Platform communities: a new frontier for community informatics?

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The Platform Economy has left the "novelty" phase to become a well-known phenomenon, affecting people all over the world. While a few years ago it was all about the very well connected, nowadays it is happening at many levels in many countries, effecting change not just at the digital dimension, but for workers, regulators, and employers, as well as collateral damage to many that are not supposedly involved in the day to day transformations that Platform are spearheading.

By transforming both supply and demand markets, platforms transform the core relationships that sustain economic exchanges, and create new opportunities to extract value from local and national markets, towards the transnational corporations that are designing and supporting these platforms. Local taxi drivers, subject to regulations and job-market protections (or their absence), are being buffeted by Platforms like Uber or Lyft, that oversupply the local personal transportation market while removing control and bargaining power from workers and employers alike; at the same time, these Platform-based transnational bypass State actors at the local and national level, sometimes using big data approaches to elude control; sometimes by sheer market power, forcing governments to bind to their interests.

The apparent beneficiary is the consumer: a cosmopolitan culture of consumerism is promoted through the usual discursive means, stating that "choice" is good and that quality and consistency of service is a larger goal than local control or the possibility to negotiate among the multiple actors of the economic process to achieve solutions that at least, consider all potential positive

and negative outcomes. The dominant discourse proposes that "disruption" is good and that the algorithm is king: big data and the power of technology will disentangle long-strained markets and shall provide a better life, a better world, for all.

Of course, we all have seen this before: promoting technology as a perfect solution has been the predominant discursive vector of the self-serving industries that provide the connectivity, the services, and the devices that require demand from us, consumers of the world. From the Last Mile through the Bottom of the Pyramid to internet.org, finding shareholder value in development projects is not precisely new; there is a change though, in that Platforms are not using such a compassionate discourse, but rather presenting themselves as great equalizers for those already connected. Use Uber, it is implied, and your experience will be as good as that of a New Yorker, a Londoner or a Tokio denizen. The world is yours, cosmopolitanism is, literally, on your hands.

Disruption of local communities is there, too. Work defines the workers, and bind them together as forces made out of solidarity and shared experiences. Trade Unions have been at the base of many local communities all around the world, and even in these times, when trade unionism has been weakening by so many factors, there is a salient fact: communities born of a shared working experience are still significant political actors, even if negatively so. Identity is born there, social bonds are born there, and lives are lived there.

But Platforms fragment work and remove the solidarity born out of the need to define a common interest and negotiate through collective demands that express that common interest. The kind of workers that half a century ago could have been organized in a trade union of clerical workers are now not only lacking unionization as a resource for better deals; they are becoming mandatory freelancers, journeymen that cannot and will not be part of a workplace, but rather just a faraway clog doing repetitive work for a [Task Rabbit](#) or [Mechanical Turk](#) overlord, never to be seen nor possible to negotiate with. Your skills, your capabilities, and yes, your dignity as a human being, are left to the mercies of the algorithm.

It would be churlish to deny the advantages for those in position to obtain the benefits of globalized disruption; but the shortcomings for those left to their own (local) devices when dealing with "sprightly giants of algorithms and data" (to paraphrase John Perry Barlow) are significant.

However, there are other considerations to take into account. With shared experiences and perhaps shared demands, the basis for a community of platform workers may exist. It is not immediately evident that such a community is to emerge, but it may be the case that slowly, and with some soft prodding from activists, a recognition of the common issues and dilemmas faced by the Platform Workers of the World may emerge, and that in time, they may want to assume that the bonds they virtually have may bind them together into a community of workers, a new form of trade unionism based not on a traditional shared working experience, but on a novel understanding of social links.

As it has been clearly demonstrated by the success of Facebook and similar social media, social ties through digital exchanges can be as powerful as "presence-based" ties. Communities have been identified in Cyberspace a while back, and though they are clearly different to standard, territorially-based communities, they are not trivial or inexistent; they are emerging forms of social life. Similarly, an emerging form of work may create an emerging form of workers' association. A new form of community that may require new concepts and a fresh understanding of what a community may be.

The Platform-based working experience may be the future of communities. Not of all communities; but at least of enough new forms of communal bindings, of new, specific forms of community ties, that might require research, from a community of dedicated people that have created, sustained and disseminated knowledge about the way that ICT and Digital Media both affect and create communal experiences, ties and lives all around the world. What better terrain for such researchers as a set of community-like experiences that happen to exist through ICT-based, deterritorialized, almost un-regulatable, work.

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This, the first of two Special Issues dedicated to the CIRN Conference of 2016, is part of a continuing collaboration with the committed organizers of the conference, which has been taking place since the first colloquium in 2003, and the actual first conference in 2006; the papers included here are a showcase of the combination of concerns, skills and academic approaches that both the Community Informatics Research Network, and this Journal, try to promote and disseminate. We expect that this relationship will continue for years to come, and will also be expressed in Special Issues, like 6(3), on the 2010 conference.

But the continuity of the Community Informatics network, or dare I say, community, of researchers, depends on the cooperation of all those participating on it. Continuity is necessary, as well as renewal, not just of research concerns, but of people: new scholars and practitioners are welcome to participate at all levels, from all around the world, presenting new approaches and new areas that relate to the main concern of the Community Informatics paradigm: how ICT / Digital Media is transforming not just communities already existing, but by creating, priming or providing salience to new communities, of practice, beyond traditional borders, and virtual ones as well.

Cooperation is also expressed in participation in the editorial process. We request all readers to provide help with reviewing, as well as authors; to those already registered as such, please make sure that our requests are arriving by whitelisting our address in your spam filters, which are known to be overzealous sometimes.

Looking forward to your input at any point in time, please continue to share and enjoy the collective endeavors of the Community Informatics community.