

NOT-EQUAL

EPSRC NetworkPlus: Social Justice through the Digital Economy

Project Review Form - Mid-Term Review Pilot Project

Please submit this form before the deadline of 5pm on the 13th December to notequal@ncl.ac.uk.

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Lead Applicant (PI): Dr Wifak Gueddana Email address: wifak.houij_gueddana@kcl.ac.uk Job Title: Researcher Department: Digital Humanities Organisation: King's College London	Co-Investigators (names and organisations): Dr Kendra Briken, Chancellor's Fellow at University of Strathclyde; Dr James Stewart, Lecturer in Science Technology and Innovation, University of Edinburgh; Prof. Rob Procter, Professor of Social Informatics, University of Warwick; James Ravenscroft, PhD Student, University of Warwick and Chief Technologies Officer @ Filament Consultancy Supporting Partner(s): Duncan McCann and Miranda Hall (New Economics Foundation) Project Title: Platforms, Forums and Hidden Labour: The Invisible, Underpaid and Unregulated World of Domestic and Care Labour Project Tagline: Eol Reference Number: NE106

1. SUMMARY

Please provide a summary of the activities and/or initial findings of your research project to date. This also includes events, engagement activities with non-academic partners and any other activities. Please include any images or website links that could be used for dissemination purposes (at least 500 words).

Initial Findings: This pilot study seeks to explore homecare work in the gig economy. First, we found an ambiguity as to who the homecare workers are. So far, we have focused our empirical investigation on two categories of homecare workers; the first includes people who advertise their services as in-home elderly carers, housekeepers, in-home nurses, cleaners, child-sitters, cook, DIY workers, etc. -hence they are referred to, or refer to themselves as domestic workers and homecare professionals. To find jobs and connect with potential clients, increasing numbers among them are now using platforms such as care.com, Urbansitter, childcare.co.uk, Taskrabit, cozymeal.com, etc. For example, Ms BAYA is registered with a homecare; but she's only employed part-time; the other time she cares for her son while advertises her services on care.com; the platform has encouraged her to put-up two different profiles on care.com, one as elderly carer and one as childminder/nanny. She just completed an online form and authorised care.com to run a background check on her behalf. The platform offers a background that



should guarantee workers a chance of being hired quickly, i.e. families won't have to request and pay a background check. Care.com has promised her that with her many years of experience, she should lose no time getting jobs in her neighborhood.

The second category of homecare workers includes people who use platforms for work because they cannot work the regular hours; they care for others, elderly relatives, children, or have personal illness/needs. For example, Elsie has good online writing skills. She is home and receives gov benefits to care for her dad who has advanced Dementia; it's been a few months now that she is searching/working online for all sorts of online jobs, i.e. writing tasks, SM influencers, and low-paid hits. She advertises her services on multiple platforms as a blogger, life-style writer and content manager and has created profiles using PeoplePerHour (PPH), Upwork, and Fiverr.

These two categories of homecare are often separated by research disciplines and in policy research; the reason is that traditionally, the first category is considered paid-work while the other is not. Indeed, feminist scholars have since long ago denounced the gendered nature of the division of labour whereby reproductive care is a prerogative of women and family carers – at least until the latter start to compete with men for paid work -hence, the exploitation of women's work allows men to get paid jobs. While before work and care were artificially separated, today this has changed as many mums, dads and family carers are working online and through platforms. Also, we see that these two categories often overlap. For example, Elsie and other people like her, who are not professional homecare workers are increasingly using platforms to capitalize on personal experience. They can now advertise services as nannies, cooks or elderly carers on homecare platforms, intermittently or in parallel, with other short-term online and offline jobs. This digital labour (feeding websites personal data and maintaining online profiles) is crucial for them to get paid work; the same way, professional homecare workers like Baya can get to do other platform jobs between shifts (for example, use Uber to taxi drive overnight).

Platform labour whether through sites such as care.com, PPH, helping.com or others is extensive. It is also tightly coupled with homecare as this form of labour challenges the notion of the workplace and messes with traditional employment perspective on 'normal' work-life balance, leading people overall to spend more hours working and juggling between jobs online and offline. In fact, platform work did not just replace employment; even before platforms started to take over the labour markets, many workers were already doing gigs, shifts and temp work, especially in the care industry through placement and homecare agencies, so that platform work is now the new freelance and temp work. On these premises, our study considers platforms to be secondary in our understanding of platform work and homecare, especially as people handle websites that match job seekers and clients interchangeably or sometimes use them at the same time.

In this sense, and contrary to extant research that portrays platforms such as Uber, Deliveroo, Amazon MKT or AirBnB as a new type of employers, our focal point here is platform workers. We seek to understand the meaning of independent work in relation to care and work-life balance as platforms become an infrastructure for digital labour that is unprotected, unaccountable for and unregulated. To that our research strategy brings back the homecare workers into focus to understand their practices, life style and grievances in order to characterize their work conditions and identify sometimes abusive and exploitative practices in terms of platforms' algorithmic management and mechanisms of control.

Initial Research activities: We have divided empirical work into two stages, first, forum data analysis, and second focus groups. So far, we have collected thousands of discussion threads from forums such as Reddit, Moneysavingexpert.com, Mumsnet.com and CarersUK.org; By so doing, we sought to develop an alternative data source -that is data, which is not generated by platforms but by the workers themselves – and a scalable methodology to enable the analysis of key topics and themes across threads and online forums. Our aim is to produce visuals that could be shared with key stakeholders, such as trade unions, homecare workers and professional trusts during group discussions and focus groups (stage 2).

Over the past three months, we have created a group slack to organize data sharing, and team input. This contains a handful channels for exhibits, extracts and forum materials as well as related analysis and comments (private slack). We have also created a project repository that includes data files and analysis spreadsheets which is hosted on Kings' College server and shared by the team members.



Please indicate if these details can be shared in a blog post on the Not-Equal website YES

2. WORK PLAN

Please explain any deviations from your work plan, the reasons for this and plans to address the issue (up to 250 words)

During the past four months, we have focused on the computational analysis, i.e. forum data extraction and processing combined with qualitative analysis. Our objective is to create an outline of a scalable methodology that could be extended to the analysis of multiple forums on platform labour. We have thus spent considerable time experimenting with websites and data and trying to come up with a standard analysis protocol for both forum users' interactions and their related topics. First, we extracted two years' worth of data from 65 subreddits and other homecare and platform work forums. We also run a topic modelling on them to elicit the generation of themes and topics. We realized that topic modeling could help with the clustering of large conversational text; however, this form of automated analysis is not helpful to start with and when the researchers do not have a sense of what the data is about. We thus tried to do a manual analysis of threads in order to identify key posters and threads that we can use to build keyword libraries and informed text mining strategy for an enhanced topic modelling. We have also tried to include elements of network visualizations to speed-up the discovery of key participants and popular threads. This approach, although consistent with our focus on platform workers and the use of alternative data sources, is slow and very much a journey of trials and errors; so far we have invested our time in increasing familiarity with labour forums, reading threads, packaging data and trying to come-up with an analysis prototype that we can apply across forums to complete a more systematic mapping of topics. Although it took us longer than planned, we are positive that we are going to produce visual outputs in the next couple of weeks. We will also have a meeting in the start of the year to start planning the focus groups and discussion groups and invite participants. These will take place over January and February and will help shape the results of the forum analysis.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this form, please contact notequal@ncl.ac.uk or 0191 2088268.

