

## **Communication and Work from Below: The Role of Communication in Organizing Delivery Platform Workers**

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This article analyzes the role of communication with delivery platform workers, drawing on research in the United Kingdom and Brazil. It discusses the relationship between communication and work from a Marxist perspective, the importance of communication “from below” among workers, and the contradictory role of communication. On the one hand, it enables the circulation of workers’ struggles as the first step of organizing. On the other hand, communication is just one of the dimensions of platform work, comprising one part of the new technical composition of work. We argue that this new technical composition repositions the role of communication to the center of the analysis once it creates an infrastructure of communication among workers that enables and shapes their struggles. From research data, the article analyzes three dimensions of communication in delivery platform work: communication at work; communication through social media; communication in struggle. It discusses the contradictory role of digital infrastructures in workers’ organization, arguing that delivery platform work creates a different relationship to power and communication from traditional industrial sectors.

*Keywords: communication and work, platform work, organizing, delivery workers*

There has been much written about platform workers’ struggles, covering strikes and other forms of collective action, as well as the emergence of trade unions and new forms of worker organizing (Cant, 2019; Negri, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Woodcock, 2021). There has, so far, been comparatively little written about the role of communication for platform workers that interrogates it across a range of dimensions. While some studies have examined how platforms communicate with workers (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), others have looked at communication among workers (Maffie, 2020; Wood, Lehdonvirta, &

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Graham, 2018), but there are fewer that have sought to understand the role across both the technical composition of the work, the way workers communicate outside of work, and the multiple ways in which communication is important for forming a new political composition of platform workers.

This article considers communication in a broader sense across the experience of workers both in and against platform work, directly and mediated. In particular, this is an attempt to make sense of the main differences that are emerging between the industrial (broadly considered) and platform work sectors. Of interest here is the difference in power that each one mobilizes. While industrial strikes aimed to economically suffocate companies by halting the production process, food delivery platform worker strikes have not been able to stop production, instead targeting the public image of the company to cause reputational and economic damage. Although the riders' economic power has been more successful at the local level, this shift repositions the role of communication in the struggle between workers and companies.

We argue that in the delivery platform economy, communication takes a central role in the social organization of this workforce, the execution of the work itself, and the political organization of riders against these companies. The different relationship of this economic sector to power and communication positions the last as one of the main arenas of dispute and as an important vector of power for both workers and companies. Although workers do not control the means of communication that platform companies use, they build other forms of communication, creating an infrastructure that shapes the aspects of their labor and class struggle. This communication infrastructure is mostly digital and forms a social media circuit among different platforms, each bringing both possibilities and contradictions. In terms of communication, the relationship between the strike and the public sphere is clearly different from traditional union organizing in which digital communications often play a minor role, often in a "one-way" model and with low engagement with the union and nonunion actors (Carneiro & Costa, 2020). Delivery workers are attempting to convince other actors—including restaurants, clients, the general public, public influencers, politicians, and so on—of the legitimacy of their claims while trying to gather support for their struggles.

The role of communication has always been important for workers organizing, from communication among workers in factories to the production of leaflets and newspapers. However, the role of communications, mainstream media, and social media were only tangentially approached in classical studies of strikes (Hyman, 1989; Kelly, 2012) or in specific studies (Durrenberger & Erem, 2005). Moreover, this role of communication is increasingly visible, important, and affects the struggles of platform workers (Hennebert, Pasquier, & Lévesque, 2021; Panagiotopoulos, 2021).

In this article, we examine the role of communication with delivery platform workers, drawing on research in the United Kingdom and Brazil. The article discusses the relationship between communication and work from a Marxist perspective, the importance of communication "from below," among workers, and the contradictory role of communication. Based on ethnographic data and interviews, the article analyzes three dimensions of communication in delivery platform work: communication at work; communication through social media; communication in struggle. It discusses the contradictory role of digital infrastructures in workers' organization, arguing that delivery platform work creates a different relationship to power and communication from traditional industrial sectors.

### Communication and Work

From a Marxist perspective, work and communication are interrelated, as aspects of the interaction of social subjects (Marx & Engels, 1846), and as part of the ontology of social being (Lukács, 1978). Taking this perspective, there is no work without communication, particularly communication through language (Leontyev, 1981; Marx & Engels, 1846). Work is therefore closely connected with communication: "Society therefore emerges in their work, and that of workers close to them, primarily as their consciousness, and the human individual as a communicating" (Leontyev, 1981, p. 249). Language, as an element of communication in a broader sense, is synonymous with the production and circulation of meanings (Figaro, 1999) that occur at work and among workers. This is a historical phenomenon that has been appropriated by capital (Rossi-Landi, 1983), including within the productive processes. Likewise, communication has historically played an important role in forms of workers' organization and resistance (Brophy, 2017).

Given this historical context, there is a risk of overemphasizing the novelty of communication in new forms of work. Platform work clearly involves high levels of digital communication as the work is mediated in new ways. However, communication has always played a key role in capitalist production (Braverman, 1998). While the factory is often seen as a site of manual labor, Alquati (as cited in Wright, 2016, p. 114) notes that information has played two important roles for capital. The first is "control information" used to manage the labor process, while the second is that which "constitutes the collective legacy of the working class . . . productive information tout court" (as cited in Wright, 2016, p. 4).

Communication has therefore played an important role in production historically, both for capital, in its drive for greater exploitation and control, and for workers' resistance and struggle. For example, Marx and Engels (1848) argued that the "union of workers" is "helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another" (p. 9).

Thus, communication plays a role in the class struggle, mediating disputes and conflicts and being involved in the circulation of meanings (Grohmann, 2018). This means that the different technical, social, and political class compositions are influenced by communication at work and among workers although this is not the only or decisive factor. If workers' tactics and resistance involve communication issues, then we state that understanding the workers' point of view, from below, also involves analyzing communication from below, as a horizontal form of sociality among workers (Brophy, 2017). These forms of sociability cover different kinds of interactions, solidarities, and the development of forms of organization, as well as ways of recognizing themselves as workers.

In the context of platform work, the platform acts as both means of communication and means of production (Williams, 2005). This means, on the one hand, the materialization of historical relationships of technologies with production processes, and, on the other hand, the way in which communication itself involves production. Thus, communication is a means of both organizing work and workers. In the case of the delivery sector, platforms are also means of communication and transport. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1857/1973) explains that the means of transport and communication are essential for the circulation of capital.

Much has been written about “communication from above” regarding capital and technology (see Dyer-Witthof, 2011; Fuchs, 2014), and even between labor and media (see Maxwell, 2017). In the context of platform workers specifically, there is a growing body of literature that has examined some aspects of communication in relation to the work, for instance, Chen (2018), Rosenblat and Stark (2016), and Yin, Gray, Suri, and Vaughan (2016). Much of the existing literature has focused on the communicative aspects of systems of algorithmic management used by platforms (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Other angles of research have looked at the role of datafication (van Doorn & Chen, 2021) and lack of information for workers. This process mirrors early stages of production in which information is taken out of workers’ hands. In the context of platformization, it is formalized into a process of data extraction from workers (van Doorn & Badger, 2020).

As a Deliveroo rider explained: “We rarely receive any official clarification, and largely rely on sharing information and experiences between workers” (Woodcock, 2020, p. 81). This spurs communication among workers. For example, Wood and colleagues (2018) state that 58% of platform workers have communicated online with other workers. In the process, Maffie (2020) has argued that for transport platform workers, “frequent social interaction in digital spaces was associated with more positive views on unions and an improved interest in joining a labor association” (p. 141). Cant (2019) has noted that the lack of communication from platforms means that worker grievances quickly build as there is no capacity for the platform to ameliorate issues or offer small changes. Building on this, Woodcock (2021) has argued that there are three important dynamics involved in platform work:

1. The increasing connections between platform workers, showing that they are not isolated.
2. The lack of communication and negotiation from platforms, leading to escalating worker action around shared issues.
3. The internationalization of platforms, which has laid the basis for new transnational solidarity (p. 3).

Each of these involves communication in ways that are complex and interrelated, particularly from the workers’ perspective. There is a growing literature that addresses communication from below among workers in the context of platformization, less about organizing than activism, in a broad sense (see Maxwell, 2017). Brophy, Cohen, and de Peuter (2017), in the context of the creative industries, highlight the importance of understanding the autonomous practices of communication, involving counter-publicity and networked solidarity.

The collectivities and solidarities that are emerging in platform work are a mix of continuity and change (Cant, 2019). If communication is historically important for worker organizing, it currently presents different nuances and dimensions due to the platformization context. One of these characteristics is the role of digital infrastructures, which are not neutral, and present a certain materiality for the organization, as relational infrastructures. Another dimension is the role of digital labor influencers in platform work (Soriano, Cabalquinto, & Panaligan, 2021), sometimes reproducing neoliberal ideology, as “skill makers” (Soriano & Panaligan, 2019), sometimes building solidarities among workers. This means recognizing contradictions both in terms of infrastructure and political composition due to the role of communication in workers' organizing.

To situate the role of communication in class struggle, it is necessary to analyze the communication from below among workers as a first step toward organizing (Woodcock & Graham, 2019) to understand in what ways communication enables and allows circulation of workers' struggles (Dyer-Witthoford, 2015; Englert, Woodcock, & Cant, 2020).

This does not mean, however, maximizing or overestimating the role of communication. Communication does not act alone in the productive processes but operates alongside and within the labor process and the political context as well as issues such as power, ideology, financial resources, and different organizational forms (Schradié, 2019). Unlike a Habermasian perspective, which separates communication between work and economics (Habermas, 1987), our outlook emphasizes the contradictory and relative role of communication within work in general and among organizing riders in particular.

Although there are many studies focusing on the role of social media in the work of platform riders, there is a gap in relation to the broader role of communication and work, which this article aims to address. Thus, it offers a more detailed analysis of how communication is changing and structuring the platform economy and of the struggles within and against it.

### **Methodology**

Communication itself presents ways of organizing work and workers. To understand how this has unfolded in the delivery sector, we build on data from research with Brazilian riders in the United Kingdom and Brazil. Reflecting on two different contexts will be helpful in understanding the circulation of workers' struggles in a transnational context (Grohmann, 2021; Woodcock, 2021), with commonalities and differences. The resonances and nuances between cases enlightened our understanding of how communication is central to the execution of delivery work, the formation of communities around labor, and the disputes involved in these struggles.

These cases also present the interesting overlap of Brazilian delivery couriers, who are the major migrant nationality of platform delivery workers in the United Kingdom. These workers share similar and different experiences and backgrounds from Brazilian riders in their home country. In Brazil, riders have been involved in a series of high-profile strikes, while Brazilian workers in the United Kingdom have formed an important part of the workforce and have been active in campaigns over the past five years. Clearly, there are differences in the class composition of workers in Brazil from those who have the resources to migrate to the United Kingdom, but the use of communication in—and indeed the communication between—both groups provide important insights into how workers are organizing in platform work. However, whether in the United Kingdom or Brazil, they are all Brazilian delivery workers, which makes them, to some extent, part of the same cultural background. The authors also span these two case studies, with one an academic living in the United Kingdom, another an academic living in Brazil, and the third a Brazilian researcher living in the United Kingdom, who has been embedded in both case studies.

The core of the data for this article was generated through our long-term ethnographic engagement with delivery platform workers' struggles and a series of interviews conducted with riders in Brazil and Brazilian riders in the United Kingdom. The systematic observation of social media including WhatsApp and

Facebook groups was also an important data collection technique. Over the period 2019–2021, an ethnography was carried out among Brazilian riders, in the United Kingdom and in Brazil, documenting their processes of struggles. This included actively participating in riders' movements and collective groups, attending their protests, meetings and public events, and building personal relationships with worker organizers in both countries.

Moreover, we conducted seven in-depth interviews with riders in Brazil and 12 interviews with Brazilian riders in the United Kingdom. We used a snowball sampling approach that started from meeting workers in the field, using existing communication networks to facilitate further interviews and selected key organizers who are active in the processes of organizing their colleagues at work. The interviews were semi-structured, conducted either in person or via voice or video call. The interview guide focused on questions regarding the labor process, the personal trajectories and experiences at work, their relationships with other riders and with the platform, and the processes of mobilization.

The fieldnotes, interviews, and supplementary data were iteratively coded by all three authors in a collaborative process that sought to draw out the key themes in relation to communication in the riders' work, in terms of analyzing and nuancing the dimensions around work in the platform delivery sector.

### **The Dimensions of Communication in Riders' Work**

From our research data, we observe three main dimensions of the role of communication in riders' work: Communication at work, communication through social media, and communication in struggles. These dimensions involve all aspects of class composition, from the technical, social, and political (Notes from Below, 2018). The nature of delivery platform work means that workers are required to have access to a smartphone to sign up and undertake work. This means that all workers have access to this technology although the access may be uneven. For example, there are differences in the availability and cost of Internet access, digital literacy in using a smartphone beyond the delivery application, and other patterns of usage—for instance, the use of social media like WhatsApp.

#### ***Communication at Work***

Communication has always taken place at work, long before the emergence of digital platforms. Workers necessarily communicate at work, both verbally and with gestures and looks. In workplaces such as factories, with significant attempted control over production processes, there is an important role for language (Brophy, 2017). Even at the busiest workplaces, during shift changes, mealtimes, or breaks, over a coffee or while smoking a cigarette, workers find moments to talk to each other. On the one hand, capital always tries to decrease and control that time (Braverman, 1998). On the other hand, these are the moments when workers try to understand the unknown aspects of their work and become involved with other workers, laying the basis for solidarity and the potential for organization. The key change with platform work is that the platforms are designed to reduce to a minimum any interaction among workers who are scattered across the city. This is related to the shopfloor and offices in the past, where there was limited interaction with customers.

As shown by Brinkmann, Heiland, and Seeliger (2022), Deliveroo had a forum on the platform where workers could share information in the form of horizontal self-help, which was useful to the platform as it reduced the costs in providing support for riders. But when discussions emerged around electing a workers' council and complaints about the working conditions, the platform deleted these posts and then abruptly closed the tool. However, it is impossible for platforms to prevent communication among workers once they create their own networks of digital communication on other social media platforms. This makes the control of managers over the riders' communication much harder to maintain than in other kinds of work.

In delivery platform work, this horizontal communication among workers is boosted by the lack of vertical communication with the platforms (Grohmann, 2021). Once a worker creates their account and logs in, they are expected to undertake the work. However, workers have little support from the platforms when they face technical issues and no support when it comes to dealing with the challenges of working in the chaotic environment of the streets, dealing with difficult clients, issues with restaurants, or even mechanical problems with their bikes.

Therefore, riders heavily rely on the knowledge and information that circulates among other workers to effectively carry out their work. In our observations, some of the most common kinds of communication among riders were about ways to increase their earnings, warnings about traffic, police harassment and scams, tips and information about good or bad restaurants or platforms, and how to deal with other problems during the job. It was common to see newly added people in these groups asking questions about both the job and life beyond work, including issues like housing, services, paying taxes, and so on. As a consequence, riders who "know a lot" about the work (often due to many years of experience) are usually the ones with the most influence in the community of riders.

The main physical site of communication among riders at work is the waiting areas. In many cities, such as London, São Paulo, and Porto Alegre, riders wait for orders at points considered strategic to be able to receive orders. These spaces are usually in areas of the city with a lot of orders, or near restaurants in high demand. Workers often report that delivering food can be a lonely experience. These issues strengthen digital communities as they provide a way to meet other workers and create deeper bonds. While this takes place at work, unlike many other contexts, there is almost no surveillance by managers.

This territoriality, along with nationality and personal affinities, usually frames the digital communities. WhatsApp or Facebook groups, for example, usually cohere around names such as "Brazilian (or other nationality) riders in London (or on a larger or more local scale)." Smaller groups of friends or colleagues across these terms were also frequently reported. A sense of belonging to an area is usually solidified by being added to the local WhatsApp group. This is particularly important for migrant riders, who make up the vast majority of this workforce (van Doorn, Ferrari, & Graham, 2020). Migrant workers often rely on their peers to get access to jobs, learn how to do them, deal with problems and xenophobic harassment, and survive in a different country where they may not know the language.

Communication during riders' work also involves relationships with restaurants and customers. In our research, we came across riders who expressed this aspect of communication as one in which they suffered discrimination and harassment because of race, migration status, or gender. Many riders described

to us the privileged position of restaurants and clients to report them and the lack of opportunities to defend themselves on the platforms. Although very limited, these points of vertical communication (or, indeed, the lack of it) are a source of conflicts mostly due to disrespect directed toward riders, the lack of support from platforms, and language barriers.

Thus, conceptualizing communication at delivery platform work means understanding the role of these digital communication infrastructures for organizing the industry “end to end,” from getting into it and learning how to do it, developing more effective ways and practices of organizing, and determining how to organize against common issues. These characteristics of communication shaping the technical composition of delivery platform workers were strongly present in both the United Kingdom and Brazil. While international migrant work is not that significant in Brazil yet, the dynamics of Black and peripheral communities have played a very similar role there.

### ***Communication Through Social Media***

The infrastructure of horizontal communication described above creates a “circuit of social media” where each platform has different roles and contradictions in communication among workers, involving technical, social, and political compositions. This means that communication among workers through social media can change both aspects of everyday work and the workers’ relationships with other parts of social life, in addition to helping build solidarity (Soriano & Cabanes, 2020).

From their materialities and affordances, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are the most used social media by riders and are done so in different ways. In Brazil, and among Brazilian riders in the United Kingdom, the most used app for daily communication among workers is WhatsApp. They are included into these groups through invitations from other workers or find a link on another social media platform. As we have mapped, these WhatsApp groups are based on an intersection of local areas and personal affinities. In the United Kingdom, there are cleavages based on nationalities. Most of these digital groups were created to learn and deal with work issues. However, they end up also organizing the riders’ social groups and interactions as well. During our ethnographies, it was common to see riders referring to each other regarding the WhatsApp groups they belong to, ranking people in terms of intimacy depending on which groups they share, pointing out the group’s “admin” as a status position, organizing barbecues or social gatherings through them, and so on. Depending on size, there are more “public” or “private” groups too.

Groups of workers on Facebook are less common, but there are still many. These groups often work as the first place for people who want to be riders to know how to work for the platforms, the price of bags and other items needed for the job. When riders want to post or advertise to larger communities, Facebook groups are the preferred place because of the lack of limit on the number of members. One of the riders we interviewed from Crawley (the United Kingdom) told us that when they organized a wildcat strike through a Facebook group, they quickly moved to WhatsApp as they felt less exposed to identification by the companies.

On Instagram and YouTube, there has been the emergence of workers as “influencers.” This can take different forms, from teaching other workers how to earn money on platforms, termed by Soriano (2021) as “skill-makers,” to the ones who share memes and comedy videos about this work, from those who share “news”



about riders to others trying to build solidarity among workers through social media—and many who are at an intersection of multiple types. Thus, this visibility labor (Abidin, 2016) is important for the formation of a collective identity of “platform riders,” often through sharing of viral content and news about what is happening in the community. In the case of Brazilian riders in London, there are many social media influencers on these platforms whose main content and identity is about being a “migrant rider in the UK.”

In Brazil, the racial and peripheral identity is central. We mapped at least 45 YouTube channels and Instagram accounts with delivery platform workers talking about their everyday lives in both countries. In both cases, they talk about what it is like to be a rider, advertise Brazilian products, and shop in London, post funny Brazilian memes to generate engagement, and often tag each other, including riders in Brazil who are also digital influencers. They also constantly share posts and stories of other riders talking about their everyday experiences and tag each other to get more visibility. This is in line with the works of Soriano and colleagues (2021) and Soriano and Panaligan (2019). Many of these influencers, or known people in the riders’ communities, create their own WhatsApp groups as well.

In addition to individual influencers, there is the construction of collectivities through social media. More than “social media collectives,” in the terms of Soriano and Cabanes (2020), there are workers’ collectives with a strong presence in social media, exerting influence in favor of workers’ visibility and solidarity. The construction of workers’ media is part of a longer history of struggles, involving communication from below since the first workers’ newspapers, as a way to circulate information about their struggles. An example in the context of riders is the media collective *Treta no Trampo* (informal for “Struggles Over Work”). According to them, “the channel was created so we could monitor the real movements of the current working class recomposition: to register those struggles, stimulate their development and reflect over their meanings” (Notes from Below, 2021, para. 4). In Brazil, there are at least 15 Instagram accounts of organizers and workers’ associations. Through social media, couriers interact with each other and play a role of agitation and propaganda. The collective *Revolucionários dos Apps* (Apps Revolutionaries) from Goiania, for example, who publicize their protests, profile ongoing struggles, and organize livestreams among workers.

Thus, the communication on social media platforms happens among individual workers and, at the same time, involves the construction of workers’ networks and identity. However, as these platforms are not designed to benefit workers, this does not come without contradictions as we will develop in the discussion section.

### ***Communication in Struggle***

Communication among workers, in person or through social media, facilitates forms of organization. The aspects described above create a network of communication that operates as an infrastructure for riders’ struggles, from the most formal point of view, such as building of unions or political groups, to the emergence of informal solidarities and organic direct actions. Moreover, communication has become a major arena of disputes in these struggles and also an important vector of power for workers and companies. Communication therefore plays a central role in the tactics and dynamics of these struggles.

Unions have been looking for ways to use social media platforms in their struggles (Hennebert, Pasquier, & Lévesque, 2021; Panagiotopoulos, 2021). In one of our cases, the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB), which organizes platform riders in the United Kingdom, extensively uses WhatsApp, as well as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, to communicate with and organize workers for campaigning against platforms. The total absence of communication among platforms and unions forced the IWGB to use external communications to put pressure on these platforms. They used Twitter or contacted newspapers or local media to try and solve casework issues after receiving no response by contacting platforms directly. These include grievances on unfair terminations, deduction of payments, lack of support for riders, and so on. Publicly contacting the rider's local member of Parliament on Twitter, asking them to intervene on their behalf, and contact the delivery platform was one of the most successful tactics to have these minor issues solved. While these tactics have become widespread among some groups of workers, it is worth remembering that mainstream or well-established unions still lag substantially behind in the effective use of social media. Here the lack of union recognition and negotiation opportunities forced the delivery platform workers' movements to invest heavily in these external communications in the public sphere to communicate with employers, even to solve the most simple and ordinary issues.

Among riders, the struggles circulate at the same time on WhatsApp and on the streets. It is important to highlight that while these social media platforms are key infrastructure for organizing and spreading the word of a campaign or strike, they do not substitute for in-person conversations to convince more riders to get involved in organizing. Both in Brazil and the United Kingdom, riders have often used pamphlets, flyers, stickers, and other physical materials to talk to other riders. When blocking particular restaurants or shopping centers, pickets were crucial to convince riders and assure the stoppage. The previous communication networks are then activated into communities of struggles and resistance. Once this happens, these struggles also reinforce, expand, or reconfigure these communication infrastructures.

In a large U.K. city with a high concentration of Brazilian riders, these workers were being heavily attacked by robbers and xenophobic gangs of youngsters. They created a WhatsApp group named "SOS 'city name'" in which posts only around safety and security were allowed. All other kinds of posts would be put up in other smaller groups they participate in. Last year, a woman rider posted saying that she was trapped in a restaurant to escape from boys who were beating her. Around 30 other riders organized a "rescue mission," and a big fight erupted after they got there, leaving many severely injured. The police were called in but only watched it from far, and at the end only two Brazilians were arrested. The delivery platform made no attempt to improve the situation. Having experienced a long history of police negligence, some Brazilian riders created a WhatsApp group to organize a protest march from downtown to the central police station. One of the leaders told us they decided to protest instead of striking because they "mostly wanted to bring the media attention to the issue." Mainly because of lack of expertise and language barriers, they did not get much media coverage. Then, they approached the IWGB. In the same month, there was a very similar situation around the same issue in a large city in the north of the United Kingdom. Other similar stories were common to witness during our research. From the circulation of information on social media about triggering events, a strong sense of injustice emerges among riders. As no support is found on platforms or from local authorities, delivery platform workers organize direct actions through social media. Groups turn to organizing a protest—or other groups are created for this purpose. Depending on the results

of the protests, the frame of the group might change—groups may disappear, return to previous shapes, reconfigure in new groups, depending on the fallouts.

In Brazil, the main group involved in starting the 2020 national strikes was a media group called *Treta no Trampo*, which aims to bring visibility to precarious workers' struggles by helping them to make viral videos and social media content. After having many in-person conversations with riders in meeting areas, they decided to create a social media poll to set up the date for a strike. The poll went viral in many cities across the country, and once the date of the action was decided, this group helped to foster social media content for riders to share. During the weeks that preceded the strike, they edited self-made videos of riders across the country saying that their areas would also strike into short, agitational videos. These videos went viral on WhatsApp groups, which helped to build the successful mobilization that involved tens of thousands of riders protesting in cities across Brazil in July 2020.

In this movement, the Anti-Fascist Couriers, a relatively small group, achieved large visibility in the main newspapers and had their main hashtags and topics trending on Twitter during the strike. Paulo Galo, their leader, became a political and media personality as a symbol of the couriers' struggle in the country, even though they were a tiny minority in the movement and many riders opposed the "anti-fascist" slogan as alien to their labor claims. The "brand" of the Anti-Fascist Couriers had a strong communicative power, particularly in the context of rising discontent with the authoritarian measures of the far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, during the pandemic. Nevertheless, they played an important role in boosting the visibility of the strike into public attention.

Communication is not only key for the infrastructure of mobilization but also as the arena of struggle. The tactic of "public-shaming" has become a key part of organizing for the IWGB in the United Kingdom. The possibility of shutting down a platform with a national strike is extremely challenging. Usually, the strikes affect some areas where the union has a stronger density, but the platforms try to overcome this issue through algorithm controls by giving financial boosts to riders to keep working on that day and for riders of other areas to collect orders in the most affected parts of the city. Thus, the union has been developing new forms of media communication to target these companies. One example is the recent struggle against Deliveroo, particularly around its initial public offering (IPO) in April 2021. The union contacted journalists, newspapers, and investment groups to tell the story of the precarious working conditions and hardships that couriers face. They developed an online calculator into which riders could upload their invoices and see how much they earned per hour after working out costs with their bikes or scooters. This helped to fight Deliveroo's narrative that workers were making good money, as it was demonstrated that the majority of riders were making far less than £10 an hour, which was Deliveroo's main claim. Many investors publicly explained that they would not invest in the company due to concerns with workers' rights (Walsh, 2021). This is still an ongoing struggle, but there is a clear indication that Deliveroo's first day of trading turned into the "worst IPO in London's history," with £2 billion lost from its market capitalization (Bradshaw & Mooney, 2021).

The importance of communication in struggle is also recognized by the companies. In early 2022, the Brazilian platform iFood was accused of hiring a public relations (PR) agency to create fake profiles on Instagram to demobilize the organization of delivery platform workers in Brazil (Lévy, 2022). These anti-

organization and anti-union strategies from the companies' side are not new but reveal an aggressive strategy in terms of PR in the platform economy, for example, with the Uber Files (The Guardian, 2022).

While communication has always been part of the labor process, the current innovation in platform labor is not only bringing this into a new digital space but also moving it beyond the "means" for reaching a political action or tactic, like a stoppage of the production. This is a key tactic in itself and the realm of struggle with these companies.

### **Digital Infrastructures and Workers' Organizing**

Through the range of empirical data drawn on in the article so far, it is possible to understand how communication plays a pivotal role across different dimensions of workers' experience of platform delivery work. The new technical and social compositions of delivery platform workers involve different relationships of power and communication from more traditional industrial sectors of work. There is a relative centrality of communication involved in platform labor.

All work, of course, involves communication. What is different with delivery platform work is the relative centrality of digital communication in the labor process and wider dynamics. Workers are locked out of many of the potential ways to communicate through the work platform controlled by capital. This decision benefits capital, preventing workers from building networks while they receive and respond to instruction. However, this does not prevent communication from happening, as demonstrated, it rather displaces it into physical spaces and alternative communication platforms. The lack of vertical communication within platforms (or, rather the lack of two-way communication beyond algorithmically mediated direction) has boosted the development of horizontal, workers-led infrastructures of communication and the need for external communication tactics.

Delivery platform workers require access to a smartphone to accept orders and interact with the platform. This means that these workers are more likely to have access to digital infrastructure than in other forms of work. The reliance on horizontal communication and networks fosters the emergence of solidarity among delivery platform workers. This means learning how to better perform their jobs, sharing safety information, building communities and friendships, and finding ways to survive in hostile societies. In the WhatsApp groups, for example, it was common to observe harsh discourses against any hack that undermines other riders, like the use of "fake GPS," which allows you to get more orders. Thus, operating as a mechanism against a "race to the bottom" among these workers. This is different from the "entrepreneur solidarity" described by Soriano and Cabanes (2020), focused on freelance platforms (p. 2). Instead of undermining the workers' resistive potential, this solidarity among delivery platform workers is fundamental to the development of their struggles. This difference relates to the intersection of these digital networks with the in-person connections in the territories and the social composition of these workers, mostly migrants or Blacks from the cities' peripheries who rely on these networks.

Digital communication is a key element of the infrastructure around the mobilization of delivery platform workers. Their struggles tend to circulate "on the top" of this infrastructure, for instance, among riders who are in the same groups or networks and among groups relying on people who are in many groups at the

same time. Groups striking tend to follow the connections on social media platforms. The way messages circulate through social media platforms like WhatsApp is an easy way to mobilize these workers, differing from industrial sectors and their forms of communication. The challenge to move from mobilizing to organizing is, among other factors, also related to the affordances of social media platforms.

This worker-led communication is not seamless and is shaped by the infrastructure available to workers. For example, Woodcock (2021) states that WhatsApp “provides a very cheap method of communicating” but it “was not designed as an organizing tool” (p. 39). These platforms are not always suited to organizing. The affordances of WhatsApp, for instance, is best suited for discussion and sharing information than decision-making processes. Moreover, social media platforms belong to Big Tech (Lazar, Ribak, & Davidson, 2020). These are proprietary digital infrastructures set up to make a profit as well as encourage venture capital funding on the basis of data collection. WhatsApp, as a specific example, was purchased by Facebook to provide further channels for the collection of data to refine the advertising and marketing machinery of a particular fraction of contemporary capital. That it also provides an avenue for workers to connect with each other and begin forming the initial bonds and connections of solidarity is not a designed function of the platform but an unintended consequence of easing communication among potential consumers. The technical affordances of the platform are often targeted toward other forms of activity rather than providing a democratic space for organizing workers from below.

The algorithmic design is also often hostile to critical political engagement of influencers. The affordances of Instagram and YouTube, for example, benefit the production of “soft” content but remain “neutral” during contentious debates to avoid dividing their audience, losing followers, and lowering their social media engagement (Arriagada & Siles, 2020). A similar dynamic can be seen with WhatsApp group admins. Aiming to avoid fallouts in their larger groups, they often create another group for people interested in organizing struggles. This means we should not idealize the role of social media platforms for organizing workers as if it were a repetition of the digital activism of the early 2010s (Schradie, 2019). Riders trying to organize must also pay attention to the contradictions of digital infrastructure as an aspect of class struggle as well.

While there is a long history of trade unions and the labor movements using public shaming as a tactic, social media provide a new arena in which public shaming can be deployed. This requires relatively little cost compared with public shaming in other forms of media and can effectively multiply workers’ voices and actions. In the delivery platform industry, these tactics gain more importance. These companies are in a constant struggle to “validate” their new business model, which is constantly pressured by legal actions and legislative attempts to regulate it. This industry is highly controversial, well-known for undermining employment regulations and the visible intensive work on city streets. These workers often mobilize a “moral power” with strong images of daily exploitation to gather public support against these companies.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this article we have sought to critically analyze the role of communication from below, by which we mean the ways in which workers use and engage in communication rather than on communication driven “from above” by the platform. This starts from the labor process of delivery riders, the social composition of this workforce, as well as through the emerging struggles of delivery workers. We have argued that communication from below can be understood as developing from the labor process of the

work, then through social media, and heightened through struggle. This article was motivated by a pressing need to understand the role of communication in the changing class composition of delivery platform workers. Across the technical, social, and political composition we have drawn out the way that struggles over communication play a role, both for labor and capital.

Based on the case studies of delivery platform workers in Brazil and the United Kingdom, we argue that it is the new technical and social composition that requires a repositioning if communication is at the center of the analysis of this workforce and its new and emerging forms of resistance and struggles. This work creates a different relationship to power and communication in relation to traditional industrial sectors. The horizontal infrastructures of communication among workers enable and shape their labor processes, organize social interactions, and foster their struggles. The use of social media platforms has an important role in struggles around communication, which became a major arena of dispute in this industry. Thus, digital communication also becomes a vector of power in the relationship between workers and platforms.

In this article, we demonstrated how this infrastructure of communication organizes this industry from “end to end,” creates a communication circuit, and provides the conditions for delivery platform workers’ struggles. Each social media platform plays a different role and imposes limitations and contradictions, in terms of its *affordances*. New forms of solidarity emerge from the articulation of social media platforms, territorial connections, and dynamics of the social composition of these workforces. The riders’ struggles not only emerge from and are shaped by the communication infrastructures but also reconfigure these infrastructures once they create new groups, networks, and initiatives.

We found more commonalities than differences in the contexts of delivery platform workers in Brazil and the United Kingdom, which reinforces the importance of the transnational struggle and the circulation of struggles between workers around the world. Communication at work mainly takes place in waiting areas. Communication through social media takes place mainly in WhatsApp groups, but there are also channels on YouTube and Instagram for both individual workers and collectives. The fact that we found more similarities than differences may also have been caused by the fact that both the communities studied were Brazilian. The common cultural background may explain the use of the same communication platforms.

The argument we put forward here focuses on how communication acts as an emerging point of organization. We are not arguing that struggles over communication replace, or indeed should replace, existing forms of worker struggles on platforms. These platforms cannot operate without workers delivering food, but communication has provided another channel for collective struggle. In the example of Deliveroo’s IPO, the IWGB developed a dual strategy of fighting over the company’s narrative—and indeed claiming success with institutional investors pulling out over concerns about workers’ rights—while also organizing worker strikes. The question remains how these combinations of tactics and strategies can develop, both more widely than the flash point of Deliveroo’s London IPO and for building sustainable forms of worker organization that can win concrete victories for platform workers.

These dynamics have been the focus of the argument here, in our effort to understand the role of communication from below. This indicates the need for labor studies to pay more attention to the role of communication, and for communication and media research to highlight not only the power but also the

limits of communication in the workers' organization. This is important because platform labor provides a laboratory of class struggle (Cant, 2019). In the early phase of platform work, this laboratory provided a testing ground for bogus self-employment, platform technologies, algorithmic control, piece rates, and so on. Platform work is increasingly now becoming a testing ground for novel worker strategies, many of which build on communication and the affordances of social media platforms. Further research with workers and worker organizations will be needed to unpack and critically understand these experiments and their potential for refiguring worker power both against and beyond platform capital as well as the possibilities of building alternatives from below.

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