

Working the platform: How photographers engage with digital platforms to generate income

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SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE | EMPLOYABILITY | JUST WORK

What are digital platforms?



- ❑ Internet businesses connecting workers, through intermediaries, with end-users
- ❑ Characterised by transactions via web applications rather than social exchange
- ❑ Transform value chains by lowering transaction costs and creating open markets
- ❑ Organisation and experience of platform work may be profoundly different

Digital Platform Work: previous research

Platform workers typically classified as independent contractors; can be considered a subset of freelancers or portfolio workers

Emerging empirical evidence of the motivations of digital platforms workers to participate and costs and benefits of doing so

Benefits

- flexibility, autonomy, work/life balance
- enhanced skills
- ability to supplement existing income
- new opportunities to make a living
- transparency and fairness in parts of labour market typified by inefficiency, opacity & capricious bosses

Concerns

- competition between workers
- erosion of pay/working conditions
- spatial, temporal and psychological work/home boundary blurring
- few employment protections and entitlements
- marketization of work via 'begging and bragging'

Yet, a partial picture....



To *what extent* and *how* do workers, operating within a particular occupation/industry, move between platform work and more traditional modes of employment?

What is the impact on worker livelihoods?

A man with a beard, wearing a grey hoodie, is focused on adjusting a camera mounted on a tripod. He is in a studio or office environment with large windows in the background. Another person is visible in the background, also holding a camera.

Photographers

Why this occupational group?

Ideally placed group of workers to reveal how the gig economy is impacting work and workers:

- Industry is highly fragmented
- Creative reputation in a professional context
- Digital platforms proliferating:

The logo for snappr, featuring the word "snappr" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The letter "s" is blue, and the letter "r" has a small blue square at its bottom right corner.The logo for ImageBrief, featuring a yellow hand icon with the thumb pointing up, above the text "ImageBrief™" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font.The logo for Oneflare, featuring the word "Oneflare" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The letter "O" is stylized with a circular arrow around it.

- Unlike studies of gig workers engaged with a specific platform (Uber, Deliveroo, MicroTurk) this study contributes to ***knowledge of those who participate and those who do not***

Sample

**23 women
28 men**

**Average
age = 47**

**15
supplement
photography
income**

**45% used or
were using
platforms**

METHODS



- 51 in-depth interviews (face to face; skype; telephone) with photographers from all Australian States
- Initial access through Australian Institute of Professional Photography
- Snowball for genre specialisation; location; tenure; type of employment arrangement
- Analysis
 - Stage 1: Identification of text where photographers discussed their experiences of digital platform work; varied according to platform
 - Stage 2: coding relevant to platform type

FOUR

PLATFORM

TYPES

STOCK

DIRECTORY

BIDDING

BOOKING

1. Stock platforms

- Royalty based system
- Clients purchase images or subscription
- Platform sets the price
- Photographer is paid a fee
- No advance knowledge of price
- No control over the sales price
- No contact between buyer and photographer

iStock.
by Getty Images

austock
PHOTO

The Australian
Photography
Collective



500px

Stock platforms

Seven photographers currently deriving income via stock platforms

Minimal per image download payment:

'pennies on the dollar'

attributed to increased competition and a dilution effect caused by:

'an oversupply in the marketplace'

Labour intensive process of assuring appropriate copyright arrangements

'They said, is this your image? I said yeah. They said prove it'

Need for sophisticated organising tools, including geo-tagging

Large volumes of images (up to 200,000) made available over long periods of time

Opportunities to earn a modest income from *'latent intellectual property assets'*

2. Booking platforms

Platform facilitates bookings between clients and photographers

Photographers submit and maintain portfolio of work

Platform messages the photographer with shoot details

Final images uploaded to the platform for distribution to clients



snappr



KODAKIT

Booking platforms

Only 2 photographers currently received work through booking platforms

Major reason for avoiding was that they competed solely on price; esp. Snappr

'below the minimum wage'; 'pretty devastating'; below the cost of production'; 'less than I would pay an assistant'

No control over pricing structure or payment schedule

Ideological opposition:

- propensity to destabilise, commodify and harm the photographic industry;
- undermine the creativity of photographers and the profession

Considered an *'unsustainable business model'*

- high turnover of photographers
- multiple points where breakdown of communication with clients could occur

3. Bidding Platforms

- Photographers pay a subscription
- Clients post a 'brief' - platforms distribute the lead - photographers respond (quickly) with a quote
- Successful bid = client contact details
- Payment entirely through the platform



Oneflare



Bidding platforms

Only six photographers were receiving work from bidding platforms

Unlike booking platforms, bidding platforms offered for these photographers an opportunity to develop a relationship with a client once a bid was won

Considered to offer insufficient income relative to time and resources required to engage

Specific challenges:

- *'dead ends'* where clients would not return calls,
- *'when you get a brief, it is not a complete brief...you're taking time to respond to these requests for not benefit'* - time to negotiate details which were insufficiently explained
- *'you've only got 400 characters...to win the job'* - the concise nature of the response
- the vigilance required to quickly respond to bids that *"come off my phone and my watch"*

Clients were seen as; *'people who fish'*, *'bottom trawlers'* and *'tyre kickers'*

4. Directory Platforms

- Online advertising space in exchange for paid subscription
- Clients request a quote from their chosen photographer
- Directory emails lead to photographer who directly contacts client



Directory Platforms

Photographers more accepting of directory platforms than stock, booking and bidding types

Several were using photographers.com and had found it successfully generated business

Benefits included:

- being able to *'engage directly with the client into a conversation'*
- a higher booking rate and quality leads - *'50 percent of my leads'*

Some used directory platforms to facilitate networks - *'open doors'* by connecting with (for example) *'hair and makeup artists, decorators and stylists'*

Challenges were to *'set clients' expectations the moment they call'*

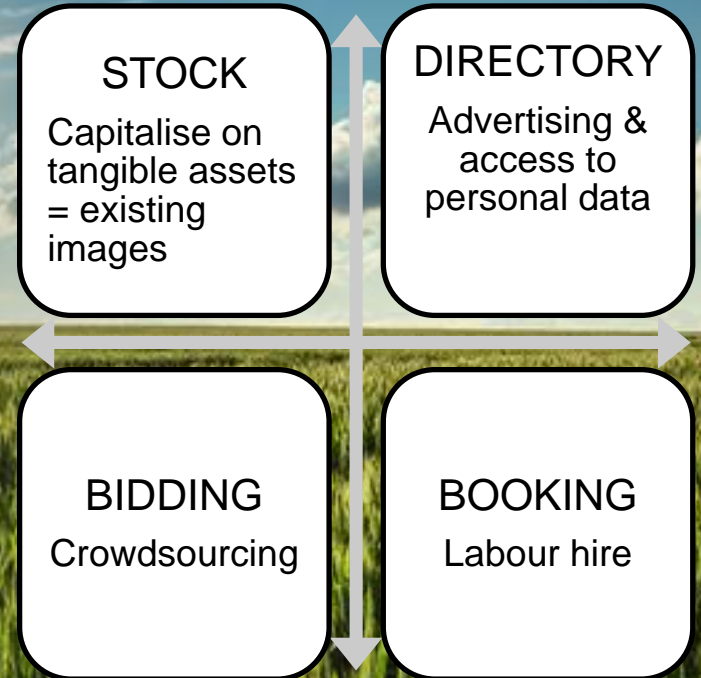
Some photographers regarded directories as attracting *'price-driven clients'*

Discussion

Photography platforms share consistent features with existing typologies of digital platforms that distinguish on the basis of type of work, tasks or resources accessed:

Crucial feature that determines participation -
relationships with clients

RESISTANCE to platforms for pragmatic and ideological reasons



Discussion

CONSTRAINED
ability to develop
quality, long-term
client relationships
necessary for repeat
business

THREATENED
professional
identity and
creative
community

DAMAGED creative
community; users
labelled as non-
experts, new-
comers, amateurs

**LIMITED (FAIR)
INCOME**
Useful for portfolio or
network building and
supplementary
income only

Platform influence on worker-client relationship

Platform Function	Categories of Platforms			
	Stock	Booking	Bidding	Directory
Price setting and payment	High	High	High	Low
Relationship management	High	High	Med-High*	Low
Product and service quality	Low	High	High	Low

* Bidding platforms closely manage initial client interactions but once a photographer wins a bid, the photographer is able to directly contact the client to negotiate details, diminishing platform influence

Conclusions

Proliferation of platforms \neq large numbers of gig workers

Evidence suggests photographers (& other creatives??) may be unlikely to embrace platform work, at least in the near future

Regardless of business models, platform **functions are the critical feature** – how they support or constrain the worker's ability to set prices, manage relationships and ensure quality of their product/service

Occupational and professional context is likely to be critical when considering the contours of work in the gig economy

