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Food does not teleport: Exploring work practice on food delivery platforms through ethnographic inquiry

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Introduction

I can tap a few buttons on my phone and a prepared meal appears at my doorway within 20 minutes. Since food does not teleport, the food must have gotten there in another way. My PhD project investigates how.

While the practice of restaurant-to-door delivery is not novel in itself, one key aspect of modern food delivery is: the platform infrastructures and the way they are deployed. Rather than aggregating restaurant menus and phone numbers, companies are now providing digital infrastructures for the delivery to be completed (Hirschberg, 2019). Thus, they also provide work for a fleet of loosely knit workers through so-called algorithmic management (Lee et al., 2015).

It has now been three years since I was walking down a central hill in my home city and was struck by a guy who came wobbling up on his bicycle; blue jacket, blue square bag and a smartphone mounted to his handlebars. Within three months, I had conducted a pilot study where I worked as a courier myself and interviewed a few workers. Since that first step, I have worked as a food delivery

worker in two different countries and conducted ethnographic interviews with more than a dozen.

In the following, I start by presenting my case and my ethnographic approach to it. I then present my overall research questions, and three empirical questions that contour my research. I end by presenting my next steps and expected contributions.

Case and approach

I study work practice on food delivery platforms from the workers' perspective. To focus my research, I currently mostly study Wolt, a Helsinki-based company founded in 2014 that owns and manages a food delivery platform connecting fast food customers and restaurants with their “courier partners” who deliver the food. While Wolt is as of primo 2022 present in more than 250 cities and 40 countries spread across Europe and Asia, I have, thus far, decided to focus on how the platform works in a Nordic setting by conducting field work in Aarhus, Denmark and Helsinki, Finland.

Methodologically, my PhD project relies on multi-sited ethnographic inquiry and thus extends a long tradition of ethnographic work studies conducted within CSCW (See for instance (Blomberg & Karasti, 2013)). In practice, I signed up as courier almost three years ago and began to work part-time on the platform. Concurrently with this participant observation I have conducted ethnographic interviews with couriers in Aarhus and Helsinki during my two field studies. During my first six-month field work in Aarhus, I worked part-time as a courier myself. In this process, I talked to many couriers while working and conducted long interviews with eight of them. This approach allowed to capture the work process and algorithmic management as it unfolded in my local context.

During my 3-month stay in Helsinki I situated myself with several food delivery workers, by moving into shared student housing in the Northern part of Helsinki where I was the only non-Asian resident. This allowed me to experience the life of some of these workers, and provided plenty of room to both share my research results with them and hear their concerns. These formal and informal interviews were complemented by ride-alongs with three couriers working by car which gave me real-time insight into the work practice as it was conducted by these workers. Finally, I spent days working from a McDonald's in the city centre and got acquainted with several of the workers who had this spot as their “hub” while working for the platform. To deepen my findings, I interviewed nine couriers focusing on themes that had emerged during the initial part of the study.

Given the highly politicized context around these platforms, I find it relevant to state that I am not affiliated with any company, nor any union. I believe deeper insight into the processes that go into developing the platforms, and a better understanding of union history could be fruitful. Such studies could reveal further

details of both the technical composition of the platforms as well as the substantiate the divergence of visions for the future of work amongst unionists. However, my job in this project is to granularly engage with the workers' perspective.

Research questions

Given the exploratory nature of my research as well as the rapidly evolving field, the research questions for my PhD have been subject to continual adjustments. However, the overarching questions encapsulating my work are: How does algorithmic management structure work practices? How does it unfold in different settings from the workers' perspective? In the following section I present three questions that structure and specify my current work. I present these alongside my preliminary findings pertaining to each question. My work until now has been focused on the first question, whereas the latter two play a key role in my current work.

RQ1: How is work practice structured on Wolt in Aarhus?

The research question above structured the first stages of my research, as I began my field work on the platform. While I have consulted other studies on food delivery and algorithmic management since (eg. (Seetharaman et al., 2021; Veen et al., 2020)), the initial part of my PhD was inspired by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), and I thus sought to approach the field with limited preconceptions. Through participant observation I came to understand how delivery bags and orders were dispatched, how workers signed up for the platform, and sought to understand each of the steps in the work practice. In this process, I began engaging with the literature around algorithmic management conceptualised as “Software algorithms that assume managerial functions and surrounding institutional devices that support algorithms in practice” (Lee et al., 2015). However, the algorithmic management on the platform appeared milder, or more lenient, than I had anticipated after reading other papers: I experienced no financial repercussions or penalties when I was late or spilled food, I continuously had the opportunity to contact a human supporter whenever there was an issue coming, Wolt was paying me more than similar jobs in Denmark and – finally – I did not experience any sanctions if I chose not to accept certain orders. Building on the vocabulary from Möhlmann and Zalmanson's specification of algorithmic management for IS (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017), I co-wrote an article where we proposed the notion 'lenient algorithmic management' (Kusk & Bossen, 2022). With this, we wanted to convey that the algorithmic management in this context appeared milder than it was portrayed in other studies. We contend that a spectral understanding algorithmic management will prove useful going forward. Further, we displayed how the

lenience in algorithmic management and the unsupervised nature of the work allowed for multiple expressions of agency by the workers.

RQ2: How is work negotiated by workers on food delivery platforms?

The strategies workers engaged in to optimise their work had already come to my attention in Aarhus, but became a primary focus as I moved my study to Helsinki. While focusing on the agency of workers on the platform, I discovered that there were in fact constant negotiations going on between the workers and the platform. Some workers would, based on the information they received from the dispatching algorithm, only accept a small fraction of orders offered to them and the company, in turn, would make more or less information available on this pop-up. I am currently going through my data to identify and describe these negotiations in detail. In doing this, I am building on Strauss and colleagues' empirical work studies in hospitals that, while not negligent of grand circumstances and contexts, focus on the negotiations that occur in various "arcs of work" that are enacted through constant interactions (Strauss, 1985).

RQ3: How is scheduling done on food delivery platforms?

Another one of my current research questions ties to workers' scheduling practices. Given that workers on the Wolt platform currently can choose themselves when they want to go online and offline, I found that each of the workers' I talked to had different plans for when they worked. Some preferred busy evenings; others preferred to work in the light of day; yet others prioritised having the opportunity to take six vacations per year to meet with their children living in another country. Similarly to my work on RQ2 I am going through my data to identify the scheduling practices, describe them in detail and connect them to current discussions on, for instance, flexi-time (Sheail, 2018).

Next steps and expected contribution

In the next part of my PhD, I will focus on analysing my data with the above-mentioned questions in mind. In this process I hope to integrate deeper with previous work on work practice that has been widespread within the CSCW in general and ECSCW in particular. Further, I plan to have a final field study in a context outside of the Nordic region. Here, I plan to follow the Wolt platform to a - from my Scandinavian perspective - remote location such as Kazakhstan or Japan. While the pragmatics of this field study are yet to be finalised, I expect it to contribute with nuance and insights to the research questions above as well as present new questions and answers tying to standardisation and globalisation.

I hope and expect that my research will provide a workers' perspective of how food does not teleport, but rather is subject to a novel work practice with algorithms at the centre. In turn, this should lead to a better understanding of platform work and algorithmic management which are both pressing and controversial topics central to discussions around the future of work. Finally, at a more general level, I hope my work furthers discussions on how algorithms are permeating modern life – including life in the workplace.

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