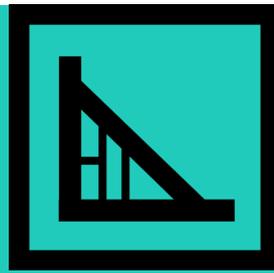
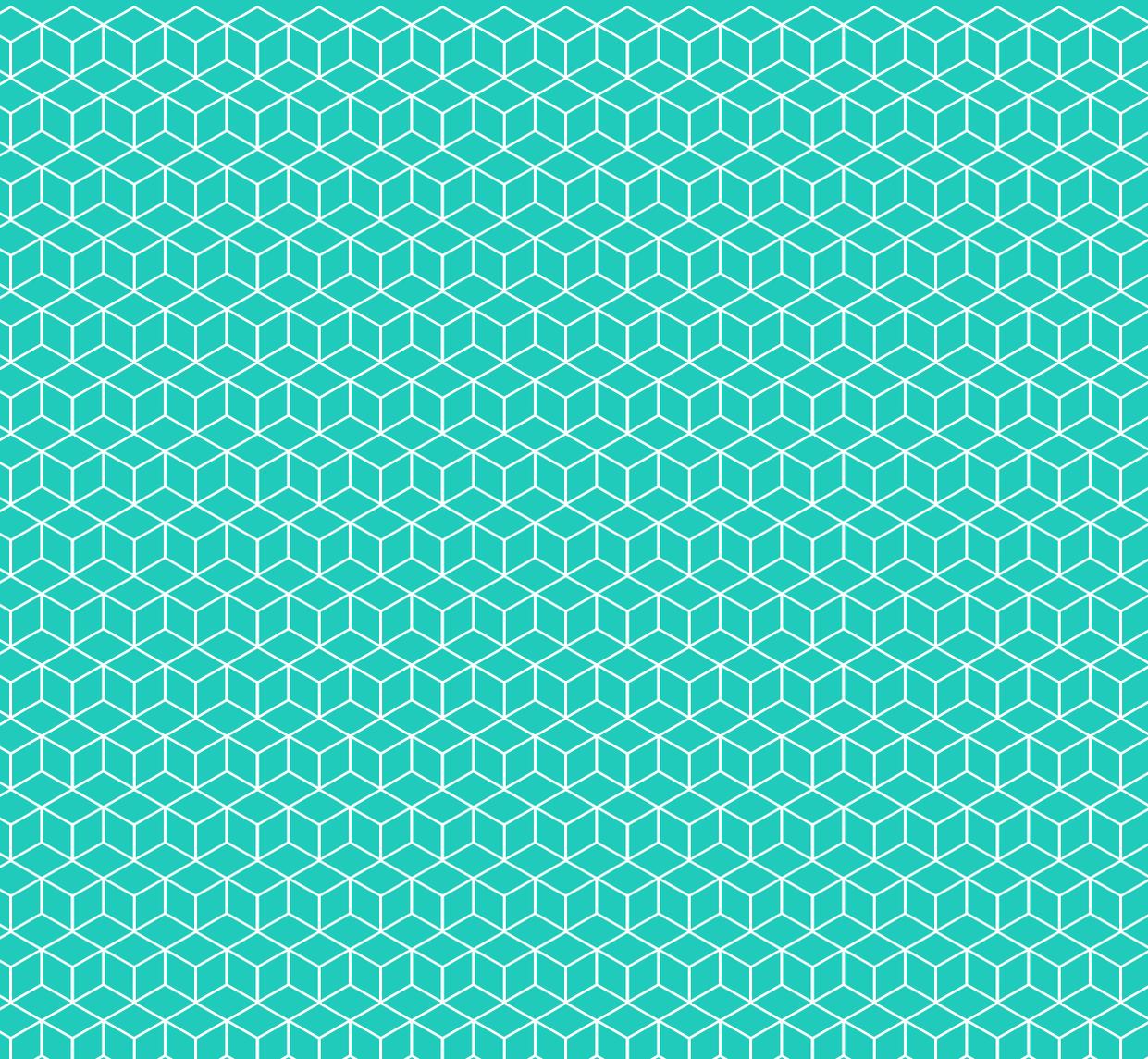


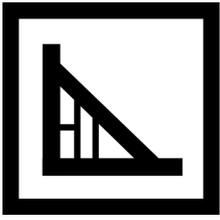
Dinner For One?
A Report on Deliveroo Work in Brighton
By Robbie Warin



Autonomy

Dinner For One?





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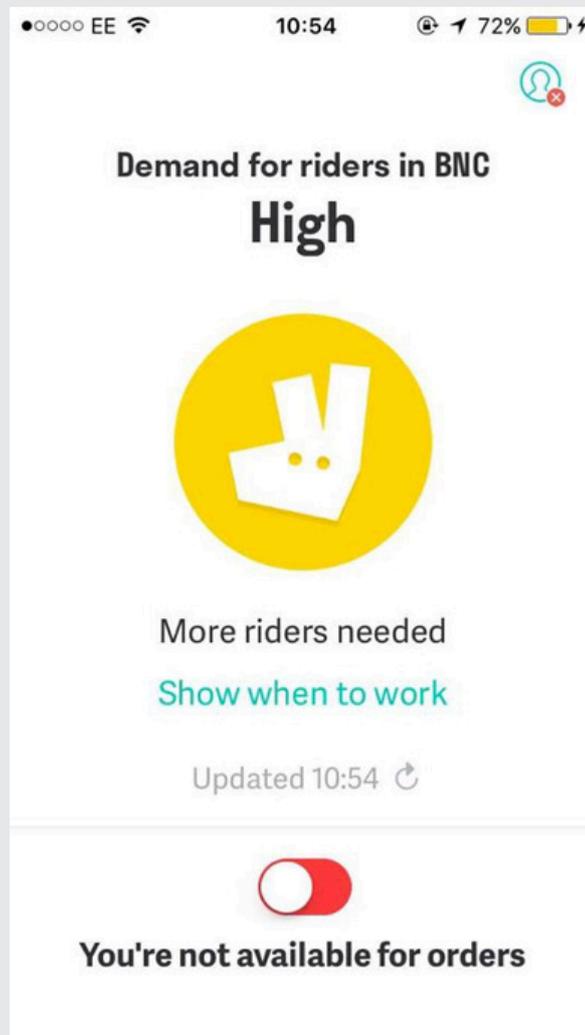
Attention to Deliveroo's business model has tended to focus on the status of working riders as self-employed contractors and the way in which the employer uses this as a means to remove certain responsibilities they might usually have towards their employees. Less attention has been paid to the riders themselves, and how the changes in the organisation of work epitomised by companies such as Deliveroo are impacting upon the formation of community at work, and for this reason also upon the potential for collective bargaining and trade union formation.

Deliveroo is a company offering an on-demand service, allowing customers to order food from local restaurants, and have it delivered to their home. The job entails the collection of food from restaurants and the delivery to customers' addresses, with the address information of both the restaurant and the customer provided, via the internet, to the rider's smartphone. Payment structures vary around the country, but in Brighton the system is piece rate where drivers are paid a flat fee of £4 for every delivery that they complete (Deliveroo, n.d.).

The type of labour and the structure of employment within Deliveroo is nothing new and is almost identical to other, older forms of courier work – with the use of self-employed status and piece rate being common (Fincham, 2007). What makes Deliveroo different from other courier companies is the way that technology is being used to automate certain labour processes. The requirement for all three parties - customer, restaurant and rider - to have internet access means that the logistical work required to collect orders, contact restaurants and assign work to riders is managed by centralized computers, following procedures embedded within computer algorithms. Whilst in traditional courier companies this work was done by a human dispatcher, within Deliveroo software algorithms are being used to automate these managerial roles; a technique known as 'algorithmic management' (Lee, Kusbit, Metsky, & Dabbish, 2015).

This change has a large impact on the direct working experience of the individual workers. Firstly, the ability for computer systems to process and manage logistical tasks at a scale far more complex than human managers enables a level of hyperflexibility in the working times of riders. Riders are able to enter and exit the workplace at the touch of a button (Image 1), without any prior notification necessary. Logging in to the Deliveroo app notifies the centralised system that a rider is available to receive orders, with riders having the ability to sign-off at any point after an order has been completed. Secondly, the automation of management roles greatly reduces the contact which riders have with company officials. Many riders' only contact with supervisors will be during an induction meeting where workers collect their uniform, with all on the job issues being managed through a centralised call centre, and via email outside of working periods.

Image 1



Screen shot of rider login screen. Sliding the circle at the bottom makes worker available for orders. Source: author's collection

My interviews with Deliveroo riders in Brighton – carried out between January and February 2017 – set out to give some answers to the following questions: how does this automated management system effect the way in which individuals form and maintain relationships with fellow riders, and with the company itself? How does this in turn impact upon the formation of community and social solidarity amongst and between riders?

All 11 riders interviewed said that they felt that there was a sense of community amongst Deliveroo riders, however the extent to which riders felt involved within this community, and the importance which riders placed upon these personal ties, varied greatly.

For Alex, a twenty two year old rider who has been heavily involved in recent attempts to organise riders into a union structure, the importance of community within Deliveroo riders takes on increased importance due to the dangerous nature of the job and the lack of official provisions:

“There’s literally such little care being offered, we have to organise otherwise we’re fucked. Which is quite interesting because it means that in order to do the job you have to be organised whereas in a traditional employment relationship, you don’t have to

Results

be organised to do the job, because you’ve got a break room, health and safety exists, you’ve got sick pay. In the absence of that you have to build a community or else you’re fucked.”

For Alex and a number of other riders, the social networks between different riders take on a functional role, extending to the provision of help and support to other riders. Examples of this range from simple everyday problems encountered whilst working, to more extreme cases, such as riders assisting others after being mugged, involved in crashes and, in one case, a rider suffering from hypothermia. The community therefore becomes a form of social safety net in the absence of official provisions, with social media offering the primary means by which riders offer and ask for this help.

However, four riders reported that whilst they did feel that there was a community amongst Deliveroo cyclists, they themselves did not feel that they were a part of this, or at least felt only a limited connection to this community. This often manifested itself in decisions such as not to go to the zone centre to wait for deliveries, and not to join social media pages. Through these decisions riders removed themselves from making contact with other Deliveroo riders. Joe, after having worked for Deliveroo for over a year and a half, told me he didn't know a single other Deliveroo rider:

“Over time I’ve just distanced myself completely. I don’t go to the same place they all go, I even go opposite just because I can’t be bothered to talk to anyone”

Importantly for Joe and the other three riders, their exclusion from the community was not seen as the result of an animosity from other riders, rather they expressed it to be more of a conscious decision to disassociate themselves. In part, this decision appears to stem from the solitary nature of the job. The fact that the principal colleague with which riders are working with is their smartphone means that, for many people, forming affective relationships with other riders is not a necessary part of the job.

“You don’t feel the same kind of sense of like, working with this person and needing to get along with them say as you would in a bar where you’re always together”

— Alec

Couriering has always been a lonely job, but cycle messengers have tended to counter this isolation by building strong communities of friendship and solidarity. One major difference between traditional cycle messengers and Deliveroo riders is

the ability to log-in and out of work at any point. Whilst this feature is prized by riders, it also has ramifications for the ability to form relationships with other riders through limiting the regularity of meet-ups between the same individuals during working hours. This was seen to be a limiting factor for the formation of friendships and the building up of shared background.

“People come and go in shifts, so over maybe one month there’ll be someone you keep bumping into and you build a rapport with them, but then the next month you won’t see them at all, but you’ll see a different person constantly, at Burger King say, then you’ll build a relationship with them. So it’s constantly shifting. And if you haven’t seen someone for a month or so then you lose a part of that relationship.”

— Corrie

The ability for riders to drop-in and out of regular working patterns – a situation afforded by the use of technology to manage the workforce – means that the process of building up relationships with new colleagues is constantly repeated. Without regular contact riders are unable to build up the shared background that paves the way for meaningful friendships.

Problems related to the building of relationships between riders are exacerbated by the regular influx of new riders resulting from Deliveroo's recruitment drives. This leads to the introduction of new riders with whom individuals must form ties. For Alex, this has ramifications for the building up of a network of riders able to provide support and solidarity due to difficulties in integrating them into the existing community:

“So once people have been working for a bit and amongst those who identify a bit more with it and do it a bit more full time, there’s a real community. Like people have played five-a-side football together, there’s a lot of stuff like that. The difficult bit is all the new people showing up.”

— Alex

This same aspect also has an impact on the will of individuals to fight for better working conditions, with two participants referencing the transient nature of the workforce as having a negative impact on the potential for collective bargaining:

“When they brought in the pay per drop thing, I was really, because we’d only been working two or three months when they brought that in, I was really really pissed off about that. There was talk on the WhatsApp group about people unionising – obviously it didn’t get done, because so many people drop in and out, it’s hard to keep track of people.”

— Alec

The largest division reported was the division between cyclists and moped riders, with these groups seen as operating as relatively distinct communities – enacted through the use of different waiting points and social media channels. Explaining this division is complex. In part it stems from differences in culture, work experience as well as barriers based on language and nationality. However, a key aspect of this division was a perception amongst cyclists that the algorithmic function which allocates work had a systematic bias against cyclists, resulting in moped riders receiving higher income.

“Mopeds can make a lot of money, and we don’t make a lot of money, and it seems like because of the division there’s resentment” — Alex

What is critical here is that the nature of the piecework system means that all riders are in competition for work. A systematic imbalance in the attribution of work, either real or perceived, therefore becomes a major point of division due to its impact on the earning potential of different groups. What is distinctive here, is that the use of information technology and algorithmic management have the outcome of obscuring the specific decisions which management have made about how the system should function, and who it should prioritise for work. Within traditional cycle messenger companies, the allocation of work was biased due to the individual preferences of the controller, and her relationship to the individual rider (Kidder, 2011). However, within Deliveroo, these decisions are managed by computational algorithms, and thus framed as ‘distant from the intervention of human hands and as submerged inside of the cold workings of the machine’ (Gillespie, 2014, p. 182). The resultant information asymmetries mean that the riders are not able to view or shape the functioning of these algorithms, leading to a burgeoning frustration towards the perceived beneficiaries of this preferences; the moped riders themselves.

This competitive aspect can be seen to be bleeding into divisions between riders within these communities. The direct competition between riders for work and the fact that a greater number of riders results in a lower individual earning potential, means that perceived economic need was a major source of division and limited the application of reciprocal solidarity. Groups viewed as less deserving of Deliveroo work included students, young people living at home, and those treating Deliveroo as a second job.

“When you have a lot of like, basically, well off people who don’t really need it, but are doing it anyway, or their parents are paying their accommodation costs, a student, they don’t have any identification with what it can be like to really need Deliveroo to be good in order to make your rent or whatever. They’re just doing it as a total side project and they can have very different allegiances I think, primarily because of their economic position”

—Alex

In addition, the piece rate system also meant a degree of animosity towards new riders:

“There’s a level of annoyance when I see new riders and see them still pushing recruitment because it lowers our earning potential, those who are already working”

—Alfie

The answer to why seems to stem from the inability for riders to control and shape their working conditions in terms of ensuring a decent degree of income. Deliveroo itself place no restrictions on the number of riders logging in at any point, placing the onus on the riders themselves. This means that a worker’s earning potential is determined by the ratio of orders placed, to the number of riders logged in.

What is pivotal here that through removing itself from the decision of when riders should work, the company places this emphasis on the workers themselves. By leaving the order to rider ratio up to the collective logic of the crowd, the individual is able to exert minimal control in providing any real security in terms of their hourly wage, resulting in frustration towards the other actors involved in shaping this – his or her colleagues.

Conclusion

The results from this research suggest that, within the context of the research site, the automation of the management function is having a significant impact on the work experience.

The specific structure of Deliveroo in Brighton is found to foster divisions within the workforce. Principally this relates to the placing of workers in direct competition for work, whilst at the same time obscuring the procedure by which work is distributed and preventing riders from shaping the labour process in a meaningful way. As a result, riders are both disempowered and alienated from their colleagues. This poses significant difficulties for the organisation of workers and the formation of effective collective bargaining. However, recent developments within the Deliveroo workforce in Brighton suggest that this is challenging rather than impossible (Cant, 2017).

Acknowledgements

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