent by turning workers' attention away from their exploitation and towards winning these games, with success measured by the profit produced for the employer (Wood, 2021: 121-122). A typical example is Burawoy's (1979) 'making out', which turns challenges in the labour process into a series of choices and opportunities for workers to win. This tends to reproduce workers' commitment to playing the games, thereby getting them to consent to the 'rules of these games'. Burawoy (1979) considers labour as an 'active subject' within the dynamics of workplace control (Thompson and Findlay, 1999). As Beynon's (1973) study of the Ford Halewood assembly plant further illustrates, these dynamics become important for workers to secure the space and control necessary for generating their consent via 'working back the line' or making 'their own time' for rest and social interaction.

LPT has therefore been of great help in developing conceptual tools enhancing our understanding of "how employees have [...] become culturally literate in a way that management cannot always

control” (Thompson and Findlay, 1999: 183). ‘Misbehaviour’ (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) is the key concept here, explaining workers’ non-conformity with managerial expectations. Taking place within the framework of performance control measures and increased workplace productivity, misbehaviour relates to the conditions and dynamics shaping the processes behind distinct ‘workplace consent’. It crystallises around the everyday contested practices and behaviours inside (and outside) work by which workers attempt to protect a ‘private’ space where they dissent while gaining control over their work and life.

Analysing the structuring conditions which foster or impede workplace consent, some studies in the critical pluralist tradition of employment relationships have specifically focused on the complexity of capital-labour relations (Edwards 2006; Bélanger and Edwards, 2007). These are considered at the core of the explanation of workplace consent, as agents often do not behave according to a predetermined set of interests. Instead, interests are constructed through the evolution of the contradictory relationship between capital and labour (Edwards, 2006). Hence, this article explores how the organisation of consent unfolds from capital/labour dynamics of control across a variety of transnational (online freelancing) and local (food delivery) platform ‘types’ reliant on different work-related skills (Vallas, 2019).

As much of the traditional industrial and labour sociology literature argues, the natural terrain of interest formation is the ‘wage-effort bargain’ where ‘self-organisation’ is considered to be the space for “the effective protection and extension of interests” (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 54). The types of self-organisation most often examined are those connected to the practices of skilled workers. As Ackroyd and Thompson observe, “it is the autonomy of any kind which should be thought of less as an outcome of managerial activity and more as something that is achieved by relentless self-organisation” (1999: 58).

Burawoy (1985) theorises production as a key dimension in shaping the capacity of workers to elicit control by working-class struggles and self-organisation. His ‘regime’ concept reflects the analytical distinction between the labour process, conceived as a coordinated set of activities and relations involved in the transformation of raw materials into useful products, and the political apparatuses of production, understood as the institutions that regulate and shape these workplace struggles. His theory of ‘factory regimes’ provides a fruitful approach to understanding variations in broader production politics (Dörflinger et al., 2021; Vallas and Hill, 2012). The theory discusses the varying production regimes that arose under industrial capitalism where levels of market competition, forms of the welfare state, and the impact of labour organisation are acknowledged as forces shaping the ‘factory regimes’ that arose under different conditions. At the broadest level, the author distinguishes two types of political apparatuses, ‘despotic’ and ‘hegemonic’, which vary in the degree to which they rely on ‘coercion’ versus ‘consent’ by ‘making out’ (Burawoy, 1979).

Recent literature has emphasised the importance of understanding the role played by labour regimes in the structuring, organisation and dynamics of global systems of production and reproduction (Baglioni et al., 2022), where “a labour regime signals the combination of social

relations and institutions that bind capital and labour in a form of antagonistic relative stability in particular times and spaces” (*Ibidem*: 1). Building on this concept, the authors consider a range of conceptual debates around labour regimes and global production relating to various issues, including the labour process. Current understandings of the global platform economy have the potential to offer an important contribution to this debate. Shedding light on the hybridity of platforms in forms that contradict the existing approaches of traditional firms and organisations, current studies within the digital platform economy highlight the need to conceptually understand how this happens, theorising about the generation and organisation of consent resulting from the dynamics of control and labour governance within the digital workplace (see Lin, 2021).

Thus, autonomy and domination may, in this sense, be conceived as being “relationally and situationally produced by platforms” (Schüßler et al., 2021: 1231). Yet, how platform strategies of domination embrace not only the labour process itself but also extend to a specific institutional setting covering the contractual status (e.g., self-employed) and shifting risk to labour is less investigated to date. In so doing, our analysis relates to labour process research pointing to the ‘contract’ as an important aspect of Burawoy’s work on ‘factory regimes’ (Nichols et al., 2004). Yet, there is a need both to expand knowledge on platform strategies of domination and control, taking account of the risks workers experience when providing their services via platforms, and to examine whether and how workers gain control for the organization of consent within the framework of these strategies. As Edwards and Hodder (2022: 7) state, while “contemporary workplaces, including the gig economy, have both distinctive features and continuity with the past”, it is important to spell out what these differences and similarities are. Therefore, getting to know the ins and outs of the organisation of consent which result from the dynamics of capital and labour control helps promote an understanding of how workers protect themselves from the risks generated by platform work. As we will explain, these risks can take different forms within the wider ‘political apparatuses of production’ which embrace both the labour process and the institutions shaping workplace struggles (Burawoy, 1985). When examining whether and how the labour governance systems practiced by platforms account for how workers secure the space of control necessary for the generation of consent, we therefore highlight the importance of institutional conditions (i.e. the contractual status and the role of national governments) to explain the nature of the space shaped by the regime dynamics unfolding across (and within) the platform economy. In particular, a ‘factory regime’ analysis includes employment contract issues as the way to avoid underestimating the magnitude of the changes happening in sectors and industries, such as the platform economy (Nichols et al., 2004; see also Standing, 2007). These aspects are key in our empirical investigation of labour platforms in Belgium and our corresponding analysis.

The platform economy in Belgium and its institutional underpinnings

Generally speaking, the platform economy is heterogeneous with regard to both the nature of the work and the workers providing services (Lenaerts, 2018; Pulignano et al., 2022a). Platform workers perform either online activities, for example software development or technology services (Kässi and

Lehdonvirta, 2018), or offline activities such as food delivery, ride-hailing, tutoring, babysitting or various household services (FOD Financiën, 2021). In the majority of cases, platform work is occasional and supplements other earnings, although a small percentage of workers rely on platform work as their main source of income (Drahokoupil and Piasna, 2019; Lenaerts, 2018).

Compared to other European economies, the size of the platform economy in Belgium remains relatively small. Survey evidence from the EC Flash Eurobarometer (2018) shows that just 18% of the Belgian population participated in some form of the sharing economy in 2018, well below the rate seen in the four neighbouring countries, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, and below the European average of 23%. However, the use of sharing platforms in Belgium is rising rapidly, with the number of platforms officially recognised by the Belgian Ministry of Finance growing from 30 in 2017 to 69 in 2021 (FOD Financiën, 2021). As a significant share of – especially global – platforms are not registered, the actual number is considered much higher.

Belgium is a pioneer in Europe with regard to the introduction of dedicated legislation on digital platforms, reflecting the government's ambition to encourage both the development of platforms and their uptake by citizens as users, workers and entrepreneurs. The 2016 De Croo Law put platform work on a par with the broader category of 'collaborative economy' jobs, alongside voluntary work, and created a specific contractual status (i.e. peer-to-peer) for individual workers providing their services to clients via officially registered platforms. Between 2018 and 2020, peer-to-peer workers were allowed to perform services via platforms tax-free and exempt from social security contributions up to an annual ceiling of €6.340 in 2020. This status was highly contested, as it favoured platforms through externalising tax and social security costs and exacerbated polarisation between a protected (contractually dependent) workforce (including standard and non-standard employees), for whom income and social security benefits are guaranteed, and an unprotected (contractually independent or self-employed) workforce which works digitally without employment protection (Pulignano and Van Lancker, 2021). The Belgian Constitutional Court overturned the tax-free scheme, meaning that a tax rate of 10.7% on platform earnings has applied since January 2021 (Paelinck, 2020; Franke and Pulignano, 2021). However, the Court decision did not repeal the possibility afforded to a platform to (re-)classify platform workers as self-employed. Moreover, Belgium offers a 'student self-employed' status, under which students aged between 18 and 25 can earn up to €7,000 a year (indexed) from self-employed work without having to pay tax or social security contributions. Thus, labour platforms in Belgium can hire workers under a broad range of different statuses. On 15 February 2022, the government introduced a 'new labour deal' extending protection (e.g., in the case of accidents at work) to self-employed platform workers, albeit without coverage for peer-to-peer and student self-employed workers.

Methods

The research was conducted between spring 2020 and autumn 2021 on four labour platforms within food delivery and online freelancing in Belgium. We used Vallas' (2009) typology to select the platforms in accordance with the geographical dispersion of the work (i.e., on-location and online)

and the complexity of – and skills required for – the work. We selected Deliveroo and Takeaway (on-location food delivery) and Upwork and Jellow (online freelancing).

Deliveroo hires couriers under the self-employed, student self-employed and peer-to-peer status, allowing the platform to disregard sectoral regulations and to use a piece-rate payment model. Originally, both (student) self-employed and peer-to-peer workers received a variable fee per delivery, consisting of a fixed amount for delivering the food and a distance-based amount dependent on the distance to the client. In response to the Belgian tax authorities challenging the classification of couriers under the peer-to-peer status in 2019, Deliveroo switched to a fixed delivery fee for peer-to-peer workers to be able to justify the use of 'self-employment' contracts for peer-to-peer workers, as it is the client who 'directly' pays the worker. Peer-to-peer workers thus receive the same amount for each order they deliver, no matter how far away the client is, whereas self-employed workers' fees remain distance-related. This change went hand in hand with eliminating the possibility for peer-to-peer workers to see the client's location before accepting an order and to receive financial rewards (i.e., bonuses) from the platform, whereas self-employed workers retain these possibilities. Since 2020, Deliveroo has used a 'free login system' allowing all couriers to 'login' to their apps and to work whenever they want, provided that orders are available. Conversely, Takeaway employs couriers either directly or through an employment agency as employees, paying them an hourly wage, including overtime. At the time we collected the data, agency workers worked under daily or weekly contracts, but could be offered monthly contracts and direct employment after three months of work, provided they had good performance ratings. Working under a shift-based system, Takeaway couriers are supervised by middle-range managers (i.e., 'driver captains', 'hub coordinators'). At both Deliveroo and Takeaway, workers perform a standardised sequence of tasks, following the platform's instructions through their apps when picking up food at restaurants and delivering it to the client.

Freelancers working for Upwork and Jellow can be self-employed, student self-employed, or – in the case of Upwork – work without registering their freelance activity. As a platform operating across borders, Upwork can supply services at low cost by benefiting from cross-national differences in the regulation of self-employment (Mara' and Pulignano, 2022) and by not obliging freelancers to officially register as a company when creating their platform profile. Upwork uses ratings and penalises workers who work outside the platform. By contrast, Jellow is active in Belgium and the Netherlands and does not penalise freelancers working with clients outside the platform. Jellow requires freelancers who create a profile on the platform to declare that they are registered as self-employed and screens profiles to verify that freelancers are not 'bogus' self-employed. Both Upwork and Jellow bring together workers and clients for the execution of high-skilled work. We selected IT, graphical design, translation and copywriting freelancers, as these are the most common services performed online in Belgium according to the online labour index (Kässi and Lehdonvirta, 2018).

Primary data collection included 29 qualitative biographical narrative interviews with platform workers and 3 semi-structured interviews with platform managers from Deliveroo, Takeaway,

Jellow. Upwork management never responded to our attempt to reach out for an interview. We conducted 15 interviews with food delivery couriers and 14 with freelancers. To gain a comprehensive insight into the platforms' strategies of control, the interviews were complemented with desk research (e.g., platform websites).

Our sample consisted of 11 women and 18 men, aged between 18 and 66. The gender split was influenced by the male-dominated nature of the selected sectors and occupations (with the exception of translation and copywriting). We recruited freelancers by using the platforms' search engines to identify potential respondents and then contacting them via LinkedIn. Food delivery respondents were recruited via snowball sampling, social media, LinkedIn and grassroots, independent and established unions. We selected participants with different contractual statuses and working on one or several platforms and/or in the traditional labour market (see Table 1).

[Table 1 here]

Respondents were asked to speak about their work and life experiences and conditions associated with platform work (Schütze, 2008). Respondents told us about their working hours and pay, about a platform's operations and how (and why) they gained or lacked control over the conduct of their work. All respondents also completed a questionnaire on their demographic profiles, reporting on household composition, migration background, pay and job characteristics.

Each interview lasted between 1-3 hours, with an average of 2 hours. Interviews were conducted under Covid-19 restrictions: partly face-to-face (when restrictions were relaxed in the summer and with physical distancing) and partly online via Zoom or Skype. The participants were compensated for their time. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated and anonymised. Interview data was analysed using NVivo, coding both platform strategies and workers' ways of regaining control over the conduct of their work. This shed light on the differences and commonalities in strategies across (and within) platforms and sectors. Platform strategies relate to risks reported by workers in the interviews. Although we found that workers' experiences of these risks were platform-specific, we also found important differences in how these risks were assessed between food delivery couriers (e.g. income instability) and freelancers (e.g. losing clients).

Findings

Platform strategies for on-location services

Both Takeaway and Deliveroo use digital technology to assign orders to couriers, tracking them through their smartphones and specifying the entire work process of food pickup and delivery. Deliveroo couriers access work whenever they want through a so-called 'free login system' (BEMFEX06). Allowing couriers to decide when and how much they work is possible because Deliveroo pays them per delivery, hence the platform leaves the worker moving in and out:

“It is not the case that a boss obliges you to work a certain amount of hours per week (...) You only have to make sure that the orders get delivered. (BEMF37).

However, this means that couriers unable to access or deliver an order do not get paid. By contrast, Takeaway pays couriers by the hour. This is why the platform “plan(s) on the numbers” of couriers working at a certain point in time “so that we have optimal occupancy” (BEMF45). Takeaway asks couriers to either choose a fixed schedule (this option is available for workers directly employed by Takeaway or temporary agency workers with at least three months’ service and good ratings) or “to regularly update (their) availability for the coming week” (BECM09) so as to be able to assign shifts (usually 3-hour time slots) that couriers are required to attend (this option is only available for temporary agency workers). Temporary agency couriers updating their availability on a weekly basis have guaranteed access to just 2 shifts per week, meaning that they may end up with fewer working hours than requested:

“Sometimes you post more availability, but you don’t get the hours because there are too many couriers available.” (BECM10)

As earnings depend on how many working hours they can access, Takeaway can assign “open shifts” on a “first come first served” basis (BEMF17) to couriers who wish to increase their working hours. Conversely, Deliveroo relies on a large number of couriers regularly available for delivering food when needed through its ‘free login system’. This means that couriers get disciplined by their peers, as any order foregone will be delivered by another courier who receives the payment:

“For example tonight, it won’t happen, but we could be 100 people wanting to work (...) the more we are, the less orders each of us gets, so we earn less.” (BEMF39)

Deliveroo awards ‘bonuses’ to steer couriers’ deliveries. Bonuses are increased payments “when Deliveroo doesn’t have enough drivers, then you would get a text: you’ll get one or two euros more per order that you deliver right now” (BEMF35). However, to comply with Belgian regulations, Deliveroo “cannot offer a bonus to peer-to-peer riders” (BEMFEX06), meaning that these financial incentives only apply to self-employed couriers. The distance-based fee for self-employed couriers means that they sometimes receive just “€3.50 for a short-distance order (...) for an order of €9 you have to go further” (BEMF38). Both peer-to-peer and self-employed couriers can be assigned ‘double orders’ (i.e. two orders from the same restaurant), which earn self-employed couriers 1.5 times the fee of a single order and peer-to-peer couriers twice the amount of a single order, in compliance with the rationale that two clients are paying for the delivery. By contrast, Takeaway management optimises courier performance through recurrent assessments using metrics that measure courier availability, delivery times and ‘wrong app usage’. In addition, courier performance

at Takeaway is assessed by driver captains supervising the daily work of couriers. This enables Takeaway to improve delivery efficiency by retaining well-performing couriers through rewards including progressive “pay increases of 50 cents after 4.5 months” (BECM05), access to more shifts, and promotion to ‘driver captain’ or ‘hub coordinator’ – hence, allowing workers to move to a better position in the hierarchy. Moreover, Takeaway rewards well-performing temporary agency couriers who “enter with daily contracts” (BECM10) by offering them a direct employment contract giving them access to such benefits as an “insurance for water damage to their mobile phones, (reimbursement) of 4G costs, things that are not possible to offer with a temporary agency contract” (BEMF45). Conversely, low-performing couriers are sanctioned through temporary exclusion from the shift-booking system or permanent dismissal:

“We check who arrives late, who is using the app in the wrong way. If it happens too much, we notify that person. If things don’t change, then we’ll do a follow-up (...) we’ll give him one last chance before firing him” (BEMF18)

As Deliveroo couriers are paid per delivery, the platform allows them to be inactive for prolonged periods of time and to ‘multi-app’, meaning that they can use several different platforms at the same time to increase their chances of receiving orders. Moreover, couriers can cancel orders up to the moment they pick them up at the restaurant. However, as the platform does not provide information about when couriers will receive the next order, they sometimes refrain from cancelling orders. This is particularly the case when workers experience long unpaid waiting times between orders:

“If you haven’t received any orders for 15 minutes, then you just have to accept everything because otherwise you risk having to wait a long time” (BEMF40).

While self-employed couriers on distance-based fees can access information on the client’s location before accepting an order, Deliveroo prevents peer-to-peer couriers on fixed distance fees from cancelling long-distance orders by keeping the client’s location and information on whether the order is a double order hidden until they pick up the food at the restaurant:

“You only know where you have to go after you’ve received the food. Sometimes it can be really far and that’s really frustrating because you know that you’ll be spending too much time on it for €4.35.” (BEMF37)

Conversely, to avoid couriers remaining idle while being paid, Takeaway intensifies the pace of work by assigning orders to all available couriers who “can’t choose if we take an order, unlike at

Deliveroo” (BEMF48). The delivery time specified by Takeaway’s app sometimes induces couriers to take risks on the road by cycling fast:

“I saw on my app that I was behind schedule (...). I wanted to make up time and then I was on a tram track, it was slippery and bam I fell.” (BEMF19)

While both food delivery platforms offer accident insurance, coverage for Deliveroo couriers excludes material costs such as damage to their bikes or phones, which is why couriers report being insufficiently protected in the event of an accident. Takeaway provides bikes and clothing but not smartphones to couriers.

Platform strategies for online services

Jellow charges clients (mostly large businesses) a relatively high membership fee of around €200 a month. The platform offers a matching service where freelancers are suggested to clients based on their platform profiles and portfolios. At the same time, clients can look for freelancers in the Jellow database. Hence, building a “good quality database of highly skilled freelancers” (BEMFEX07) is crucial for attracting and retaining clients. According to management “we screen all assignments for potential bogus self-employment and also do a number of checks on freelancers such as requiring a company number” (BEMFEX07). Freelancers are incentivised to regularly update and improve their profiles to increase their chances of finding clients, knowing that “you’re in a huge pool of freelancers and you have to stand out” (BEMF14). By contrast, registration on Upwork is free for both clients and freelancers, with upgrading to paid membership optional. Freelancers apply for jobs by buying so-called ‘connects’ and have to pay a commission, in many cases significantly impacting their earnings:

“You pay 20% on every Upwork job. So if I get 30 dollars then I immediately lose six dollars to Upwork.” (BECM01)

Upwork rewards freelancers by progressively lowering the commission from 20% to 10% or even 5% insofar as they increase their earnings with an Upwork client while remaining within the platform. In addition, Upwork offers a payment system (called ‘escrow’) for fixed-price contracts that requires clients to deposit freelancers’ pay on the platform when stipulating the contract, releasing it on completion of the work. In the case of payment by hour, Upwork is able to monitor freelancers via “a tool that takes a screenshot every half an hour” (BECM01). Freelancers caught working outside the platform are sanctioned through fines or deactivation, which means they lose their jobs and clients on the platform. They also lose access to the ‘escrow’ system that “protects” (BECM02) them against non-payment when working through the platform. Conversely, Jellow clients and freelancers can contact each other outside the platform as “a large share of our customers have the subscription

anyhow, so it does not matter whether you are communicating directly with each other” (BEMFEX07). Thus, Jellow freelancers “receive emails from businesses” (BEMF10) when they are selected, they arrange the terms and conditions of their work “independently from the platform” (BEGIGMF12) and get paid directly by clients. However, freelancers have to make sure themselves that they receive payment, as transactions are organised outside the platform:

“There were invoices that really took time. I'm not shy about sending payment reminders, calling or threatening. But that doesn't look good for the next collaboration.” (BEMF14)

Upwork regulates access to work and payment through a system involving ratings (scores from one to five stars and written texts) given to freelancers by clients and vice versa. It also works with a ‘job success score’ calculated on the basis of the number of completed jobs and other metrics, such as worker activity, the size and the value of the completed jobs. ‘Top-rated’ Upworkers are rewarded through reduced commissions, incentivizing them to build up a strong track record which is rewarded internally by the platform. Moreover, the platform suggests ‘top-rated’ Upworkers to clients and grants them the possibility of removing bad reviews from their profiles, hence further improving their ratings. Freelancers also benefit from a higher ranking within their job category, which means that they move to a significantly better position within Upwork as “you don't have to compete anymore with people who have bad reviews” (BECM02). Excelling within the platform’s rating system is crucial, as Upwork exposes freelancers to cross-border price-based competition, where freelancers can underbid their peers in order to be selected by clients:

“There are many Filipino freelancers and they work for very low fees. (...) Clients sometimes think that’s more interesting of course.” (BEMF15)

Jellow freelancers compete by showcasing their experience (which they gain both on and off the platform), skills and other information relevant for the client on their profiles:

“On Jellow I can say: ‘Look, that’s what I do, this is my availability, that’s my price, these are my specialisations, that’s the kind of clients I want to work with’. That goes beyond Upwork where you just select a general category.” (BEMF46)

Jellow uses freelancers’ profiles to attract clients who bring their network of freelancers to the platform. As Jellow is continuously expanding its workforce, freelancers risk accessing relatively few tasks: “I very rarely receive a message from clients” (BEMF12). Whereas the Upwork rating system incentivises freelancers to complete as many platform tasks as possible, Jellow refrains from pushing freelancers to apply for and complete tasks. Jellow freelancers can stay inactive for prolonged periods without jeopardising their ability to compete on the - and on other - platform(s):

“I created a profile but I never received anything. I thought, I'll just wait and see what happens. And suddenly I was contacted via e-mail” (BEMFPI01)

Tables 2 and 3 provide an overview of the strategies deployed by food delivery and freelance platforms, shedding light on the risks they generate for couriers and freelancers.

[Table 2 and Table 3 here]

Workers shaping a space of control

Food delivery workers engage in platform work in an attempt “to earn some extra income” (BEMF37), but they also find that platforms’ operations may constrain their capacity to achieve earnings guaranteeing a living wage. Pay-based control within Deliveroo involves couriers using the ‘free login’ to increase their income by working whenever it fits their schedule: “I’ve got 2 hours free now and can just jump on my bike and earn money” (BEMF35). While some couriers work longer hours to receive as many orders as possible, others prioritise working “weekends, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays between 6 and 9 pm (when) you always pick up a lot of orders” (BEMF40). Thus, they adapt their work and life schedule to market demand. This is important for them as a way of mitigating assignment unpredictability and income instability resulting from often having to wait a long time before receiving orders.

By contrast, time-based control within Takeaway means couriers plan their shifts themselves, thereby exercising control and enhancing work predictability as “I decide when I am going to work according to my life planning, my appointments, I plan all that.” (BECM05). Couriers with fixed schedules can “work every day from 12-9pm” (BEMF48). Temporary agency workers with daily or weekly contracts can work “the minimum of 6 hours per week” (BECM10) or increase their working hours to secure more income by indicating as much availability as possible, applying for open shifts or contacting management:

“They [couriers] come and say (...) for me that’s really not enough, I need to be able to pay my rent, can I please do 30 hours” (BEMF18).

Under this system, some Takeaway couriers are able to “end the week with 40 hours (...), all paid” (BECM05).

Deliveroo couriers report that “what you earn can fluctuate a lot” (BEMF40), so they sometimes combine their Deliveroo work with other (platform) work. The possibility to ‘multi-app’ allows them to maintain their income at times with little access to orders. Couriers acknowledge that regaining control through ‘multi-apping’ may sometimes delay their deliveries:

“it is technically allowed, but there will undoubtedly be moments where you get two orders at the same time and then you can’t guarantee that the food from both orders will arrive at the customer still warm” (BEMF35).

Moreover, Deliveroo couriers benefit from the possibility to (temporarily) stop working without losing access to the platform: “for example, I didn’t drive for a month and a half because I was finishing my Masters’ thesis” (BEMF37). Conversely, as access to working hours on Takeaway is dependent on their metrics, couriers avoid sanctions (i.e., losing access to work and payment) by closely “sticking to the rules and not wasting time” (BECM10) and making themselves available all the time. By trying to be “one of the fittest and best” (BECM09) couriers, workers strive to improve their metrics to gain a pay raise or to make their job more secure by obtaining a monthly contract. The latter is particularly the case for temporary agency workers, with daily or weekly contracts. Workers also express their ambition “to continue to grow within Takeaway” (BEMF18) by obtaining a promotion to middle-range manager, with the benefits this entails within the platform. In the same vein, self-employed Deliveroo couriers increase their pay by taking advantage of financial incentives inside and outside the platform:

“I work a lot on days when there are bonuses. You get a notification, for example today between these hours you’ll get €1.30 on top.” (BEMF38)

Hourly pay at Takeaway may sometimes be “less than Deliveroo, €10.30, but it’s safe” (BEMF17). Hence, Takeaway couriers take breaks during shifts with few orders (although this rarely happens), thereby enabling them to limit the physical exhaustion resulting from the intensified work pace and long working hours:

“I didn’t get a job for 2 hours, so I went back to my room (...) I ate and chilled and read a book. I got paid for 2 hours without having to work” (BEMF17).

Deliveroo couriers “cycle fast” because “I know that every extra minute it takes, I earn less” (BEMF37). Having experienced that “I earned just €4 because I waited one hour at the restaurant” (BECM08), Deliveroo couriers often cancel orders from restaurants where waiting times are long. This means that they give up getting paid for the assigned order in the hope of receiving an order with a shorter waiting time. Some self-employed couriers accept ‘double orders’ or orders involving a long distance to the client which earn them “two, three or four times more money” (BEMF36) than a short-distance order, even though these orders demand more physical effort due to the longer ride. Deliveroo peer-to-peer couriers with fixed pay rates lack the possibility to make such choices, significantly reducing their possibility to secure higher pay: “It’s annoying that you can’t see the

location of the customer anymore” (BEMF40). That is why peer-to-peer couriers sometimes trick the algorithm to protect themselves against the risk of low pay by posts to the app:

“I said that I received my food without getting it so that I could see where I had to go. (...) Then I called the Deliveroo helpdesk and told them that I was going to turn down the order because I saw that I had to go very far (...). I said that I accidentally posted having picked up the food” (BEMF37).

Takeaway couriers shield themselves against drops in their metrics by posting longer waiting times at restaurants or reporting they have arrived at the client’s address somewhat earlier. They also use their personal contacts with middle-range managers to regain control in the case of bad metrics, for example, when “the people at the hub say, you’ve been delayed way too much with the deliveries. Then I can always try to justify myself” (BEMF19) or in case they experience problems with restaurants or clients:

“They’d say ‘be respectful in the restaurants’ and I’d ask ‘will they also be respectful towards us?’ It’s half a joke, half discussion. Then they would said say ‘okay, if you want to talk about it, come inside’” (BEMF48).

Deliveroo couriers “just have to arrive at the clients’ address” (BEMF36) in order to get paid. In the case that clients are not home or don’t open the door couriers use the Deliveroo helpdesk that sometimes “allows you to keep the food yourself (...) certain people would take advantage of that (...) I knew someone who often would say I have a trouble with the delivery (...) that’s how he would get his food” (BEMF16). Others report the delivery of an order by confirming it on their app in order to be paid, even though this may be not true. They achieve this by communicating with clients when they encounter delivery problems, for instance when the restaurant is closed.

Freelancers use platforms “to look for clients, to do a lot of marketing, to expand my network” (BEMF46). However, they also report that the ability to compete is limited. As Jellow freelancers, for example, report finding only very few clients, they highlight the importance of gaining skills and experience which they can showcase on their Jellow profiles to attract more clients, thereby exerting customer-based control as they stand out from the competition:

“As a freelancer new to the game, you don’t have anything to show. (...) You need to have a portfolio, you need to get customers, so that you have references (...) I make sure that that my profile is always up to date.” (BEMF14)

Likewise, new Upworkers with no ratings on their profile often find no clients for weeks. They, however, persist in their job search and try to access tasks on the platform as a way to gain control,

investing significant time and money (by buying 'connects') to apply for any kind of job they can find. Upworkers try also to highlight "something making you different from the others" (BEMF15) in their profiles and job applications. For example, they include a customised proposal or "send video proposals, then you get a response because everybody else sends written proposals" (BEMF02). Upworkers can increase their chances of being selected by clients through enhancing their ratings and thereby their position in the platform ranking – which means completing as many tasks as possible on the platform:

"Once you have a certain score, you will see your click-through and conversion rates starting to get much better." (BEMF02)

Some Upworkers do not register as self-employed and "go directly through the platform and complete tasks" (BEMF41), avoiding the administrative procedures and costs of starting a business. As opposed to Upworkers, Jellow freelancers register on multiple platforms and use other channels such as word to mouth and social media to find clients. Completing "many small projects on several platforms, such as freelancer.be, freelance network (...) also getting many job requests on LinkedIn" (BEMF12) enables them to maintain their income while "not depending on one sole business" (BEMF03), but it also allows to further expand their portfolio, thereby increasing the chances of finding more clients through Jellow. Freelancers also build long-term relationships with clients by offering them an all-inclusive service:

"I want to have more regular clients, so I tell them: "look, I can also do your digital marketing, look for your target group, design your logo, work something out for your social media. (...) These therefore become longer relationships. These customers keep coming back to me" (BEMFPI01).

When a client on Jellow asks for several tasks, this helps the freelancer to reduce the time s/he spends on searching for jobs and to become more selective regarding the tasks s/he accepts:

"I don't look anymore because I have enough work. But that doesn't mean that when I see something interesting in my mailbox, I won't have a look at it." (BEMF03)

To avoid losing clients and a large share of income, Jellow freelancers make themselves available and accept "last-minute assignments (...) I get up at 5am to start" (BEMF13). They regain some control over their schedule by directly negotiating deadlines with clients without having to invest much time on the platform. Likewise, Upworkers work long and irregular hours to complete many tasks. As their rating improves, workers move to a better position within the platform that allows them to gain more space to decline tasks, thereby regaining some control over their working time: "the clients are contacting me now instead of me contacting the clients" (BEMF15). Faced with strong price-based competition, Upworkers sometimes consent to non-payment to win over clients:

“In your first month you’re literally so desperate to please everyone that you’ll bend over backwards, you’ll do stuff for free. A lot of clients ask you to do samples and test work for free.” (BECM01)

Upworkers charge “way below the normal price” for their first tasks and “dare to raise my price” (BEMF01) and to negotiate prices with clients once their ratings improve. Upworkers who do not declare their income from platform work can lower their prices as they avoid paying taxes. To avoid paying the platform’s commission, some Upworkers quit the platform, offering clients a price lower than on the platform but still higher than what they would have earned after paying the commission. Although on Jellow “clients often search for the cheapest and fastest freelancer” (BEMF03), freelancers tend “work for the same rate” (BEMF03) as for off-platform clients. Freelancers with high-quality profiles can negotiate pay rates directly with clients without jeopardising their position on the platform, even if inactive on Jellow for a prolonged period. Those with weaker profiles can lower their prices to please recurrent clients: “I often say: ‘I can give you a discount of 10%, because it’s such a big assignment.’”(BEMF13). Upworkers read client reviews to learn something about a client before accepting a task to reduce the risk of low (or no) pay. They also use the platform’s escrow payment system to avoid clients scamming them, which they report as a reason for staying on the platform:

“I do like the platform very much, because (...) I have the peace of mind that clients are going to pay me. So, I wouldn't leave the platform at all.” (BECM02)

Working outside Upwork may imply a lower ranking or deactivation, therefore some Upworkers leave the platform only after having established a relationship of trust with clients. Others boost their rating score by going off the platform “with first-time customers (...) And then I see how that collaboration goes. If they’re decent people and keep their word, then I agree to continuing via the platform. Because I know they're going to give me a fair rating” (BEMF02). Jellow freelancers try to avoid scams and non-payment by meeting clients face-to-face: “I find it important to meet that person, because you get a look at how that person thinks and who he is” (BEMFPI01) (see Table 4).

[Table 4 here]

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study offers a novel cross-sectoral comparison of the control and consent regime dynamics of labour platforms by using LPT as the theoretical lens. It explores how these regime dynamics unfold via the rules implemented by the platforms to govern labour, and how and to what extent workers

use these rules to their own advantage by shaping the dynamics underpinning them, and thereby regaining control over the conduct of their work through creating spaces of control.

Workers have to operate within the constraints of rules set by those who own and control resources. As Ackroyd and Thompson argued, “behaviour in work organisation is directed and controlled in a manner not found elsewhere” (1999: 28). Work is usually supervised through disciplinary mechanisms designed to make workers sufficiently compliant with the rules set to organise production. Even where there “seem to be no specific duties attached to a job, workers are constrained to accept and work within definitions of appropriate conduct” (*Ibidem*: 29). However, the authors understand organisational behaviour not simply as the result of the control and direction imposed on workers. A more appealing argument is put forward, stating that, at the same time as workers are interpreting and adapting these rules, they are also bending them through “orienting their conduct to a conception of informal norms” (*Ibidem*: 29). Although there are a plethora of studies examining the disciplining mechanisms used by labour platforms to direct and govern labour, very few studies to date have combined this perspective with an examination of worker responses within the platform economy.

Our encompassing view of the dynamics of control and consent enhances the study of the platform economy by embracing the dimension of the organisation of consent in relation to the responses that workers develop – and the space of control they attempt to gain - towards the platform’s use of systems of governance and control. Here, labour governance signals the combination of the capital and labour relationships within the wider political realm, including both the labour process and the regulatory institutional context. Research reveals that institutions can influence accumulation dynamics in labour process by providing the social conditions within a distinctive market economy (Pulignano et al., 2022b). In so doing, the regime dynamics here define the societal framework which politically positions labour at the heart of the questions about how we understand and approach the platform economy.

The four cases (i.e., Deliveroo, Takeaway, Jellow and Upwork) illustrate how workers’ attempt to gain a space of control (i.e., ‘social’ or ‘market’) for the organisation of consent unfolds from different platform logics to organise work. Workers in Takeaway and Upwork build a space by having to adhere to an organisational logic which reckons an internal labour market structure in how workers build up a track record as a condition to access paid work. Conversely, Deliveroo and Jellow follow a transactional logic in accordance to which workers build a space by moving in and out the platform (and the wider labour market) in the attempt to top up pay (Deliveroo) or to build up a clientele (Jellow). This diversity entails differences in the kind of ‘games’ occurring across the different four platform cases as the former reflects a variety of – often contradictory - conditions underpinning workers’ attempts to generate a space of control in each platform (see Table 4). For example, workers in Takeaway get control over time (i.e., ‘time-based control’) due to that the internal labour market organizational logic fosters competition over time as workers need to get enough hours in spite of them being potentially insulated from competition (e.g., Takeaway workers

do not have to snap up orders). Inversely, workers on Deliveroo build control over pay (i.e., 'pay-based control') because the transactional logic does not shelter them from competition over pay as workers often report difficulties to access paid work in spite of the freedom to access the platform (e.g., Deliveroo workers can log in via app whenever they decide). Furthermore, freelancers on Upwork organise consent around the platform rating system which incentivizes them to access as many tasks as possible within the platform instead of in the wider market (i.e., 'task-based control'). This is different in Jellow where self-employed freelancers can take advantage of the transactional organisational logic of the platform which allows them to compete for tasks inside and outside of platforms. However, freelancers on Jellow attempt to regain control as the platform restrains their capacity to reach out good customers (i.e., 'customer-based control'). Findings also point to important differences in the 'spaces' created by food-delivery couriers and freelancers. Online self-employed freelancers shape a 'market' space of control by retaining the capacity to compete in an independent and entrepreneurial manner against the behaviour of a platform exposing them to low pay or no pay at all by limiting them either to freely accessing tasks - also outside the platform (Upwork) - or to reach out to a few good clients (Jellow). Conversely, food delivery couriers shape a 'social' space of control by creating protective conditions through either ensuring sufficient orders and income (Deliveroo) or gaining access to a decent number of working hours (Takeaway).

By understanding and locating different modes by which workers shape spaces of control, thereby organise consent while responding to the platforms' strategies of labour governance within a distinctive regulatory setting, our analysis allows "to defetishize exploitation as a first step for building relationships of commonality between workers who are, seemingly, often disparate" (Baglioni et al., 2022: 2), as the case of workers providing their services within the global platform economy clearly illustrates. In so doing, regime dynamics of control and consent analysis exposes the multiple threats linking different workers' struggles both within (and across) different models of digital production and across (and within) different platforms. This is because labour platforms' rules and practices – as is the case with traditional employing organisations – eventually weaken the ability of workers to gain control over the conditions of their work (Grimshaw et al., 2017).

Hence, our study contributes to labour process analyses in the platform economy by applying a micro-level perspective focusing on the rules and practices of platforms as the key antecedents of the nature of the different identified 'spaces' of control. As such, our study shows that dynamics of control and consent unfold from the 'dialectic' produced by the rules used by platforms to govern labour and how the 'self-organisation' of workers (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) allows them to gain control over these rules, across (and within) different types of platforms. By basing the study on platforms in different sectors (i.e., on-location food delivery and online freelancing) in Belgium, we shed light on the different rules, such as rewards, sanctions and the use of contractual statuses used by different types of platforms to organise and govern labour. We also show how these rules create both constraints and opportunities for workers to shape the form and content of their work,

something we refer to as the space of control – i.e., social and market aimed at sheltering workers – at the basis of any understanding of the organisation of consent within the platform economy.

Previous studies on the platform economy have referred to ‘algorithmic management’ (Woodcock and Graham, 2020) as the way in which platforms exert control by organising work in a way shifting risks to the workforce. Our study adds to this literature by showing how the different organisational logic of the platform (i.e. internal labour market logic and transactional logic) and its underpinning rules frame the spaces of control, while at the same time revealing that these spaces are not solely prescribed by the platforms organisational logic but they also include how workers organise consent through ensuring the space to regain control over their work conditions. Therefore, we point to the ‘space of control’ underlying workers’ struggles resulting from the dynamics of control from which the ‘regimes’ (i.e. ‘pay-based control’, ‘time-based control’, ‘customer-based control’, ‘task-based control’) unfold. In line with traditional theory on autonomy, control and skills, we argue that each space reflects the skills of a (self-employed) workforce providing services within a distinct type of platform (i.e., on-location versus online). We find that food delivery couriers, requiring few skills and classified by the platform as (student) self-employed, peer-to-peer or (temporary) employee, exert control by protecting themselves from the risk of income instability, assignment unpredictability, job insecurity and a lack of physical and material safety which are likely to occur under the diverse rules imposed by food delivery platforms. These rules aim at improving delivery productivity by embracing the classification of couriers as self-employed or temporary agency workers. On the other hand, skilled self-employed freelancers within online platforms exert control by enhancing the space for selling their services as self-employed entrepreneurs. Competition both inside and outside the platform usually indicates how skilled freelancers reduce the risk of not finding clients, of receiving low pay or no pay at all or of losing clients. In other words, skilled freelancers aim at increasing the number of trustworthy clients to whom they can sell their services, both inside and outside the platform. They therefore organise consent by expanding the space for controlling the market competition vis-à-vis the rules of the platform, a process that conversely tends to restrict their independence as ‘real’ freelancers. This is particularly the case with Upwork where freelancers’ possibilities to access work and high(er) pay are restricted by the platform’s rating system within an organisational logic which reckon an internal labour market.

Our findings also raise important implications for those considering platform work as an emerging – and additional – form of insecure and precarious work (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018), with digital platforms shifting risks to workers by rejecting the traditional employer responsibilities of protecting their employees. Here our study uncovers the mechanisms generating these risks, as they originate from the rules dictated by platforms and leveraging contractual status. It also shows that these risks are not the same, revealing the extent to which skills are important to understanding how workers and freelancers attempt to overcome, circumvent or bend the rules, thereby regaining control. Hence, we claim that core contradictions are revealed in the way in which platforms – within each ‘space’ – function as potential transmission mechanisms for workers’ action. We reveal how

platforms shape the interests of different players by examining how platform workers regain control (i.e. shape the space for control) over performing their work. This also helps identify gaps in existing regulatory settings applying to platform work (e.g. protection, possibilities to compete).

Despite our spotlight on the practices of platform workers, the question of whether the platform economy has distinctive features or whether it has more continuities with the past (see Edwards and Hodder, 2022) remains only partly answered. Future research should investigate whether the platforms' rules and practices are fairly new or merely represent the digitalisation of existing ones. As Lomax (2017) points out in his inside view of the translation sector, a platform like Jellow can also be considered as the digitalised version of a traditional secretary-run translation agency. Thus, further research is needed which requires a different macro-level and transversal approach aimed at providing a much more extensive longitudinal view on the phenomenon. Another aspect which may need further investigation is whether and how labour market experiences of digital workplaces shape the organisation of consent (for call centres, see Sallaz, 2015). Our research reveals the importance of skills shaping the organisation of consent across different digital workplaces in one country; however, more cross-national research is needed to determine whether and how different labour market experiences may (and how) matter.

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Table 1. Overview of interviews with workers and managers

Platform	Interview code	Occupation	Gender	Age	Employment status	Other (platform) work and income
Deliveroo	BECM08	Food delivery	Male	29	Peer-to-peer worker	Other food delivery and ride hailing platform work and work through a temp agency
	BEMF16		Male	20	Student, peer-to-peer worker	Other food delivery platform work, financial support from parents
	BEMF35		Male	23	Student, peer-to-peer worker	Only Deliveroo, financial support from parents
	BEMF36		Male	43	Self-employed, employee outside the platform	Other job as full-time employee
	BEMF37		Male	26	Student, peer-to-peer worker	Only Deliveroo, financial support from parents
	BEMF38		Female	23	Student self-employed	Other student job
	BEMF39		Male	18	Student self-employed	Only Deliveroo, financial support from parents
	BEMF40		Male	22	Peer-to-peer worker	Only Deliveroo, financial support from parents
	BEMFEX06		Deliveroo management interview			
Takeaway	BECM05		Male	29	Temp agency worker	Only Takeaway
	BECM09		Male	30s	Temp agency worker	Other job as a driver
	BECM10		Male	23	Temp agency worker	Only Takeaway
	BEMF17		Male	25	Student, Temp agency worker	Other tutoring platform work
	BEMF18		Male	24	Employee, driver captain	Only Takeaway
	BEMF19		Male	47	Temp agency worker, unemployed	Only Takeaway, receives unemployment benefit
	BEMF48		Female	29	Temp agency worker	Only Takeaway
	BEMF45		Takeaway middle range management interview			
Jellow	BEMF03	Translation and copywriting	Female	38	Self-employed	Other freelance platforms, clients outside platforms, work as a photographer & teacher
	BEMF13		Female	26	Self-employed	Other freelance platforms, clients outside platforms
	BEMF10		Male	66	Pensioner, continues working as self-employed	Other freelance platforms, clients outside platforms, receives pension
	BEMF12	Graphical design and IT	Male	40	Self-employed	Other freelance platforms, clients outside platforms, teaching job
	BEMF05		Male	40	Self-employed	Other freelance platforms, clients outside platforms
	BEMF14		Male	32	Self-employed	Other freelance platforms, clients outside platforms

	BEMFVP01		Female	25	Self-employed	Other freelance platforms, clients outside platforms
	BEMF46		Female	26	Self-employed, prior student self-employed	Also uses Upwork, clients outside Jellow
	BEMFEX07	/	Jellow management interview			
Upwork	BECM01	Translation and copywriting	Female	35	Self-employed	Other freelance platforms
	BECM02		Female	32	Self-employed	Only Upwork
	BEMF01		Female	33	Invalidity statute	Works for another freelance platform, receives invalidity allowance and financial support from grandparents
	BEMF41		Female	27	Employee off the platform	Uses other freelance platforms, employed full time as a copywriter
	BEMF15		Female	22	Student self-employed	Also uses Jellow, clients outside Upwork
	BEMF02	Graphical design and IT	Male	32	Self-employed	Some clients outside Upwork

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2. Strategies by food delivery and freelance platforms

Food delivery platforms		Freelance platforms	
Deliveroo	Takeaway	Jellow	Upwork
Platform specifies work process and tracks workers, algorithm assigns orders based on client demand		Platform matches workers and clients online, clients specify work	
Peer-to-peer, self-employed or student self-employed status	Employee status, either hired directly by Takeaway or through a temporary employment agency	Self-employed or student self-employed status	Self-employed or student self-employed status, possibility not to register as self-employed
Piece-rate pay by the platform: fixed fees for peer-to-peer, distance-based fees for self-employed workers	Hourly pay by the platform	Direct payment by the client, client pays subscription fee	Hourly/ per-task payment by the client through the platform, workers pay for 'connects' and 5-20% commission
'Free-login' system: workers can work anytime, provided that orders are available	Platform assigns shifts based on couriers' availabilities (temporary agency workers) or a fixed schedule (Takeaway employees, temporary agency workers with 3 months seniority and good evaluations)	Matching service offered to clients, screening of worker profiles, clients contact workers directly	Workers apply for jobs Billing, monitoring and interactions with clients happen through the platform
Discipline imposed through large number of available workers, piece-rate payment and hiding information on client location from peer-to-peer workers	Discipline imposed through performance evaluation, including statistics and personal assessment of managers	Discipline imposed through 'local' competition from the Netherlands and Belgium, profiles to showcase skills and track record	Discipline imposed through global price-based competition and rating system consisting of client ratings, worker ratings and a 'job success score'
Rewards include bonuses and distance based fees for self-employed workers, higher pay for double orders for peer-to-peer and self-employed workers Sanctions include deactivation from the platform	Rewards include pay raises, promotions, more working hours and better contracts (for temporary agency workers) Sanctions include temporary exclusion from shift-booking or permanent dismissal	No direct rewards or sanctions by the platform	Rewards for 'top-rated' workers include reduced commissions, higher ranking, possibility to remove reviews, being suggested to clients Sanctions include fines, lower ranking, dismissal

Workers can cancel orders, be inactive during prolonged periods of time, 'multi-app'	Work intensification, no possibility to cancel orders Requirement to work at least two shifts per week or to work according to a fixed schedule	No direct pressure to complete or apply for jobs Workers can keep an inactive profile	Incentivizes workers to apply for and complete as many jobs as possible Inactive workers are ranked lower
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Source: Own elaboration

Table 3. Risks reported by workers in food delivery and freelancing

Food delivery		Freelancing	
Deliveroo	Takeaway	Jellow	Upwork
Income instability		Not finding clients	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited availability of orders - Low pay for some orders - Waiting times between orders or at restaurants - No pay when not working or not delivering order to client's location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited availability of shifts - No pay increase: pay remains relatively low 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited availability of jobs - Not being selected by client or matched by platform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many job applications without being selected
Job unpredictability		Low pay rates and non-payment	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not knowing how many orders will be assigned - Not knowing when next order will be assigned - Peer-to-peer workers: not knowing clients' location beforehand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workers without fixed schedule: Not knowing how many shifts will be assigned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Client not willing to pay much, asking for free sample work - Client doesn't pay for work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Client not willing to pay much, asking for free sample work - Underbidding by other workers - Low pay due to paying for connects, commission - When going off the platform: Client doesn't pay for work
Job insecurity		Loosing clients	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of social security and regulation for peer-to-peer workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Daily or weekly contracts for temporary agency workers - Permanent or temporary dismissal from platform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Client stops providing tasks - Losing client when raising price 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Losing clients when leaving Upwork or being deactivated - Losing client when raising price
Safety (physical and material)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Physical exhaustion from riding a long time - Accidents: bodily injury - Accidents: damage to equipment 			

Source: Own elaboration

Table 4. Workers' consent within food delivery and freelancing

Social space Food delivery couriers try to overcome risks by:		Market space Freelancers try to overcome risks by:	
Pay-based control	Time-based control	Customer-based control	Task-based control
Deliveroo	Takeaway	Jellow	Upwork
Accessing as many orders as possible: prolonging working day, working at 'peak hours'	Accessing as many working hours as possible: inserting many availabilities (temporary agency workers without fixed schedule), accessing 'open shifts'	Accessing multiple tasks from the same client: Building long-term relationships with client(s)	Assessing as many tasks as possible on Upwork, including small tasks, underpaid tasks, tasks outside own profession Possibility to access tasks without registering self-employed activity
Combining Deliveroo with different (platform) work	Being available for Takeaway	'Passive' use of Jellow next to other platforms: waiting to be matched	Very 'active' use of Upwork: job applications, completing jobs, purchasing 'connects' or paid account
Self-employed couriers: Working at moments when bonuses are paid	Improving or maintaining performance statistics, aiming for pay raise, promotion or better contract (temporary agency workers)	Self-promotion through Jellow, other platforms, LinkedIn, own website Charging same price as off the platform	Improving rating score Lowering or raising price based on rating Lowering price by not registering as self-employed and avoiding to pay taxes on income
Delivering orders quickly: Riding quickly, purchasing a scooter or an electric bike	Slowing down work rhythm, taking brakes	Working hard for Jellow clients Jellow profile as long-term investment in job opportunities	Applying as quickly as possible, completing many tasks on short notice Using billing tools to secure pay
Accepting orders depending on waiting time at restaurants Self-employed couriers: accepting orders depending on distance to client, 'double order' or not	Delivering all orders assigned by the algorithm	Workers with strong profiles: only accepting few 'interesting' tasks	Accepting any task at first, becoming more selective as rating improves
Tricking the algorithm: falsely reporting problems, food pickup (peer-to-peer couriers) or delivery	Tricking the algorithm: manipulating statistics	//	Tricking the algorithm: boosting rating, going off the platform
Communicating with platform support, clients and restaurants	Communicating and negotiating with middle range managers online and face-to-face	Communicating and negotiating directly with clients, online or face-to-face	Rating clients, looking at client reviews Communicating and negotiating with clients through Upwork

Source: Own elaboration