

## Communication Inequality and the Technopolitical Structure of Platform Work: Aotearoa New Zealand Platform Workers During COVID-19

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Drawing on the culture-centered approach (CCA), we conducted 25 in-depth interviews with Aotearoa New Zealand rideshare and delivery drivers, demonstrating how the technopolitical structure of platform work intensified communication inequality, and resultingly, precarity, during the COVID-19 crisis. Although literature has recognized that the platform has become the place of employment, less researched is how this makes it the place of information distribution, handing power to the platform operators, while contributing to the precarity of platform workers. The concept of communication inequality has been underapplied to considering the intersections between the structure of platform work and worker precarity. A thematic analysis concentrates on 4 key themes linked to the centralization of information flows through the platform architecture: information restriction, indirect management, unilateral term-setting, and accentuated precarity. We conclude by arguing for more research on platform work from a communication perspective that foregrounds the voices of workers.

*Keywords: platform work, gig economy, precarity, Uber, communication inequality, voice, COVID-19, Culture-Centered Approach (CCA)*

On March 26, 2020, the Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa) government placed the country into a nationwide COVID-19 lockdown, with restrictions on freedom of movement generally recognized as one of the most comprehensive in the world. Although successfully halting the spread of the virus during 2020, a shorter, second national lockdown was required in August 2021 to combat the Delta variant. During the 2020 lockdown, a generous package of economic support was provided, including a wage subsidy supplied to employers to keep workers in jobs, whereas a sense of collective risk mitigation was promoted through a discourse of the “team of five million” (O’Brien & Huntington, 2022, p. 2).

However, the discourse of unity obscured communicative and material inequalities experienced by workers unable to work from home, such as location-based platform workers (Cherry & Rutschman, 2020;

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Webster & Zhang, 2021), particularly when the economic support packages were not as generous for the 2021 lockdown (Godfery, 2022). During the crisis, location-based platform workers (rideshare and delivery drivers) in Aotearoa were placed on the front lines, implicitly classed as essential workers, while lacking basic employment protections (Salter & Dutta, 2022). The legislative framework in Aotearoa delineates two types of workers, employees and contractors, with platform workers falling into the latter category, meaning they are legally prohibited from collective bargaining through union membership (Rosentreter & Miller, 2021). Further, they lack a sense of collective identity and the voice infrastructures required to advocate for improved conditions and inform the public of their iniquitous position (Dutta, 2020a, 2020b).

This study draws on in-depth interviews with 25 Aotearoa rideshare and delivery drivers, conducted between June 2020 and September 2021. Through applying the culture-centered approach (CCA), the research gives voice to a marginalized group during a period of intensified precarity and health risk. We argue that this diverse group of workers had their already significantly precarious positions intensified by a technopolitical structure designed to decrease risk and responsibility for platform operators (Graham, 2020), while increasing risk, communicative inequality, and precarity for platform workers (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; van Doorn & Chen, 2021).

This study contributes to a gap in the literature on platform work: the links between the technopolitical structure, precarity, and communication inequality. The latter has largely been applied within the subdiscipline of health communication to describe differences in distribution, access, and processing of vital health information from governments to different social groups (Dutta, 2020a; Ramanadhan & Viswanath, 2008). Its interplay with the information asymmetries endemic to platform work, and how it is intensified during crises such as COVID-19, has been underexplored.

In our analysis, we outline four key themes that characterize the workers' unequal communicative interactions with the platforms: *information restriction*, *indirect management*, *unilateral term-setting*, and *accentuated precaritization*. We argue that these phenomena, linked to but not determined by the technological affordances of the platform, combine to increase communicative inequality, thereby increasing the risk of contracting COVID-19, while also expanding material precarity by affecting the workers' capacity to generate a sustainable and secure income.

First, however, we outline what we mean by the technopolitical structure of platform work and its effects on the labor process through its information flows. We then outline the philosophical tenets of the CCA, how it draws the links between precarity, oppressive structures, and communicative inequality, and how it was applied to the context of working with rideshare and delivery drivers in Aotearoa. We conclude by outlining how the CCA can help to empower communities of workers to organize in fighting back against oppressive technopolitical structures.

### **The Technopolitical Structure of Platform Capitalism, the Reconfiguration of the Labor Process, and its Information Flows**

Srnicek (2017) coined the term "platform capitalism" to place the rise of the digital economy within longer-term trends in capitalist production, reminding us that the platforms we use every day are capitalist enterprises at their core. Although still representing a relatively small percentage of the global economy,

Srnicek saw that the “digital economy is becoming a hegemonic model” (Srnicek, 2017, p. 2), representing the potential savior of capitalism, which has experienced decades of stagnant economic growth.

The current dominance of the big tech platforms should therefore not be considered as a natural result of superior innovation and competition, but placed within broader and longer-term technopolitical order, which has instituted the dominance of U.S. capital in the areas of the Internet and the digital economy (Pohle & Voelsen, 2022). Encouraged to expand quickly through a ready stream of venture capital and a neoliberal framework of light-touch regulation (Anwar & Graham, 2021; Barratt, Goods, & Veen, 2020; Graham, 2020), the large platforms have generated “network effects” (Srnicek, 2017)—a tendency toward monopolization through possessing more users, resulting in a greater capacity to collect valuable data. Once they have more data than their competitors, platforms are able to establish “walled gardens” (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018), preventing smaller companies and the public from accessing data that derives from the provision of an essential infrastructure (Muldoon, 2022).

Being able to collect more data also means more sophisticated predictive algorithms, which, in the case of employment platforms, allows for the algorithmic management of the platform worker—an indirect, dehumanized form of management that relies on gamified nudges and coercive metrics to encourage workers to be available in the places and times most profitable to the platforms (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; van Doorn & Chen, 2021). The machine-learning algorithm becomes more sophisticated in its management over time through collecting more and more data, facilitating a feedback loop that allows the platform operators to constantly update the rules from data on driver reactions (Gandini, 2019; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; van Doorn & Chen, 2021). The relationship between the platform and the worker then becomes “gamified” through the real-time analysis of data on worker reactions to game-like rewards on the apps, to ascertain which incentives work best to “elicit higher productivity” (van Doorn & Chen, 2021, p. 1345).

Algorithmic management also allows the continuing misclassification of platform workers as independent contractors (Koonse et al., 2021). Through the idea that they are simply a technology company that mediates a relationship between customer and provider (Graham, 2020; Zödi & Török, 2021), platforms are able to function as a “shadow employer” (Gandini, 2019). However, according to Gandini (2019), the reconfiguration of the labor process goes deeper than misclassification. By facilitating a tripartite relation (worker-consumer-platform operator; see Zödi & Török, 2021) the platform becomes *the place of employment*, containing all the social relations inherent to the production process. Whereas under Fordism, the site of production is the factory, and the worker relates to a fixed employer through a formal employment contract (Jones, 2021), platform work deformalizes employment, unfixes employment relations, and fences off production relations “in a newly delimited, unique environment” (Gandini, 2019, p. 1040).

However, undertheorized in the literature on the gig economy is how the platform environment, with its walled gardens and deformalized employment relations, also contributes to communication inequalities in providing the technological opportunity to control and limit information flows. Although there has been a profusion of work that examines inequalities in terms of data extraction and analysis, which are heavily stacked toward the platform operators (see Bucher, Schou, & Waldkirch, 2021; Galière, 2020; Sun, 2019), since Rosenblat and Stark (2016), there has been a lack of work examining how employment organized through an app facilitates information asymmetries between platforms and workers (Grohmann,

Mendonça, & Woodcock, 2023). As Rosenblat and Stark (2016) put it, although Uber knows everything about them, “the paths for drivers to request information from Uber are limited” (p. 3771). Platforms are able to place obstacles in the communicative paths of drivers through the rationalization of the employment structure, allowing them to outsource many of the tasks normally completed by human managers to AI bots, offshore call centers, and customers, who in effect become their “middle managers” through rating systems (Healy, Pekarek, & Vromen, 2020; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018), with significant implications for communication inequality.

As highlighted by Rosenblat (2018), Uber’s self-positioning as a Silicon Valley technology company, more akin to Netflix or Facebook than a transportation company, means that they view drivers as customers rather than workers. The relationship between the drivers and the platform operators, mediated through the technology, becomes similar to that between social media companies and their users, whereby the latter becomes a resource for data extraction and profit (Gehl, 2015). At the same time, the relationship between social media users and the platforms they use is unilateral; they have no ability to bargain with the operators on their terms and conditions, only getting a stark choice on whether to accept or decline when signing up (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). This is in contrast to traditional labor relations, which are bilateral in that the worker (at least in theory) has the ability to negotiate or collectively bargain terms and conditions.

Platform work also reduces contact with other workers, leaving them isolated and reducing opportunities for sharing the kinds of informal information that facilitates collective identity formation (Barratt et al., 2020; Koonse et al., 2021; Stewart, Shanahan, & Smith, 2020). The algorithm encourages them to go to the places where there are customers, meaning they do not necessarily congregate in the same spaces as other workers. Even when they do gather together, they often view each other as competitors, rather than colleagues, making the kinds of deep communication needed to organize resistance haphazard and unpredictable (Cant, 2019; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Further, the misclassification of platform work as contractors precludes representation by labor unions, a traditional source of voice infrastructure that can challenge marginalization (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Rodino-Colocino, Wolfson, Dolber, & Kumanyika, 2021).

At the same time, we must remember that all technopolitical structures are contingent (Plantin et al., 2018)—they can be challenged and eventually changed, by placing worker voices at the forefront of a counterstructural movement addressing the communicative inequality they experience in the face of the powerful platforms (Cant & Woodcock, 2021; Grohmann et al., 2023; Woodcock, 2021). The next section summarizes the key tenets of the CCA and how it places the voices and struggles of marginalized workers in the foreground to address communicative inequality.

### **Communication Inequality and the CCA**

Ramanadhan and Viswanath (2008), health communication scholars, define communication inequality as “differences in the generation, manipulation, and distribution of information among social groups” (p. 1), leading to health disparities. Structural factors such as socioeconomic status affect “both the information environment and resources for consumption” (Ramanadhan & Viswanath, 2008, p. 3). The CCA takes this argument further, illustrating how there is a symbiotic relationship between “communicative

inequalities [and] inequalities in the *distribution* of material resources” (Dutta, 2021a, p. 3; emphasis added), which become “further entrenched amidst crises” (Dutta, Moana-Johnson, & Elers, 2020, p. 14) such as COVID-19. Communication inequality is therefore a key factor in the compounding precarities experienced by platform workers, which has so far been underexplored in the literature, because of the concept having so far failed to gain traction and theoretical development outside the subdiscipline of health communication.

As an illustrative example, for migrant workers in Singapore, communicative inequality includes, but also goes beyond, insufficient information on the health risks of COVID-19, to also include lack of access to voice infrastructures, which reinforces material inequality, with both combining to increase vulnerability to COVID-19 (Dutta, 2021b). The material precarities of migrant workers in Singapore, such as “struggles with food, decent housing, and adequate sanitation” (Dutta, 2021b, p. 1308) are intertwined with health inequalities but also kept in place by their lack of access to voice infrastructures to challenge their erasure from mainstream discourse. Feelings of erasure, while lacking the power to challenge it, has deleterious effects on health and well-being (Apouey, Roulet, Solal, & Stabile, 2020; Dutta, 2021b).

The CCA shares many of the same presuppositions as cultural studies—particularly that language and culture cannot be understood as separate from politics, and that analysis of their relation should be central to counterhegemonic struggle (Hall, 1992). However, the CCA differs from cultural studies in aiming to empower marginalized groups directly with the tools to interpret their situations and voice that understanding through communicative resources they typically lack access to, thereby working to combat communication inequality (Dutta, 2020b, 2021a). Rather than speaking *for* such groups, the CCA aims to speak *with* them, cocreating voice infrastructures at the margins of neoliberal economies (Dutta, 2020b, 2021b).

As well as offering a metatheoretical approach, the CCA offers a methodology that draws on ethnographic approaches, with their bottom-up approach to sense-making (Elers, Elers, Dutta, & Torres, 2021). The methodology encourages the researcher to constantly reflect on the impact of their decisions, alongside a commitment to giving voice to communities normally rendered invisible by dominant discourses. The CCA researcher aims to “engage in deep listening with humility and reflexivity” (Elers et al., 2021, p. 36), constantly reflecting on both their privilege and the appropriateness of their tools, while recognizing that socially scientific representations of complex lives can only ever be partial (Back, 2007).

And like cultural studies, culture is theorized as the site where voices from the margins disrupt oppressive structures through the articulation of contextually situated meanings. Emergent from the context of everyday lived struggles at the margins of the global neoliberal economy, the CCA turns to voice as “the very site where meanings from the margins, filled with other imaginations, break apart oppressive structures” (Dutta, 2020a, p. viii). Although existing studies employing the CCA document the interplays of communicative inequalities and material inequalities, including in the context of worker struggles amid COVID-19 (see Dutta, 2020a, 2020b), this literature has not yet delved into the forms of communicative inequalities experienced amid the precarity of platform work. In the next section, we explore the challenges and benefits of applying the approach to organizing an individualized and heterogeneous group of platform workers.

### **Applying the CCA to Platform Workers in Aotearoa**

The 25 interviews drawn on in this study are part of a two-year project aiming to investigate the expansion of platform work within Aotearoa. Although ideally, within the principles of the CCA, a community advisory group would lead the recruitment (see Dutta et al., 2018), in this case, platform workers are not an established community, instead being comprised of a heterogeneous, atomized, and geographically dispersed group of workers. As we had no other way of accessing the "community," the interviewees were recruited on social media, between June 2020 and September 2021 (15 months). A poster advertising the research project was posted to various Facebook groups (including specific groups for rideshare and delivery drivers, as well as general community groups).

Recruitment proved a slow, incremental process whereby some posts would receive significant interest, whereas others would receive barely any. Some of the interviewees were asked what they thought the reasons were for this, and it was generally acknowledged that drivers felt both isolated and afraid to speak out. This was confirmed through correspondence with drivers in arranging interviews, who often asked us to verify that the interview process would be fully anonymous.

Of the 25 participants, 23 were currently working as delivery or rideshare drivers, with the other two having recently found other work. Fourteen were rideshare drivers either solely working for Uber (7) or in combination with one or more of Uber's competitors: Didi, Ola, and Zoomy (7). The other 11 were delivery drivers, of which four worked solely for DeliverEasy (an Aotearoa-based company), while the remaining seven either worked only for Uber Eats (three) or Uber Eats and Menulog (4). Just 11 of the 25 drivers relied on gig work as their sole income, whereas 14 undertook it on top of another job.

In terms of gender balance, six of the 25 interviewees were female (24%), while the other 21 were male (76%). Five of the six female participants worked currently or formerly in rideshare, with only one female delivery driver interviewed. At one stage, purposive sampling was attempted to increase the proportion of female interviewees, where female drivers were identified in Facebook groups and sent direct messages, but this yielded only one extra participant. That participant was also asked to contact other female drivers she knew, but no others were interested in participating. Nevertheless, the 76% male figure does not differ substantially from recent survey findings both in Aotearoa (Rosentreter & Miller, 2021) and the United Kingdom (Spencer & Huws, 2021).

In terms of location, five were based in Auckland, four in Christchurch, 14 in Wellington, and one each in New Plymouth and Hastings. The high figure for Wellington was partly because of one of the authors being based there and utilizing the community Facebook group *Vic Deals* for advertising the research.

Unfortunately, standardized questions were not asked of the participants' age, sexuality, ethnicity, or country of origin via a demographics form. At the same time, inferences could be made from the participant narratives on whether they were born in Aotearoa New Zealand, and most (13 of 25) were not. Of those 13 immigrants, eight were ascertained to be of Asian descent.

Interviews were held over Zoom, and the format was qualitative, in-depth, and semi-structured, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews followed a schedule flexible enough to allow for the articulation of anecdotes from the participants, which were often not only highly insightful but also aided the building of rapport.

The 25 transcripts were then coded with a thematic analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), aiming to find emergent themes through a close reading of the data, without denying the active role of the researcher. We produced three successive phases of reading/coding/thematizing (Tracy, 2013). The first phase was reading and immersing ourselves in the data, which was important for the foregrounding of worker voices. A secondary phase then saw primary themes emerge, whereas the third phase involved the production of secondary themes that were more analytical, where we would attempt to find lines between the descriptive codes, amalgamating some, and recategorizing others, drawing from theoretical concepts. This dialectical conversation with theory led to the development of the four key themes related to communication inequality outlined in the next section. See Table 1 below for the list of primary themes and the secondary themes they translated into.

**Table 1. List of Primary and Secondary Themes.**

<b>Primary theme</b>	<b>Secondary theme</b>
Communication/platform function	Information restriction/Indirect management/Unilateral term-setting
Competition: Race to the bottom	Accentuated precarity
Contract	Indirect management/Unilateral term-setting
COVID	Accentuated precarity
Customer service/complaints	Indirect management
Danger/lack of care	Unilateral term-setting
Dispute	Unilateral term-setting
Employee/contractor status	Indirect management/Unilateral term-setting
Entrepreneurship/self as business	Accentuated precarity
Earnings	Accentuated precarity/Information restriction
Expense/risk	Accentuated precarity
Flexibility	Indirect management
Health and safety	Accentuated precarity
Income insecurity/lack of protections	Accentuated precarity
Isolation	Information restriction/Accentuated precarity
Market dominance	Unilateral term-setting
Power imbalance: attitude to drivers	Indirect management/Unilateral term-setting
Power: opacity and algorithmic manipulation	Indirect management/Unilateral term-setting
Power: data	Indirect management/Unilateral term-setting
Rating system	Indirect management/Unilateral term-setting
Safety/working hours	Accentuated precarity
Transparency	Information restriction/Indirect management/Unilateral term-setting
Temporariness/side hustle	Accentuated precarity

To respect their anonymity, while ensuring we articulate the voices of the workers directly, participants have been given culturally appropriate pseudonyms next to quoted extracts from interview transcripts.

### **Experiences of Communication Inequality for Platform Workers**

Our analysis identified four key themes that emerged as the most prominent about our participants' communicative struggles within the technopolitical structure of platform capitalism: *information restriction*, *indirect management*, *unilateral term-setting*, and *accentuated precaritization*. Together, they create a vivid picture of the impacts of channeling information flows through the platform on the labor process while highlighting communicative inequalities and precarities during the COVID crisis.

#### **Information Restriction**

Despite the potential of digital platforms to connect workers and consumers in a seamless way, Uber (and other rideshare and delivery platforms) deliberately restricts the information their drivers receive. The below passage is from an Uber Eats delivery driver (Kadeem), describing what happens after they first receive the notifications on their phones about a prospective delivery. They detail how they must make a very quick decision (within 30 seconds) on whether to accept the job:

As soon as you click on go, you have you do these two steps, and then the app starts looking or finding you trips, depending on the location you are. And then let's say you match them; they send you a match of the place nearby. And then they [. . .] give you all the instructions like this is the name of the restaurant, this is how much you will be paid and this would be the suburb for the delivery. And if you feel like everything is OK [. . .] you accept the order and you get 30 seconds to accept or decline.

Although some information is provided (distance in kilometers, minimum payment, the name of the restaurant, and the suburb for the delivery), other information that the drivers could use to make informed decisions is deliberately withheld (such as the exact location of the restaurant and the food that the customer has ordered). This lack of information impacts their ability to make informed decisions on whether to accept or reject jobs, vital for them to make a profit (because of expenses, some they will only break even or even lose money on some jobs).

The same issue of information restriction was present in interviews with rideshare drivers:

With Uber when we accept trips we're not told what the destination is [. . .] all we get told is how many minutes away is the pickup [. . .] destination from where we are [. . .] so we don't know where they're going until after we pick them up and then when we start the trip. (Isaak)

The only information Uber rideshare drivers receive upon accepting the job is how far away the pickup point is from their current locations and the star rating of the passenger. Other crucial information,



such as the passenger's destination, or even the length of the proposed trip, are absent from their decision-making base. This information is deliberately withheld by Uber, as they know that drivers are less likely to accept shorter trips or those that lead them away from population-dense areas, as these are less profitable. However, if the customer is unable to secure an Uber ride for these kinds of trips, they would turn to one of the platform's competitors (thus impacting market share).

The pandemic then produced another space of information deficiency for rideshare and delivery drivers. Although not a deliberate strategy by the platforms, it was linked to the technopolitical structure in terms of a reliance on the platform as the place of employment, with all information channeled through it, and the inconsistencies of independent contractor status. When asked whether he received good instructions or even hands-on training from Uber and Ola on appropriate safety instructions, Isaak replied, "We got e-mails and stuff saying you know wear a mask and hand sanitizer and [. . .] the suggestion not to use your air conditioning or to have air coming from outside."

Crucial information that could potentially protect the workers and passengers from COVID infection was delivered by e-mail delivered through the app. It was then up to the drivers to read the e-mails thoroughly in their own (unpaid) time, interpret them correctly, and apply them. Because of their status as independent contractors, applying the instructions usually meant purchasing their own personal protective equipment (PPE). Uber did offer to provide refunds for sanitizer during the first lockdown, but this was for just \$20, and there was a lengthy process involved in claiming the rebate (only one of our participants succeeded in claiming this).

For the delivery drivers, too, advice on best practices came not through live online training, but via a long e-mail:

Uh . . . wouldn't say training, but we got a big email from like the boss about how Delivereasy was going to be run [. . .] during the lockdown [. . .], and that was just all about maintaining like personal hygiene [. . .] and just the whole process of contactless payments and how it would work. (Keenan)

The lack of training should also be put into the context of the age and gender of many food delivery drivers. Of the 11 interviewed delivery drivers, 10 were young men, and many of them (particularly those who worked for Delivereasy) were university students or schoolchildren. Their experience and perception of risk would therefore likely be affected, made worse by the recent spread of COVID-19 misinformation in New Zealand. As Ronnie relates, he is under the false impression that the virus cannot affect young, healthy, vaccinated individuals: "I'm not really worried about that virus thing. I've had vaccinations and I move around quite a lot. I wouldn't be surprised if I encounter it. Looking at the information for someone who's young and healthy, I'll be fine."

### ***Indirect Management***

This theme relates to the platforms' efforts to subtly keep workers available at the times and places most profitable to the companies, as well as discouraging them from working for competitors or from

adopting strategies such as canceling (see below) and "multi-apping" (Badger, 2021), which is the act of signing up to and logging in to two or more platforms simultaneously. Indirect management includes algorithmic management, but it also includes other elements such as loyalty schemes, where platforms offer ways to ameliorate information restriction.

Because of information restriction, often the driver's only option is to accept the job through the app to receive more information (such as the passenger's destination), only to cancel it before pickup if he or she gauges that it would not be sufficiently profitable. However, this then affects his or her cancellation rate, which, if it gets too high, will prompt "an email like a warning from Uber saying you're cancelling too many trips. And if you cancel too many . . . they can just deactivate you" (Isaak). In other words, Uber is acting as a shadow employer by disciplining drivers for canceling jobs through threatening deactivation, which in effect means being fired, as they will no longer be able to use the app.

By way of incentive, Uber operates a loyalty scheme, Uber Pro, with one of the key qualifying metrics being a cancellation rate of 3% or below. With four "status tiers" (blue, gold, platinum, and diamond), Uber clearly states on the web page that "see trip duration and direction" (Uber, 2021) only becomes available as one of the listed benefits of attaining gold status and above. In other words, to attain the information that the driver needs, he or she must accept 97% of the jobs, thereby accepting that a significant proportion of those will be unprofitable, increasing material inequality.

Additionally, despite that many participants enjoyed the autonomy of lacking a human manager, they still found themselves having their material circumstances and behavior affected by algorithmic management. For example, Bahufal, who worked for Uber Eats, relayed how despite making a concession to workers on paid waiting times, he suspects that the platform tweaked the algorithm so "you get very less money than what you were used to before."

A key algorithmic management practice intended to incentivize workers is Uber's surge pricing, where, during periods and within places of high demand from passengers, drivers are enticed to make themselves available for work. Such surges, particularly when a popular sports event or pop concert is happening, can lead to fares that are three or even four times the normal rate. It therefore becomes a particularly crucial part of the competitive knowledge of the rideshare driver to predict when and where these surges may occur.

However, because of the opacity of the algorithm, with Uber closely guarding exactly how these surge areas and rates are specified, being available to take advantage of surge pricing is never an exact science. Indeed, there was some suspicion among participants that surge pricing would be advertised on Uber's map to entice them to pick up rides at high-demand locations and times, before failing to apply those prices to their fares. Because of the lack of communicative channels for drivers to raise issues with managers, "there's no ways for us to prove to Uber that I could see it on my map" (Cairon). Consequently, surge pricing, although seemingly a source of great profit for drivers, masks considerable information and power asymmetries.

In addition to incentives, there is the harder hand of discipline—and this is used in more subtle and more regular ways than threats of deactivation (most commonly through the rating system, discussed below). Even so, half of the interviewed rideshare drivers resisted Uber’s indirect management by not wanting to be part of the Uber Pro loyalty scheme. Those seven drivers instead chose to practice multi-apping. However, this kind of resistance, while enabling some sense of agency for the workers, could not make up for the significant power imbalances, made evident through their interactions with the unchallengeable decisions of the algorithm.

As described, the rideshare and delivery drivers we interviewed have no contact with human managers in their day-to-day work, with important decisions instead made by machine-learning algorithms. However, the dehumanized nature of their work extends beyond algorithmic management to instances when they need to contact the platforms with a query or dispute. Uber formerly provided physical Green Light Hubs, based in urban centers, where drivers could speak to staff employed by Uber to answer queries, while also mingling with other drivers. However, these have now been closed, and any queries need to be resolved through a call center (based offshore), which is only available to those who join the loyalty scheme. Those who do not join have to submit their queries to AI bots, which provide generic answers which say the “same thing [. . .] over and over again” (Amelie).

Drivers waste unpaid time attempting to resolve disputes, often resulting in going around in circles. The more experienced drivers learned not to attempt to contact Uber, instead resolving queries through talking to other drivers on the Facebook groups, and/or to cut corners in their work. Below, Karam, an Uber Eats driver, recounts how he threw a customer’s food away because the app crashed. As all communication is channeled through the platform, there was no way to contact the customer, the restaurant, or Uber:

So I cannot actually go back to the restaurant give it back to them, so I was really confused what to do. So I tried to contact them [Uber], the problem is that they don’t have a contact number [. . .] So I was not sure what to do [. . .] So I just parked the car and I dumped the food.

Here, the driver is attempting to do the right thing but soon learns (this experience was within his first 50 deliveries) that to be profitable in this job he should not waste unpaid time in attempting to contact Uber.

### ***Unilateral Term-Setting***

As discussed, platform workers in Aotearoa are classified as contractors and therefore have no right to unionize or collectively bargain.<sup>2</sup> When the platforms change their pay or conditions, this either happens through a subtle tweaking of the algorithm without the worker’s knowledge, or through a change to the terms and conditions on the app, to which they either click “yes” or “cancel.”

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<sup>2</sup> On October 29, 2022, the Aotearoa Employment Court ruled that four Uber driver claimants were employees, rather than contractors. However, this ruling does not currently apply to all platform workers and contractors.

Although our participants did use social media to complain and offer each other support, somewhat ameliorating communication inequality, this has no impact on their terms and conditions. The platforms do have complaint processes, but they would be subject to the dehumanized and frustrating dispute structures. As Findlay describes below, there is a recognition among workers that they have no democratic right to question anything, partly because there is no human to aim a question toward:

You know this and you don't question that. That's kind of like this is how it is for you. If you're part of it, then you're part of it. You know this is how things are going to be. So there's no point questioning it because there is no human component to it, so there's no one to question.

Moreover, because the gig economy platforms hold most of the power in the relationship, with no transparent disciplinary processes, if they do find a human to question, they face the very real prospect of being deactivated. Many drivers commented on the widespread fear of speaking out, both publicly on social media and privately through contacting the platforms. Uber includes nondisclosure and nondisparagement clauses in their contracts that drivers sign, contributing to the fear that they will be punished for speaking out.

Aqeel even equated Uber's antidemocratic, bullying behavior to the Taliban. And, as put by Sian, the significant financial investment involved, particularly in rideshare, created a real fear of suddenly being "cut off," leaving them with substantial debt and no way of paying it back: "And, probably because they know that they can just cut people off, they would be worried that if they if they found that [. . .] they [could] just get cut."

### ***Accentuated Precarity***

Rideshare and delivery work is deeply orientated toward supply and demand, leaving workers highly vulnerable to decreases in demand from customers or increases in the supply of drivers. Through the platform, a temporary contract is generated between the customer and the driver for the delivery of a specific service, a piecemeal "micro-job," with no payment made to the worker for time spent waiting for work or for time spent traveling. As a result, there are absolutely no guarantees of a steady income, which can often make paying steady expenses like rent and food problematic. And as with communication between the drivers and the platform operators, the transaction between customer and driver is channeled through the platform, preventing communication through other means that may establish a more sustainable, long-term relationship. Hence, although precarity is a precondition of these workers' status, the technopolitical structure leaves them open to have this precarity accentuated with the onset of a significant crisis such as COVID-19.

Decreases in demand can derive from traditional lulls such as the summer holiday period when Aotearoa's urban centers are much quieter. Jorge estimated that he makes just "\$10 an hour" after expenses during these lull periods, as opposed to "\$20 an hour" normally (still less than the current minimum wage of \$21.20).

However, COVID-19 dramatically increased the occurrence of lull periods. Demand from customers decreased, and anecdotal evidence from the interviewees indicates that the supply of drivers increased (more people moving into platform work after losing their jobs). At the same time, the lockdowns and the cancellation of large events removed the ability to rely on lucrative surges to make up for the drop in income during lull periods. Melissa estimates that her earnings have resultingly halved: "I'm not earning what I was doing before COVID, definitely not. I'm earning probably half of what I was earning before COVID."

And although most of the interviewed rideshare workers received the wage subsidy during lockdowns, this only covered periods at levels three and four (which have been comparatively brief outside of Auckland), with significant declines in customer demand manifesting in levels one and two (see New Zealand Government, 2022, for more detail on New Zealand's COVID-19 alert system).

The piecemeal payment structure also means platform workers have no sick pay or annual leave entitlements. If they are to have time not working, they must save and plan for this eventuality (very difficult when their margins are so low). As put by Hayden, "it's up to that individual to put that money aside and into a savings account to pay for sick pay, to pay for annual leave." This leaves them highly vulnerable to not only become infected with COVID themselves but also pass that infection on to passengers. As they would not be paid for periods of not working, they are likely to remain working while infected (although this was not directly asked to the participants).

As Aqeel claims, Uber drivers, who are not considered employees by the platform, "are not treated as a human being." When a COVID-positive passenger arrives on a plane, unlike airport staff, who are provided with adequate protections such as high-quality masks, regular testing, and social distancing, Uber drivers receive none of that protection and are therefore "more vulnerable," particularly when they would be "the first ones who are waiting after the customs for the COVID-positive person."

Another precaritizing vulnerability derives from the platform ratings systems, where customers give them a score on their driving, attitude, promptness, and so on. All the platforms that the interview participants worked for had some form of rating system (while Uber's seems to be the most sophisticated). As Neal commented, "Uber, Ola, and DiDi have a mutual star rating system where I [the driver] can rate the customer [and they] can rate me." Hence, after every taxi ride, the driver will rate the customer out of five stars, and vice versa. Although seemingly equal (both parties can rate each other), this hides a fundamental power imbalance, as the drivers alone are reliant on a high average rating to maintain their income (they can be deactivated if their average goes below 4.2). One Uber driver even provided bottled water and sunblock at their own expense to boost their ratings.

Such expenses are just one part of a whole litany that all the interviewed workers, especially rideshare drivers, must subtract from their earnings, after the platform's commission. These include petrol (the cost of which has recently increased substantially), insurance (for rideshare, this is the more expensive comprehensive commercial kind with passenger liability), tax, vehicle purchase, depreciation, and maintenance (for rideshare, the car must be under 10 years old), phone and data package (the apps must run on smartphones), passenger endorsement licensing, criminal records checks, and for food delivery, the purchase of a thermal bag. The accumulation of expenses, when considered together, constitutes a

significant and risky investment by the gig workers, made yet more risky by the knowledge that they could be deactivated and lose their income at any time. Several Uber rideshare workers recounted horror stories whereby drivers had been deactivated because of a single customer complaint. Because the drivers are not employed by Uber, there is no transparent disciplinary process, which must take place before they lose their livelihoods.

That they are solely responsible for all expenses and risks further reinforces the idea that gig workers are microbusinesses, competing against other drivers. And like other businesses, they have to find everything out for themselves, with the aforementioned platform information restrictions providing them with very little helpful information. Several drivers commented that although Uber asks for proof of insurance, they do not state that this needs to be comprehensive commercial, rather than standard. This means that drivers would be very likely to take shortcuts in this area, only to find themselves personally liable were they to have an accident with passengers on board. With DeliverEasy, the interview evidence indicates that they do not require or even advise their delivery workers (most often young men and some school-aged children) to purchase any kind of insurance.

Aotearoa platform workers are therefore reliant on Facebook groups for information on how to survive. Responsible for completing income tax returns, many turn to specialist gig-worker accountants (who charge a fee) to complete them. Those who have previous experience in running businesses and are also more familiar with the culture of Aotearoa are in a slightly less precarious position than those who have immigrated.

### Conclusions

The empirical accounts offered by platform workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic depict the ways in which their everyday negotiations of the technopolitical structure are shaped by communication inequality, which sediments their precarity and therefore material inequality. Communication inequality is manifested in ways that go well beyond that term's standard definition in health communication as iniquitous access to health information from governments (Ramanadhan & Viswanath, 2008). The reconfiguration of the labor process, deriving from the technopolitical structure of platform capitalism, means that the platform has become the place of employment (Gandini, 2019). However, under-researched is that this means the platform is also the place of information distribution, giving huge power to the platform operators while contributing further to the vulnerability and precarity of platform workers.

Our four themes, highlighting the experiences of platforms as the place of employment: *information restriction*, *indirect management*, *unilateral term-setting*, and *accentuated precaritization*, are all linked to the centralization of information flows through the platform architecture. Uber and the other platforms enacted the power to restrict the amount of information workers received on prospective jobs, limiting their capacity to increase their income during a period of fluctuating demand. They were also negligent in their provision of information, training, and support during the COVID crisis. At the same time, indirect management and dehumanized complaints and disciplinary procedures left workers feeling frustrated, isolated, and afraid to speak out.

Communicative inequality is also manifested in the ways our participants are atomized from each other, and in the way they are denied the right to collectively organize, which could potentially provide a platform for a collective voice. These communicative inequalities both constitute and reinforce the multifaceted and compounding precarities that form the nature of platform work (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022; McKenzie, 2020). The lack of access to information resources and infrastructures for voice shape the exploitative conditions that the workers negotiate. These exploitative conditions are further exacerbated amid the pandemic as crisis (Dutta, 2020b, 2021b; Dutta et al., 2020), exposing the bodies of platform workers to health risks without access to necessary protective resources at work (Apouey et al., 2020; Koonse et al., 2021; Salter & Dutta, 2022).

Although we recognize that there is increasing evidence from other countries that highlights the resistive and mutual support strategies of platform workers and that can ultimately challenge the profit models of the platforms (e.g., Anwar & Graham, 2020; Cant, 2019; Wells, Attoh, & Cullen, 2021; Yu, Tréré, & Bonini, 2022), the evidence from our interviewees was that this remains largely sporadic and uncoordinated in Aotearoa. Although drivers did support each other and even attempt to organize strikes on Facebook groups, the latter seemed to have difficulty recruiting a significant number of drivers or have much impact on the policies and decisions of the platforms. We also found no evidence for the use of WhatsApp groups, as there has been elsewhere (Cant, 2019; Grohmann et al., 2023).

At the same time, all technopolitical structures are contingent (Plantin et al., 2018)—they can be challenged and eventually changed. The CCA conceives that this occurs through the nexus of structure-culture-agency: Structures refer both to the oppressive technopolitical structure of platform capitalism, while also to the forms of organizing that push back against that. Cultures are reflected in and reflective of locally articulated meanings, and agency is enacted in the negotiations of meanings. In the realm of precarious work, the expression of worker agency in making sense of the organizing structures of work forms the basis of organizing to transform deeply unequal structures.

As a result, any analysis of the technopolitical structure of platform work must derive from the voices of those engaged in it, which we have attempted to do here, via an approach that considers its iniquitous effects as fundamentally *communicative* in nature. We therefore call for more research from communication scholars that interrogates the relationship between the communicative inequalities experienced by platform workers every day and the material inequalities identified by scholarship in adjacent fields.

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