Representing a Gig Economy: gender, visibility and news coverage of on-demand work during the pandemic

The Autonomy Institute

Representing a gig economy

Gender, visibility, and news coverage of on-demand work during the pandemic

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FEMINIST FUTURES PROGRAMME

Autonomy Institute

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FEMINIST FUTURES PROGRAMME

Autonomy Institute

Autonomy is an Institute which creates data-driven tools and research for sustainable economic planning.

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- This report examines news media narratives surrounding the gig economy in the UK press during the first two years of the Covid pandemic (2020-21).

- It finds a disproportionate news media focus on the gig economy in its 'masculinised' forms – such as driving and delivery – at the expense of other, more neglected parts of the gig economy, such as care work.

- The report is grounded in a content analysis of two samples of coverage from three British newspapers: The Times, The Sun and The Guardian.
    - Sample One covers the early stage of the Covid pandemic (March-April 2020), while Sample Two covers the same months a year later (March-April 2021).

- Focusing on Sample One, from March to April 2020:
    - Most stories focused on couriers (52% of stories). This was followed by driving and cab hailing (22%).

    - The least represented were care workers (4% of stories), sanitation workers (4%), childcare workers/babysitters (4%), and sex workers (4%).

    - In terms of the images that publications chose to accompany stories, of 45 images, 62% showed men, while only 15% showed women.

- Looking instead at Sample two, from March to April 2021:
    - 50% of stories revolving around driving and ride hailing, and 46.1% focussing on couriers and delivery.

    - There were small percentages involving those working in hospitality (3.8%) and 11.5% of stories covered forms of work covered by the ‘Other’ category (including designers, photographers, beauticians, and those working in the wellness industry). This suggests the 2021 sample was substantially more focussed on masculinised forms of gig economy work than 2020.

    - 61.5% of news stories focused on or discussed men. Only 15.3% of stories contained references to women.
        - On a granular level, of the 61.5% of stories including men in this sample, all were drivers or couriers.

Introduction: which Gig Economy?

Introduction: Which Gig Economy?

Work in the gig economy is currently a topic of urgent enquiry for academics, policy makers, and labour organizers alike. Concerns about employment status, pay, working conditions, and so on have driven various important studies, while also generating coverage in the mainstream media. As several scholars have remarked, however, critical and popular discussions alike have so far tended both to assume and to assemble a rather limited conception of what this work entails.

In general, as Kalleberg and Dunn note (2016: 11), the gig economy is 'characterized by short-term engagements among employers, workers, and customers', and as such can be seen as a continuation of existing 'atypical, casual, freelance, or contingent work arrangements' – particularly those 'characteristic of much of the economy prior to the middle of the twentieth century' (not least, we would add, those associated with feminized forms of work such as domestic service). However, Webster and Zhang argue that such 'a wide-reaching definition [...] hides the complexities and shifts in the last decade, as these forms of work become coupled with digital processes' (2020: 114). The more common approach within the literature is thus to emphasize not continuities, but rather the novelty of gig economy work as a phenomenon shaped by digital platforms.

Bérastégui, for example, defines the gig economy as 'a market system in which companies or individual requesters hire workers to perform short assignments. These transactions are mediated through online labour platforms, either outsourcing work to a geographically dispersed crowd or allocating work to individuals in a specific area' (2021: 5). Lepanjuuri, Wishart, and Cornick advance a similar understanding, arguing that the gig economy 'involves the exchange of labour for money between individuals or companies via digital platforms that actively facilitate matching between providers and customers, on a short-term and payment by task basis' (2018: 4; see also Hunt & Samman, 2019: 7).

This attentiveness to the (comparatively) new forms of mediation that make much contemporary gig work possible is important, given that digital platforms can 'amplify existing power dynamics and inequalities while introducing technologies and techniques that produce qualitatively new arrangements, conditions and experiences of work' (Van Doorn, 2020: 50). While these definitions have much to recommend them, however, we would note that not all elements of their characterizations hold equally well across sectors.

Firstly, not all short term, "gig-based" jobs are accessed via digital platforms; much ad hoc childcare, for example, makes use of social and kinship networks, local contacts, personal recommendations, and so on (Bryson et al, 2012). Secondly, not all paid-per-service work is as short term as it may at first appear. Within certain industries, workers may continue to be hired on a job-by-job basis while being engaged in regular or recurring assignments for the same individual client. This is perhaps particularly the case in industries, such as care work and domestic cleaning, where trust is built overtime or interpersonal relationships are formed between workers and service users.

As we shall see, however, the gig economy is not primarily discussed in terms of these traditionally feminized sectors, and is instead understood first and foremost in relation to transport and delivery work. Indeed, there tends to be a particular focus on a handful of very well-known companies, such as Deliveroo and Uber, often at the expense of other forms of work (Hunt, n.d.). This is neatly illustrated by the use of the term "Uberization" to refer to the rolling out to other sectors of the kind of digitally-facilitated forced flexibilization commonly associated with the company's business model.

The extent to which other forms of gig economy work are neglected within recent discussions is a primary concern of the current discussion. Building upon van Doorn's call for a differentiated approach that 'focuses on particular economies (plural), markets, and/or industries [...] while taking into account a number of factors that co-determine how/to what extent gig workers in each industry will be able and willing to organize' (2019: n.p.), we have elected to frame our discussion here not in terms of the gig economy, but rather a gig economy.

In what follows, we will be considering which forms of gig economy work enjoy a greater or lesser degree of cultural visibility within news narratives, focusing on two key moments over the course of the pandemic (namely, UK treasury announcements of measures to support the economy in spring of 2020 and spring of 2021). Our analysis will concentrate on 'on-demand physical services' rather than online freelancing or microwork (Bérastégui,

2021: 7),1 and will encompass a range of national papers to get a sense of which areas of work were most salient in the news at these times, which were less well represented in coverage, and what the gender political implications of this might be.

As we shall see, our findings suggest that, across publications, coverage of the gig economy was indeed concentrated on specific types of workers – namely, drivers and couriers. There was very little reference to other types of gig economy participant, with elder care workers and childcare workers being among the groups least discussed. We are of the view that this underrepresentation is likely to influence both the academic and the policy research agendas. Given that these are entangled with journalistic discourse (both shaping media coverage and being shaped by it in their turn), it is likely that the focus of news coverage will come to influence which kinds of gig work receive critical attention and the character of the scrutiny to which they are subsequently subjected.

Furthermore, it seems likely that the ways in which the gig economy is represented in the news media will influence the wider public's sense of which political issues surrounding gig work are the most pressing. Before we detail our methods and findings, however, we wish to begin by outlining some of the salient debates and relevant background to this discussion. How are issues surrounding gender, cultural visibility, and the gig economy dealt with in some of the existing academic literature?

1 As Bérastégui notes, whereas online freelancing in the gig economy involves connecting service users to 'a network of freelancers with high and specialised skills' such as 'accounting, translating, copywriting or illustrating', microwork involves 'very small tasks (i.e. micro-tasks) sent out to and executed by a pool of candidates' (2021: 7).

Uber Alles: Cultural Visibility and Gig Economies

Uber Alles: Cultural Visibility and Gig Economies

As we've seen, gig economy work can take a wide variety of forms, with on-demand physical services including 'tasks such as cleaning, ride sharing, delivering, caring, maintenance, etc. that must be physically carried out in geographically specified locations' (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021: ii). Tasks such as running errands, beauty work, and some 'forms of clerical work' can also be included here, making it clear that the gig economy goes far beyond the kind of services offered by Uber (De Stefano, 2016: 3).

Indeed, while 'Uber had 160,000 drivers actively working on their platform' in 2014, Care.com – an online marketplace for those who need and deliver care services – had '5.3 million careworkers with profiles on their platform in the same year' (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018: 17). And yet, despite 'vast differences in the number of workers affected by these platforms, Uber has dominated both public and scholarly discussion about the on-demand economy, to the extent that the company's name has become synonymous with labor market changes that supposedly characterize the entrance of on-demand platforms into labor markets' (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018: 17).

The fact that Uber has become the dominant lens through which to view on-demand gig economy services has not escaped the notice of critical labour researchers, several of whom have identified it as a substantial problem. Gebrial, for example, notes that the 'platform labour literature overwhelmingly focuses on male-dominated labour like delivery and minicabbing - particularly Uber, which is seen as metonymic of the platform economy' (2023: n.p.). She attributes this partly to access issues, given that 'these masculine labours happen in public space, as opposed to care, domestic and sex work' which take place in less visible locations and are thus less accessible to researchers, but she also notes the role of gendered bias at play (Gebrial, 2023: n.p.). In their study of platform-mediated beauty work, meanwhile, Raval and Pal urge scholars to 'move away from the "Uber model" as the default imagination of gig-work' (2019: 15), and Hall similarly argues that 'the mainstream story of the platform economy has been one of 'Uberisation', focusing on the largely male ride-hailing and delivery workforces. This has erased the experiences of huge numbers of women and migrants doing low-income home service work through platforms' (2020: n.p.).

It is perhaps no wonder that other kinds of companies are being inappropriately compared to the highest-profile examples of gig economy platforms when we consider that these companies themselves encourage such comparisons. Care work platforms, for example, 'have adopted much of the same infrastructure, aesthetics, and rhetoric' as Uber, 'touting an abundant and always-available pool of workers' (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018: 11). The dynamics shaping the labour involved are fundamentally different, however, and 'the narrative of "Uberization" cannot account for the entrance of labor platforms into different labor markets' (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018: 17), or 'illuminate differences in regulation, workforce demographics, and legacies of inequality and exploitation that shape other industries' (Ticona, Mateescu, & Rosenblat, 2018: 3). As such, an over-emphasis on ride hailing and food delivery services – and a tendency to see these services as synonymous with the gig economy – risks warping the debate and impairing critical understanding of the full spectrum of gig work.

As Ticona, Mateescu, and Rosenblat note, the dominance of platforms such as Uber upon public understandings of on-demand labour 'has obscured the different ways technology is being used to reshape other types of services – such as care and cleaning work – in the "gig" economy' (Ticona, Mateescu, & Rosenblat, 2018: 3). This is important not least in terms of its gender political implications, given that the forms of work identified as having been overlooked here are conventionally feminized. Research suggests that gig economies are 'highly gender-segregated. Men dominate platforms which specialise in what might be considered traditionally male tasks like transport and women dominate platforms which specialise in more traditional female tasks like caring' (Churchill & Criag, 2019: 741).2

To conflate gig work with (numerically and stereotypically) masculinized sectors therefore risks excluding 'women's experiences from public understandings of the gig economy; this is particularly troubling as they make up more than half of platform workers' (Ticona, Mateescu, & Rosenblat, 2018: 5). One pitfall to avoid when talking about platform work, then, is a tendency to map an idea of 'uberization' onto everything.

2 Hunt and Sammam (2019) make a similar claim. While they acknowledge that precise analysis (including intersectional analysis) of the demographic make up of gig economy workforces is made more difficult by the absence or inaccessibility of relevant data, they nevertheless suggest that occupational segregation in the gig economy may correspond with gender imbalances in the wider workforce – with, for example, more female workers representing in cleaning services and more men in food delivery and private transport services.

We must not assume, for example, that contemporary gig economies necessarily lead to increasing precarity, insecurity, and so on. In the case of care work, these qualities were in place long before gig work platforms such as Care.com came along. The situation is not straightforwardly comparable with digital technologies' transformation of other kinds of (comparatively stable and regulated) work, such as cab driving. In this case, in contrast to the uberization narrative,

> 'carework platforms have attempted to formalize aspects of the hiring process and employment relationship. Through the education of clients and workers and the use of payment interfaces, carework platforms urge more formal standards by equating professionalism with visibility to formal institutions, such as through IRS (Internal Revenue Service) registration and tax compliance.' (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018: 2)

Such formalization may be patchy and uneven, exclusionary of many migrant workers, and sometimes of questionable benefit to the people involved, but it nevertheless complicates the story being told about the gig economy, and should prompt us to reflect upon which forms of work enjoy greater or lesser degrees of cultural visibility and what the impact of this might be.

Where is this apparent overemphasis on uberization and masculinized versions of the gig economy stemming from? What shapes it, how is it manifested, and where do we see it in action? As we suggested in our introduction, the research agenda as well as the public's understanding of gig work is likely to be strongly influenced by journalistic discourses. For Ticona and Mateescu, it is therefore particularly 'important to acknowledge the extent to which scholarship about the on-demand economy has followed the hype cycles and inequalities in coverage that characterize journalism about these businesses' (2018: 17). While we are of the view that academic research, policy agendas, public opinion, and news coverage are to some extent co-constitutive and mutually reinforcing, rather than there being one discourse that definitively leads and shapes the others, we nevertheless take their point. It is within this territory that the current report seeks to intervene.

A reasonable starting point in challenging the dominance of a certain image of “the” gig economy would seem to be to provide an assessment of how, exactly, this economy is currently represented in the media. Where critics have, as we’ve seen, begun to express some consternation about the disproportionate cultural visibility afforded to masculinized forms of gig work, claims surrounding imbalances in media attention are rarely grounded in empirical data. Rather, they express a general sense, impression or suspicion about inequitable coverage. For this reason, we have set out to identify the extent to which such claims carry water by investigating how gig economies are framed in news coverage.

Method

Method

We looked at news media narratives surrounding gig economy workers during two key periods of the Covid-19 pandemic. The sample is tied to two key events which, at the time, directly impacted gig economy workers – namely the Treasury 'Budget Day' announcements in March 2020 and March 2021. This period also represented the height of the coronavirus pandemic, and many gig economy workers not only fulfilled what may be described as 'key worker' duties (such as delivery), but were also financially impacted, due to their working status (many were self-employed or working zero hours contracts). Treasury announcements at the time were critical to their livelihoods. For these reasons, we anticipated salience in the news agenda with reference to the gig economy.

To provide context to the analysis, we chose to cover a two-month period for each of these events. This allowed for a more nuanced analysis of the narratives around gig economy workers, and increased the sample size, which allowed for a broader inspection of the role of gender in representations of gig economies. For the Budget Day 2020 sample, we analysed coverage from both March and April 2020, and for the Budget Day 2021 sample, we analysed coverage from both March and April 2021. The report examines which forms of gig economy work enjoy a higher degree of cultural visibility within news narratives, with a focus on key moments in the pandemic. In doing so, it considers whether gig economy work is typically discussed in the media in terms of its more masculinised forms (namely delivery and ride hailing) at the expense of other areas, such as care work. It reflects on how gender plays into these narratives and the degree of representation women are given in relation to men.

As noted above, we examined Treasury announcements in Spring 2020 and 2021, with the sample including coverage from March and April 2020, and March and April 2021. The overall samples covered several key events including Budget Day and furlough scheme announcements, as well as some key rulings around several relevant companies. These rulings include, for example, Uber drivers being guaranteed minimum wage, Deliveroo launching its IPO, and Just Eat announcing sick pay for workers. We examined stories around the gig economy, gig economy workers during the pandemic, and relevant coverage that was directly related to treasury announcements. We excluded stories involving any direct coverage of these businesses and their legal decisions, in order not to skew data in favour of one area of work, namely couriers and ride hailing, which represent the gig economy in a more masculinised form.

The sample involved three publications: The Sun, as the most widely circulated newspaper in the UK at the time; The Times, the UK's newspaper of record, with a centre Right leaning; and finally, The Guardian, with its centre Left leaning. The sample also involved these newspapers' Sunday editions. The choice of sample allows for narratives to emerge from newspapers with high circulation among the British public from across the political spectrum. We analysed each story according to a coding sheet. Each story was coded for relevant data. This included, for example, the type of gig economy work discussed, the gender of workers, the images (and depiction of people included therein), and the overall tone towards corporations, the government, and workers. This gave an understanding of which areas of work were most salient in news, which were under-represented, and whether men dominated news narratives around gig economies and gig economy workers.

The findings suggest that, in all publications, the focus was on a masculinised version of a gig economy (revolving around drivers and couriers), and that there was comparatively little reference to other types of gig economy work. The below sections will map out the method we utilised (content analysis) and its theoretical underpinnings, provide further elaboration on the sample and our findings, and finally, outline our conclusions and their relevance to the issues we have presented more broadly in this paper.

Methodological Framework

Content analysis was the chosen methodology with which to analyse the data, as we deemed it to be relatively unobtrusive and systematic, in addition to being an appropriate means of drawing conclusions about media messages, through identifying aspects of these messages deemed relevant to the research (Popović, 2018; Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Riffe, Lacy and Fico define content analysis as follows:

> 'The systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption.' (2014: 19)

As per Popović, there tends to be a widespread belief that content analysis is a relatively simple and straightforward approach to analysing large volumes of data (2018: 753). This is not the case, as a series of precise and replicable research decisions must be made, such as units of analysis, sample size, coding protocols (in our case a coding sheet), and the number of coders and reliability of the coding protocol. As Popović rightly notes, 'ignoring or skipping certain stages of content analysis protocol seriously threatens the validity of the research result' (2018: 754). Our protocol, and our approach to upholding it, is outlined below.

Sampling

We utilised purposive sampling rather than convenience sampling. Purposive sampling was deemed a more appropriate method, due to its emphasis on 'logical or deductive reason dictated by the nature of the research project' (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2014: 76). As a result, we were able to locate and code a sample that was determined in advance, and which fell within an ongoing event taking place at the time, rather than a random sample which may not have shed light on the specific issues under investigation. Upon choosing the sample, we identified key words which directly related to our research question; namely, which gig economy workers were subject to greater visibility within news media narratives in the UK press at the height of the pandemic, and how gender manifested itself within the sample of analysis.

The choice of keywords allowed for precision in identifying news content directly related to the analysis and investigation, such as gig economy, platform economy, and Coronavirus job support scheme. Additionally, we also searched for stories containing keywords relevant to the research aims and objectives, and examined whether these stories also intersected with other forms of gig economy work. For example, we searched for stories that contained the key word 'undocumented migrants', and sought to establish whether there was an intersection with gig economy work or platform work. The same applied to the key term 'social care'.

Coding and Reliability

A standarised coding sheet was developed and used to code news articles. Following that, secondary analysis was conducted to determine the tone of news stories, and to determine how this tone played into the representation of gig economy workers. Given that the assessment of tone is to some extent a matter of subjective judgement, our protocol was designed with a view to maximizing coder reliability. As per Lacy et al, reliability takes two forms: 'intracoder reliability, which involves a coder's consistency across time; and intercoder reliability, which involves consistency across

coders. Minimally, content analysis requires that intercoder reliability must be tested and reported' (2015: 796). To help uphold intercoder reliability, a sample of analysis (March and April 2020) was double-coded, independently, by two members of the research team. Where required, any discrepancies in coding were discussed to achieve consensus. Through this approach, the coding protocol was rigorously tested, resulting in consistent categorisation of content and results. As a result, both intracoder reliability and intercoder reliability were established.

Sample

This subsection will map out the sample in detail, and establish which elements of the news stories were coded, and how tone was utilised to establish how these newspapers framed gig economy workers, the government, and large corporations during the pandemic. Tone was essential to determining the overarching representation of gig economy workers, and tone towards governments and large corporations was also instrumental in understanding how this representation manifested in the coverage.

It is worth noting that, in most stories, gig economy workers were discussed in tandem with the government, due to announcements around furlough and economic relief payments or funding. Corporations were also discussed in tandem with gig economy workers, particularly in relation to how gig economy workers were treated (or indeed mistreated) by their employers. A tone scale was developed to establish tone, and the scale ranged from positive, though neutral, to negative. It should be noted that not all stories discussed corporations or the government, and in some cases, only gig economy workers were featured in news stories.

Sample 1:

This sample covered the entire months of March and April 2020, and included a total of 23 stories.

- The Guardian and The Observer: 10 stories
- The Times and The Sunday Times: 8 stories
- The Sun and The Sun on Sunday: 5 stories

Sample 2:

This sample covered the entire months of March and April 2021, and included a total of 26 stories.

- The Guardian and The Observer: 7 stories

- The Times and The Sunday Times: 7 stories
- The Sun and The Sun on Sunday: 12 stories

Some stories contained multiple categories of gig economy workers. For example, one story could reference both driving/cab hailing and couriers/ delivery.

Coding Criteria

Each story was individually coded according to predetermined criteria in a coding sheet. The coding sheet investigated four key areas which were critical to the analysis. These categories were type of gig economy work, gender of gig economy workers, images/video (and the apparent genders of the people depicted therein), and finally tone. The section below will discuss this coding process in detail.

Types of Gig Economy Work

Below is a list of types of work coded in the sample, with some stories containing multiple categories of work and/or workers.

- Driving and Cab Hailing;
- Couriers and Delivery;
- Domestic Cleaners;
- Janitors and Sanitation Workers;
- Plumbing and Carpentry;
- Childcare;
- Sex Workers;
- NHS Contractors (including cleaners, porters, catering staff, transport drivers);
- Care Workers;
- Hospitality;
- Other (including designers, photographers, beauticians).

Gender

Some stories contained a mix of genders (more specifically, they referred to men and women), while others did not specify a gender in the context of the discussion around gig economies and their workers. We coded for: Men, Women, and NA (for stories that did not specify gender).

It is important to note here that the assumption that people's genders are both binary and cis is typical of much mainstream news coverage in the UK. As such there was no reference to non-binary, agender, transgender, or

genderqueer people, and there was no specific discussion of issues around trans politics or gender identity.

Images and Video

Here we coded images and video relating to the gender of gig economy workers, and these were central to our analysis. We also coded an Other category, which included miscellaneous or stock images, or images of (including but not limited to) politicians, official sources or heads of corporations. We coded as per the criteria below:

- Men;
- Women;
- Other.

In doing so, we coded for the perceived or apparent gender of people represented in images involving stories about gig economy work in both the Men and Women categories. All images coded in these two categories were photorealistic, and as such did not include cartoons, drawings or graphics for example. The Other category however, did include (along with images of non-gig economy workers) some graphics or logos of corporations (e.g. Uber or Deliveroo).

Tone

Most stories contained multiple tones, one towards government, one towards corporations, and one towards gig economy workers. Some stories contained several intersecting tones (towards the government and workers, for example), while other stories contained only one tone (towards workers, for example). In coding the categories of the gig economy workers, the government, and corporations (such as Uber or Deliveroo for example), we were able to establish each of these publications' leaning towards the gig economy and its workers. We used the tone scale below:

- Positive-towards workers, corporations, and government.
- Neutral-towards workers, corporations, and government.
- Negative-towards workers, corporations, and government

As a general finding around newspaper coverage, we found that The Times tended to focus on financial news around the gig economy. In some cases, workers were briefly mentioned, with a focus on more corporate aspects of the gig economy and relevant companies. It should be noted that many of these stories were excluded from the sample, due to the sampling criteria (discussed throughout this report). The Guardian typically took more of a human interest angle, which was more sympathetic towards workers,

particularly in relation to their working conditions during the pandemic (including health risks). Comparatively, there was a sense of balance in terms of its gender representation, particularly when it came to whose voices and perspectives were included in coverage. The Sun tended to focus on how delivery companies and couriers worked towards curbing the spread of coronavirus or helped the NHS. Occasionally, there was a sensationalist approach, particularly in the 2021 sample. This will be discussed fully in our findings and discussion sections below.

All three publications tended to report according to what we consider to be their respective ideological or political leanings. In all publications, however, the focus was on the gig economy in its masculinised forms (chiefly drivers and couriers), and there was very little reference to other types of gig economy work. The analysis sections below will discuss our findings in more detail, and will discuss representation and tone across the two samples.

Findings

Findings

This section will map out the findings of the content analysis from Sample 1 (March-April 2020) and Sample 2 (March-April 2021). These samples will be analysed separately, before we engage in a comparative analysis and a brief discussion of the results. Each sample has its own unique narratives and there are differences in what precisely was being discussed in relation to gig economies. Namely, the first sample (March-April 2020) tended to focus on the challenges facing gig economy workers and the impact of Covid on their professions.

The second sample (March-April 2021) lacked the nuance in addressing these challenges, and most of the sample tended to focus on ride hailing workers, and particularly in relation to stories around drivers who were assaulted by passengers (who refused to wear masks for example), and other miscellaneous stories regarding specific instances where drivers were harassed or injured. We hypothesize that the reason newspapers covered such stories was for their high news value (Harcup and O'Neill, 2010), and because of the centrality of this particular type of gig economy work (driving/ride hailing) within public consciousness and popular culture. Regardless of the reasons, however, it remains the case that news narratives in the sample largely focused on gig economy work in its masculised forms.

Content Analysis: Sample 1

In all publications the focus was on gig economies in their masculinized forms (drivers/couriers), and there was very little reference to other types of gig economy work. The data and corresponding tables below give a clearer picture.

Types of Work:

Some stories contained multiple or intersecting categories of gig economy work or workers. For example, a story may focus on the impact of Covid on different areas of the gig economy, such as driving, delivery services, and domestic cleaners. Most stories in the 2020 sample focused on couriers (52% of stories). This was followed by driving and cab hailing (22%). This meant that most stories focused on more masculinised forms of gig economy work. However, there were stories which referenced women who worked within these areas.

There were some types of work that were equally represented. These include domestic cleaners (9% of stories), NHS contractors, such as catering staff/porters/cleaners/NHS transport drivers (9% of stories), and hospitality workers (9%). The least represented were care workers (4% of stories), sanitation workers (4%), childcare workers/babysitters (4%), and sex workers (4%), among other types of gig economy work.

Representation according to Types of Work:

Type of work	Number of Stories (out of a total of 23 stories)	% in total number of stories
Driving and Cab Hailing	5	22%
Couriers and Delivery	12	52%
Domestic Cleaners	2	9%
Janitors and Sanitation workers	1	4%
Plumbing and carpentry	1	4%
Childcare	1	4%
Sex Workers	1	4%
NHS Contractors	2	9%
Care Workers	1	4%
Hospitality	2	9%
Other (e.g Beauticians, Designers, Photographers)	1	4%

Table 1A: Representation of different forms of gig economy work within Sample 1.

Written Gender Representation:

There were variations in terms of representation, and stories were coded according to their representation of men and/or women. Some stories contained references to either men or women, both or neither, and the sample contained no reference to non-binary people. Men were the most represented in the 2020 sample, but not by a massive margin, as they were represented in 49% of stories. Women were represented in 39% of stories. This is not surprising, due to journalistic ethics of balance in reporting. Finally, 35% of stories had no reference to gender.

However, the discrepancy in terms of gender representation became clearer in the images publications chose to accompany stories. Out of a total of 45 images, 62% showed men, while only 15% showed women. We also coded for an 'Other' category, which contained miscellaneous images such as charts, business owners, NHS workers, or stock images. This category accounted for 22% of all images in the sample. Since images form a key part of how readers interpret stories, this is an important finding.

Representation according to Gender:

Gender	Number of Stories (out of a total of 23 stories)	% in Total Number of Stories
Men	11	49%
Women	9	39%
NA	8	35%

Table 1B: Representation according to gender within Sample One.

Visual Gender Representation:

Table 1C details our findings with reference to images and/or video. Here we only analysed images or videos of gig economy workers, and coded them according to our assessment of apparent gender (understanding that outside visual assessment cannot be a precise measure of somebody's actual gender identity). We also included an 'Other' category, which involves images/videos that do not feature gig economy workers, but which could include, for example, politicians, NHS workers, company logos, or other miscellaneous images. The total number of images/video across the 2020 sample was 45, and the numbers below display the percentages of gender representation in the total number of images/videos.

Representation according to Gender (Images):

Gender	Number of Images/Video (out of a total of 45 images/ videos)	% in Total Number of images/video
Men	**28**	**62%**
Women	**7**	**15%**
Other	**10**	**22%**

Table 1C: Representation according to gender, with reference to images, within Sample 1.

Tone:

We coded all stories in the sample for tone, as we sought to establish the leaning of each of the publications in terms of their representation of gig economy workers. In the section below, we will detail how each publication represented gig economy workers, specifically whether the tone was positive, neutral, or negative. We also coded tones towards the government on the one hand, and gig economy platforms or corporations who rely on gig economy workers (such as Uber, Deliveroo and Amazon) on the other.

We believe that understanding the tones adopted in relation to each of these players is essential to determining how each publication represented workers in gig economies. The inclusion of the government and corporations in our analysis of tone allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how each publication portrayed workers, the organizations they work for, and the government (and its allocation of funding towards workers within their Spring Treasury announcement). The findings also allowed for insight into the leaning of each of these publications towards the government, large corporations, and gig economy workers.

We note that a positive tone towards gig economy workers does not always indicate positive representation, but could also denote sympathy or support in the face of adverse working conditions or unsupportive employers/ corporations. This is particularly the case in the first sample, considering it took place at the height of the pandemic and during the first two months of lockdown in 2020. It is worth remarking that most stories contained multiple tones, one towards government, one towards corporations, and one towards gig economy workers. Some stories contained only two tones, while other stories contained only one tone. As a result, the percentage of tones shown in sections below is calculated out of total number of tones. There was a total of 42 tones across 23 stories, and the percentage reflects the number of positive, neutral, or negative tones across a sample of 42 tones. The subsections below break down the data according to Positive Tones, Neutral Tones, and Negative Tones towards gig economy workers, the government, and corporations.

A. Positive Tones:

Positive towards gig economy workers: 30.9% of tones featured in the sample were positive towards gig economy workers. Below is a clearer picture of this representation across the sample.

- The Guardian: 23.8%
- The Times: 7.1%
- The Sun: (0%)

The results indicate that The Guardian displayed the most favourable representation of gig economy workers, while The Sun displayed the least favourable.

Positive towards corporations: 16.6% of tones featured in the sample were positive towards corporations. Below is a breakdown of this representation across the sample.

- The Guardian: 0%
- The Times: 7.1%
- The Sun: 9.5%

The results indicate that The Guardian displayed the least favourable representation of corporations, while The Sun displayed the most favourable.

Positive towards Government: Only 2.3% of tones were positive towards the government, present only in The Sun.

This is an interesting finding, considering that public trust in government dropped in 2020 (Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2020). The drop was likely the result of several factors, including mixed messaging and government mishandling of the pandemic, as well as key figures connected to the government failing to abide by mandated practices (such as Dominic Cummings breaking the lockdown on 28 May 2020, for example – a story broken by The Mirror and The Guardian). Against this backdrop, audiences expected further scrutiny of government coronavirus policy from the news media in the UK (Cushion et al., 2020).

B. Neutral Tones:

Neutral towards gig economy workers: 19% of tones were neutral towards gig economy workers across the publications.

- The Guardian: 7.1%
- The Times: 2.3%
- The Sun: 9.5%

Neutral towards corporations: 26.1% of tones were neutral towards corporations in the sample.

- The Guardian: 11.9%
- The Times: 4.7%
- The Sun: 9.5%

Neutral towards Government: 11.9% of tones were neutral towards the government across the sample.

- The Guardian: 2.3%
- The Times: 9.5%
- The Sun: 0%

C. *Negative Tones:*

Negative towards gig economy workers: There were no negative tones in the entire first sample (0%)
This is not surprising considering the timing (the first two months of the 2020 lockdown), the widespread reliance on gig economy workers at this time, their struggles during lockdown, and the health risks they faced. We assume that public sentiment was favourable towards these workers at this time, particularly those involved in delivery services, and that news narratives aligned with public opinion.

Negative towards corporations: 9.5% of tones were negative towards corporations, and these were only present in The Guardian

Negative towards Government: 11.9% of tones were negative towards the government, , and these were only present in The Guardian

This is an significant finding. The Guardian was the only publication found to have negative tones towards both the government and corporations in the first sample. It was also the publication with the most positive and sympathetic representations of gig economy workers. This corresponds to the comments made above with reference to publications framing these stories in ways that aligned with their ideological positionings in the UK news media landscape, with The Guardian representing a largely (if gently) left-leaning economic view.

Content Analysis: Sample 2

In the subsections below, we analyse the findings from the second sample (March/April 2021) according to the same criteria as above: Types of Work, Gender Representation (including images and video), and, finally, Tone. There were stark differences between the 2020 sample and the 2021 sample, primarily in relation to the types of news narratives involving gig economy work. This was largely due to saturation across the news agenda at the time of three key events:

- Deliveroo and its IPO flotation;
- Court cases by workers against Uber, and ensuing workers' strikes;
- Unionised drivers and court rulings connected to the Uber court case.

All stories pertaining to specific companies and their financial news were excluded. We excluded stories around court rulings for Uber, and subsequent industrial action from gig economy workers in relation to on-going court and legal proceedings. The rationale was to avoid skewing the sample (and subsequently, the findings) towards masculised forms of gig economy work. Including these stories would have created an image of news media coverage as homogenous in its focus on masculised forms of gig economy work, namely ride hailing and courier services. Images in these excluded stories (while not included in the sample of analysis) further support this, and none of the images involving the Uber court case depicted women. This is partially a reflection of the fact that men make up most Uber drivers, but is also a demonstration of a tendency to report on the gig economy in a manner that supports a largely masculinised representation.

Despite this exclusion, very little coverage involved discussions of 'the gig economy' as a sector, and the news agenda was mainly dominated by stories of Uber drivers being beaten or harassed by passengers. There were also stories of drivers and couriers mistreating customers and clients. This may be due to the high news value of these stories; namely unexpectedness, and human interest (Harcup and O'Neill, 2010). The Sun in particular covered these stories heavily, most likely due to the high potential to sensationalise these stories in a way that courts the attention of readers.

As a result, the overall findings in Sample 2 represent the gig economy almost entirely in terms of its more masculinised aspects (driving and delivery) and there was limited reference to other types gig economy workers, echoing findings from Sample 1. The subsections below will provide further detail on our findings.

Types of Work:

This sample covered the entire months of March and April 2021, and included a total of 26 stories. The lion's share discussed a gig economy, and its workers, in masculinised sectors, with 50% of stories revolving around driving and ride hailing, and 46.1% focussing on couriers and delivery. There were small percentages involving those working in hospitality (3.8%) and 11.5% of stories covered forms of work covered by the 'Other' category (including designers, photographers, beauticians, and those working in the wellness industry). The findings show that Sample 2 was substantially more focussed on masculinised forms of gig economy work than Sample 1. Table 2A below details these findings. Once again, we have calculated the percentage of stories out of the total number of stories present in the sample (a total of 26 stories). It should be noted that some stories referenced intersecting forms of gig economy work. For example, a story could contain reference to driving and hailing as well as couriers and delivery.

Representation according to Types of Work:

Type of work	Number of Stories (out of a total of 26 stories)	% in total number of stories
Driving and Cab Hailing	13	50%
Couriers and Delivery	12	46.1%
Domestic Cleaners	0	0%
Janitors and Sanitation workers	0	0%
Plumbing and carpentry	0	0%
Childcare	0	0%
Sex Workers	0	0%
NHS Contractors	0	0%
Care Workers	0	0%
Hospitality	1	3.8%
Other (e.g Beauticians, Designers, Photographers)	3	11.5%

Table 2A: Representation of different forms of gig economy work within Sample Two.

Written Gender Representation:

The second sample (March/April 2021) not only largely represented the gig economy via its masculinised sectors, but also substantially overrepresented men in stories pertaining to the gig economy, with 61.5% of news stories focusing on or discussing men. A mere 15.3% of stories contained references to women, while 26.9% of stories did not specify a gender, or did not discuss the gig economy from a gendered perspective. Again, we note that some stories contained reference to one gender, others to two genders, while still others did not specify gender. Table 2B below gives a more detailed view of our findings. On a granular level, of the 61.5% of stories including men in this sample, all were drivers or couriers. As for the women, they ranged between couriers (namely those working for Amazon and Deliveroo) and wellness and hospitality workers.

Representation according to Gender:

Gender	Number of Stories (out of a total of 26 stories)	% in Total Number of Stories
Men	**16**	**61.5%**
Women	**4**	**15.3%**
NA	**7**	**26.9%**

Table 2B: Representation according to gender within Sample Two.

Visual Gender Representation:

Table 2C details our findings with reference to images and/or video in the second sample. As with the first sample, we only analysed images or videos of gig economy workers, and coded them according to gender (either men or women). We also included an 'Other' category, which involves images/videos that do not involve gig economy workers (such as celebrities, politicians, or logos). Of course, some stories contained no images at all. The total number of images/video across the 2021 sample was 62, and the numbers below display the percentages of gender representation in the total number of images/videos. Once again we see a very limited

representation of gig economy workers who are women in comparison to men.

Representation according to Gender (Images):

Gender	Number of Images/Video (out of a total of 62 images/ videos)	% in Total Number of images/video
Men	**19**	**30.6%**
Women	**4**	**6.4%**
Other	**40**	**64.5%**

Table 2C: Representation according to gender, with reference to images, within Sample Two.

The largest chunk of images represented the 'Other' category, and it would be prudent here to refer to the events which dominated the news agenda at the time, some of which involved harassment and abuse of drivers. One of these incidents resulted in a driver being injured in a car accident, and as a result, there a significant chunk of images showed scenes of accidents, and images of people involved in the assaults. At the time, there was also a story involving British celebrity Myleene Klass, who was 'spat on by an Uber driver' as she was being dropped off for a radio show (O'Connor, 2021), and as a result she featured frequently in the sample (7 images). More broadly, the sample indicates that there was a notable shift in the types of stories circulating about the gig economy from 2020 to 2021, with the latter dominated by financial news around corporations (such as Uber and Deliveroo), or more sensationalised stories relating to incidents of violence or abuse.

Tone:

We used the same methodology to establish tone in Sample 2 as we did with Sample 1, and established tones towards gig economy workers, the government, and corporations along the tone scale. Once again, it should be noted that some stories contained several intersecting tones. There was a total of 42 tones across 26 stories, and the figures below detail the percentages of each tone in the total number of tones across the 2021 sample.

D. Positive Tones:

Positive towards gig economy workers: 21.4% of tones were positive towards workers, with The Times showing the most positive tone towards workers.

- The Guardian: 4.7%
- The Times: 9.5%
- The Sun: 7.1%

Positive towards corporations: There were no positive tones towards corporations in any of the stories in the sample (0%).
Positive towards Government: There were no positive tones towards corporations in any of the stories in the sample (0%).

E. Neutral Tones:

Neutral towards workers: 11.9% of tones were neutral towards workers.

- The Guardian: 0%
- The Times: 4.7%
- The Sun: 7.1%

Neutral towards corporations: 9.5% of tones were neutral towards corporations.

- The Guardian: 4.7%
- The Times: 4.7%
- The Sun: 0%

Neutral towards Government: 7.1% of tones were neutral towards government.

- The Guardian: 0%
- The Times: 4.7%
- The Sun: 2.3%

F. Negative Tones:

Negative towards workers: 11.9% of tones were negative towards workers.

- The Guardian: 2.3%
- The Times: 0%
- The Sun: 9.5%

Here we see a shift from the 2020 sample in that there were examples of negative tones directed towards gig economy workers. It is important to note that these negative tones were not levelled at 'the gig economy' as a whole, but rather involved isolated incidents of anti-social, and on one occasion violent, behaviour towards service users.

The Guardian article covered the story of a blind Uber passenger from San Francisco who was denied rides on 14 different occasions, and who was awarded $ 1.1 million in compensation (Bekiempis, 2021). Two articles in The Sun covered the issue of the assault on Mylene Klass by an Uber driver (Hope, 2021; Gallagher, 2021). One covered the story of a Deliveroo courier 'nicking a birthday gift from lobby after delivering food to block of flats' (Pollard, 2021), while another covered the story of an Uber driver crashing into a canal and charging a passenger for the journey (Keane, 2021). This is further evidence of a sensationalist approach by The Sun in covering issues relating to gig economies, continuing from the previous year.

Negative towards corporations: 9.5% of tones were negative towards corporations.

- The Guardian: 2.3%
- The Times: 7.1%
- The Sun: 0%

Considering The Times' generally right-leaning economic view, we will shed further light on what these stories involved. One story discussed a technical glitch stopping a Deliveroo 'Thank You' payment to its workers during the pandemic (Walsh, 2021). Another was critical of Amazon's treatment of workers in Alabama, particularly around their rights to unionise (Jones, 2021). Finally, one story involved a general discussion of gig economy workers (without specifying a single company) and their rights to a guaranteed minimum wage, holidays and pensions (Martin, 2021).

The overall negative reporting on corporations centred on the rights of gig economy workers, stressing the important role they play for firms.
Negative towards Government: There were no negative tones towards the government whatsoever across the entire second sample (0%)

Discussion and Conclusions: Vexed Visibilities

Discussion and Conclusions: Vexed Visibilities

Our research suggests that (as per the existing literature) women are underrepresented as gig economy workers within news narratives, especially in images, and that when gig economies are represented in the media, it is largely in terms of sectors in which men predominate – namely, ride hailing and courier services. The stories in the second sample (March/April 2021) were particularly focused on the gig economy in its masculinised forms, barely referencing women in their news narratives or in the images included in news stories. We do concede that the saturation of stories around drivers and couriers in Sample 2 would have contributed to these findings, but irrespective of that, further work needs to be done by journalists and newsrooms to achieve equal gender representation in news reporting of gig economies.

It is particularly unfortunate that news coverage of gig economy work during the pandemic failed to look beyond the most culturally visible forms of such work, given that workers in lower profile sectors faced distinctive challenges (and therefore were in particular need of tailored support) during this period. As the Fairwork project notes in its study of gig economy work and Covid-19,

> ‘A substantial proportion of women work for platforms that offer care work, domestic work, and beauty services. Workers report being unable to work either because platforms have suspended their services or because they have to remain at home to take care of their own families. Others report having to combine caring for their own children with care work or domestic work, including taking their children with them to workplaces—exposing both themselves and their children to the risk of contracting the virus.’ (2020: 16)

We have identified during our research that some forms of gig economy work do indeed receive more media attention than others – an imbalance that we consider to be a problem and which we view as having marked gender political implications.

Before we conclude, however, we want to acknowledge that cultural visibility, in and of itself, should not be considered an unqualified good. In fact, increased attention upon a particular subject or topic may bespeak intensified efforts at its policing or political regulation. As Ticona and Mateescu note, in the context of on-demand care services, increased visibility can equate to unhelpful forms of exposure, and '[p]utting vulnerable workers on display is [...] a form of power platforms wield over workers' (2018: 16). These comments, however, relate primarily to the visibility of individual workers on platforms and to clients, rather than to the social and cultural visibility of a sectoral workforce. We would maintain that, while there are wider debates to be had about the politics of visibility, these are largely beyond the scope of this report, and that increased public profile nevertheless has the potential to serve as a political tool. It is beholden upon critical labour scholars to explore the role of the comparative cultural invisibility of some workers at the expense of others in processes of building solidarity across gig economy workforces, and to consider how this might play into attempts to build worker power.3

In this report, we have considered the literature regarding the limits of an uberization framework for understanding different forms of on-demand physical services and different types of gig economies. We have tested some of the claims of critical labour scholars regarding the outsized public profile of masculinized forms of activity such as cab driving against representations of gig work in news coverage during two key moments of the Covid-19 pandemic. We found that commentators' seemingly intuitive sense that services such as care, cleaning, and beauty work are neglected in mainstream news media are indeed borne out by the coverage. We have also pointed to the gender political issues that this discrepancy in media coverage of different types of work might involve. Ultimately, we would agree with Ticona and Mateescu that 'it is important that media scholarship does not continue to reinforce journalism's neglect' of traditionally feminized labour (2018: 17), and that we should seek broaden our account of gig economies in the interest of facilitating more inclusive conversations about the future of work. We hope that this report, by providing some basis on which to advance claims regarding apparent variations in the cultural visibility of different forms of gig economy work, has gone some way to contributing to this process.

3 This is something van Doorn gestures toward in his comments about different levels of militancy in gig economy sectors: 'In contrast to the visible militancy of the predominantly young and male delivery workers, Helpling cleaners were conspicuously absent in spaces of labor organizing as well as in public debates about on-demand gig work' (2020: n.p.).

As a final note on intersectionality, we should note that our approach in this report has been to concentrate primarily on issues of gender (largely because our initial aim was to test the assumptions evident in the gig economy literature about sectoral representation in media coverage, and its influence on cultural perceptions of gig economy workers). However, this has led to the report adopting an approach that is not truly intersectional, given that it touches on gender and class without confronting issues around race, sexuality, ability, migration status, and so on. This is an important area for future framing analyses, particularly given disparities in the make up of gig economy work forces. A recent study from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (a professional body for HR and development in the UK) for example, shows 'two groups to be more reliant on gig economy work for their income: ethnic minorities and people with disabilities' (Cockett, 2023). While we might hypothesise about the hypervisibility or invisibility of these constituencies in terms of media coverage, full follow up studies will be required to provide a proper sense how they are represented.

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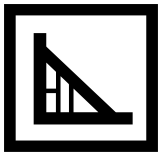

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