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Divergent Temporal Dynamics and Time Work Among Delivery Workers in Denmark and Malta

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Introduction

> 'Did you watch this one?'
> 'We've seen all of them, three, four times.'
> I was browsing through Bollywood movies in the YouTube app on the centrepiece 65" TV. We settled on a drama after a bit of discussion.

While this discussion is taking place, the smartphone locations of the delivery drivers are shared with their employers every few seconds in real time. They do not have to, nor do they, pay much attention to this unceasing tracking, and instead their conversation centres around whether this or that movie features a famous Hollywood monkey. These delivery workers, my interlocutors, are waiting for orders to be assigned to them in the northern part of Malta, a small island country in the Mediterranean Sea.[1]

I never had to wait long enough to watch movies during my stint as a delivery worker in Aarhus, Denmark. Here, my fellow workers and I received orders constantly, and applied optimization strategies: efforts that meant we were always moving. However, the workers in Malta, as well as my colleagues in Aarhus, wore the same fluorescent company jackets and delivery bags, just as we interacted with the same app on our phones to receive the work. In this chapter, I illustrate the divergent temporal dynamics of platform-mediated delivery work, where real-time tracking is fundamental to the surveillance through which work is organized. I begin with my fieldwork in Aarhus, where I worked as a delivery worker for six months, and then describe work practices in Malta, where, during three months of ethnographic fieldwork,

I met a group of workers who invited me in to watch movies with them while they were logged into the app.[2]

This chapter illustrates how temporal dynamics, or, in Lefebvrian terms, 'rhythms', are not only the product of specific technologies, as in this case of real-time monitoring, but instead formed in extended socio-material assemblages where both local conditions and workers' efforts to manipulate time play central roles. Here, I build on Judy Wajcman's (2014) argument that 'objects only take on their significance by way of our recurrent use of them' (Wajcman, 2014, p 34). In the context of platform-mediated work, surveillance sits inconspicuously at the core, as platforms use so-called 'data doubles' to algorithmically manage a fleet of loosely connected workers (Lee et al, 2015; Haggerty and Ericson, 2000; Duus et al, 2023). I use the concept of 'time work' offered by Michael Flaherty (2003) to analyse how people, in this case, food delivery workers, vigilantly customize their experience of time in various ways. In other words, this chapter aims to illustrate the extreme range of rhythms possible in platform-mediated work practices, contingent not just on contextual and technological factors, but also on vigilance from individuals and groups of workers.

This chapter's temporal focus pushes other pertinent aspects into the background, such as the economic disparity between the two settings, and the general living conditions of this precariously positioned class of migrant workers, whose families in their home countries often depend on their earnings (Floros and Jørgensen, 2022). These disparities are central to discussions of the platform economy, and many scholars are examining them, as they address the working conditions at single locations, and establish international collaborations to rate working conditions (Fairwork Foundation, 2024). However, in keeping with this volume, through a focus on temporality I show – through ethnographic detail – how real-time monitoring is the foundation of the everyday lives of platform workers, and how differences, and in particular disparities, in this type of platform-based delivery job, are contingent on factors outside both their and the platforms' control.

Delivering in real time

Platform-mediated food delivery work revolves around a smartphone app, typically installed on the workers' phones (Veen et al, 2020). This app dispatches orders to workers based on their current GPS location. The inner workings of this system are mostly opaque from the workers' perspective, but the platforms present it as the app offering a given order to the worker who is most optimally located, based on the restaurant's, customer's, and courier's locations, thus minimizing the distance to be travelled (see, for example, Wolt, 2024). After receiving an order from the app, workers pick up the food at the restaurant and deliver it to the customer, confirming that they have completed

each step in the app. For the system to work, workers' locations in real time are constantly monitored, and the time taken to complete each step may be recorded and potentially commodified (van Doorn and Badger, 2020).

The platform I studied remunerated delivery workers on a piece-rate basis, meaning they received a fee per delivery. Piece-rate remuneration is common in food delivery, in particular, and in the gig economy, more generally (see, for example, Alkhatib et al, 2017), and rewards workers for completing as many tasks as possible in the shortest amount of time. This system, complemented by the often quite short delivery times required to deliver food before it is spoiled, means that the pace of work is often high. Julie Chen and Ping Sun take this up as they study the intersection of time and platform-mediated delivery work in China (Chen and Sun, 2020). They show how the dominant temporal order among Chinese food couriers leads to 'increasingly frenetic and fragmented manner[s]' (p 1563), with workers often rushing from one order to the next, neglecting traffic rules and safety to satisfy customers' 'expectations of immediate services' (p 1576). According to Duus et al (2023), this speed is connected to the attempt by platforms to create an image of aspatial information and communication technology (ICT) time, where time is compressed, and duration replaced by instantaneity.

Both the Chinese setting and Duus et al's setting in Belgium resonate with my experience in Aarhus, where the working speed was high. Soon after I started fieldwork, following the advice of an experienced worker, I upgraded my bike to one with an electric motor to move faster, and (once again following a colleague's advice) I tracked how many orders I could deliver in an hour. When working, I would pick up my bike in the basement under my apartment around 17:30, register as being online on my phone, and often while I was pulling my bike up the stairs, 10 to 15 seconds later, I would receive my first order. This frequently continued, with orders coming one after the other (or more than one at once, as I discuss later). My workday ended either when the number of orders slowed down, in which case I would sign off myself in the app, or when I had other things to attend to, in which case I would contact the human support team and request to go offline (Kusk and Bossen, 2022). Occasionally there were small breaks with no incoming orders, where I would, once again following a strategy shared with me by a colleague, bike around to change my location, so the platform would provide me with more orders. A recurring issue was that restaurants would be behind schedule, and a continuous source of frustration was that workers felt slowed down. One worker, Mathias, tells me about a negative interaction he had with a restaurant employee:

> Perhaps she was provoked when I asked her if they could prepare the food faster. … She saw it as me telling them to hurry up and get their act together. … But what I meant was that – just politely asking if they

could have the food ready a bit sooner, so I didn't have to wait for that long. Perhaps it was a misunderstanding, I don't know …

As this 'misunderstanding' demonstrates, interactions in this context are framed by the expectation that things will move quickly. Speed is the drivers' principal goal, as they are paid only for the orders delivered.

Owing to this relatively high pace, I would be quite lightly dressed, and expect to spend most of my working time either picking up or dropping off orders, and talking to other couriers only while waiting in restaurants. This pace meant that I would typically deliver between three and six orders per hour, depending on whether the restaurants were on time, and the distances I had to cover. Importantly, the workers are not harried in the sense that the company penalizes them for being late, as they would be in China (Chen and Sun, 2020).[3] Instead, they are motivated by the piece-rate remuneration to optimize their hourly earnings. Thus, they take advantage of this temporal order, and although they do face risks, they also reap some of the rewards of this speed by having generous flexibility, and report hourly earnings that are higher than what they would earn in other jobs with similar prerequisites.

A different p(l)ace

The frequency with which workers receive orders in Malta is much lower than in Aarhus.[4] When I travelled to Malta, I was a bit worried about whether and how I would find workers to interview, as I would not be undertaking work myself. However, finding workers with time to talk proved relatively straightforward. The workers are present on most centrally located street corners, and if I wanted to find a large group, I simply went to a fast-food restaurant, where they would be waiting in the dozens, leaving large clusters of motorbikes around (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: A cluster of motorbikes used by delivery workers in Malta

Photo: Kalle Kusk

Because of the long waits between orders, the average number of orders they deliver per hour is much lower than in Aarhus. Even during the busiest hours, workers end up waiting upwards of half an hour for an order. Just like the workers in Aarhus, the workers in Malta are paid per delivery, and the slow pace of work means that their income is very low, compared with the income from similar jobs in Malta. I spent time at various locations, and although there were exceptions, a typical character emerged – a young migrant man from South Asia who had migrated to Malta to work as a delivery worker. This worker struggles to make ends meet, and responds by working a greater number of hours at a lower intensity (and much lower pay) than before coming to Malta.

After moving between locations for a month, I settled in a square where I came to know a group of Nepali workers. They told me their stories of how they had come to Malta, how long they were in Malta, about their families, their favourite teams in the football World Cup, all between getting orders. As I am talking to a group of workers in the square, one of the workers I had spoken with several times, Rahim, comes over to chat. He tells me that he has not received an order for 45 minutes, so will be staying online all night. He is off to get some food in preparation.

After spending almost every day for two weeks in the square, I am invited to the nearby apartment where Rahim is living with his fellow workers. As I sit on the balcony, I see how the workers I got to know in the square drop in and out as they deliver orders. This apartment becomes my primary location when I return five months later.

The experience of the six workers who live in this four-bedroom apartment is vastly different from that of their counterparts in Aarhus. They wake up in the early morning and go online in the courier app, typically while still in bed. If an order is dispatched to them, they leave, then return to the apartment, cooking breakfast between orders. Starting around 10 in the morning, the group in the apartment gradually expands as more workers join. All these visiting workers, who are also Nepali, live in other apartments across the town, and either head directly to the apartment after waking up or go there after delivering their first order of the day. As these workers arrive, the workday gradually commences – often, each of the workers has been online (which is to say at work) for several hours already.

Movies, often Bollywood ones, run constantly on the apartment's TV, and their vibrant soundscape fills the atmosphere. Feature films, characterized by sketches, form an ideal background to the 'ding ding dings' that chime intermittently from the delivery apps, summoning the drivers to pick up delivery orders. As we wait, the workers and I sit on a leather couch. Each of them has two phones, one for work and one for leisure. In the afternoon, Rahim might be playing *Clash of Clans* on my left, while Sajit is scrolling

through Instagram, then TikTok, then Facebook, on my right, beginning again in a continuous loop. Others look up news and sports results, which then become the subject of discussion. Video-calling family and friends is also a recurring daily event for everyone in the apartment and, often, calls would also be going on either side of me. The number of incoming orders takes on a rhythm throughout the day. The day starts with very few orders in the morning, then the pace picks up around noon for lunch, slows in the afternoon, with another peak around dinnertime, before slowing down for the night. Eventually, this pattern becomes so predictable that I too begin to scroll social media, play games, and stay updated on all kinds of recent events.

As in Aarhus, the workers in Malta are not penalized for failing to meet deadlines. However, the low number of orders dispatched per worker has implications. The fast pace that characterized my experience of working in Aarhus is not there. So, whereas I would be lightly dressed and remain seated on my bike between orders, the workers in Malta would arrive at the apartment and remove several layers of clothing between orders, unable to reap the rewards from the performance-based piece-rate model that the workers in Aarhus do.

Manipulating temporal experience

The difference in the number of orders between the two locations was an underlying condition that significantly altered the temporal dynamics of working through the platform, but the workers were also active in shaping the temporal dynamics of their work. Flaherty's concept of time work describes the various efforts humans make to 'promote or suppress a particular temporal experience' (Flaherty, 2003, p 19). Duus et al (2023) present two ways in which food delivery workers in Brussels engage in time work. Firstly, the workers use the scheduling flexibility afforded by the platform to 'exercise the kind of flexibility that allowed them to prioritize other activities, their studies for instance, as well as enabling them to avoid any commitment to a longer employment horizon' (Duus et al, 2023, p 203), thus they use the job to 'make' time for activities that are unrelated to the job, by exercising control over how their time is allocated and restricted. This means that the workers in Duus et al's study are not fitting life around work, but 'fitting work around life' (Duus et al, 2023, pp 203–5). Secondly, the riders manipulate the duration of parts of the work as they engage in 'different tactics for reducing unwanted time in the app' (Duus et al, 2023, pp 205–6). The workers in Brussels attempt to outsmart the app by identifying workarounds to control and optimize their interactions with the app, urging the restaurant staff to speed things up, and making waiting time more pleasant by finding ways to entertain

themselves. These two types of time work – allocation and duration – provide a useful starting point for identifying differences between the workers in Aarhus, and those in Malta.

In Aarhus, as in Brussels, workers are generally able to fit work around life. They develop strategies for optimizing their schedules around outside activities, following customer demand on the platform (Kusk and Bossen, 2022). This includes flexibility in day-to-day scheduling, where workers will take other activities into account. For instance, one worker bases his work hours on his girlfriend's ever-changing schedule at a local cafe. Also, the contract the workers sign with the platform does not demand a minimum number of hours, as exemplified by one worker who took an 18-month break from work while remaining registered with the platform: 'It was probably a year and a half or so break, something like that', he says.

This worker simply found himself a bit short of money, and explains that he used his earnings from food delivery to supplement the student aid he received from the government. As Duus et al (2023) also observe of workers in Brussels, this flexibility is one of the main aspects that draws workers to start working through the delivery platform, and many of them remained cold at the prospect of a fixed-hours contract offered by a rival platform. Even more than in Brussels, where the workers had to sign up for shifts, the workers in Aarhus could simply slide online, and start delivering whenever they had time. There were no guaranteed earnings, and they were remunerated only for the orders they delivered.

On a day-to-day basis, the workers in Malta enjoy similar scheduling flexibility to those in Aarhus – there are no set times when they have to work and have no fixed earnings. As one says,

> The food delivery job is like a freedom job, I think. Because it's like you don't have like starting time or ending time, you know. You can start whenever you want … and you end whenever you want. … If you want to work like 18 hours, 20 hours per day, you can go online. … If I don't want to work today or I don't want to work now, go offline. So, it's not like that in our contract.

This means that workers can take time off whenever they wish. One Thursday evening, when I visit the apartment, I expect everyone to be working. Instead, I am presented with an invitation: 'Let's go to a nearby campsite and party'. We ride off in two cars, celebrating the fact that one of the workers' wives had given birth the night before. The workers do not tell anyone that they were taking this – comparatively busy – evening off. Instead, all the other workers in the town deliver more orders, and thus, as in Aarhus, and more so than in Brussels, the workers possess the temporal agency to allocate time to work on a day-to-day basis.

A key difference between Aarhus and Malta lay in the fact that, before arriving, the workers in Malta had allocated an extended period of their lives to the primary goal of earning money. Thus, unlike the workers in Aarhus and Brussels, who go through only a brief onboarding process, the workers who arrived in Malta had already allocated a significant amount of time, work, and financial investment. As one worker explains one day in the apartment:

> '*How did you get your visa? How long did the process take?*'
> 'It takes almost nine months. … it's expensive. It's almost like €7,000, maybe more than that. Right.'
> *'And how did you pay? Loans?'*
> 'Yes, I take loans from the banks. From relatives.'

To make their effort and financial investment pay off, the workers in Malta allocate several years to earning money for themselves and their families, in which applying for visas in Malta itself becomes a form of time work. On top of the significant upfront investment, upon arriving in Malta, workers will often set up work visas and contracts for at least a year into the future, and many of them planned to stay in Europe for at least a few more years. This commitment to being in Malta primarily to work meant that they were typically also online outside of the busiest hours. This becomes evident one evening in the apartment, when Rahim offers me a spare bed, and I jot down as I walk home: 'Rahim's roommate is currently sleeping on the couch because he's online around the clock. There was a blanket.'

Rahim's roommate is just one of several delivery workers who planned to work around the clock. More commonly, however, the workers told me they worked between 14 and 16 hours per day, six to seven days a week, significantly more than they had been working before coming to Malta.

This difference, between allocating time over the short and over the long term, to some degree tracks the difference between those who were dependent or non-dependent on platform-mediated work (Schor et al, 2020). Yet the circumstances in Brussels, and those in Aarhus, feature workers who are dependent on their earnings from platform-mediated work as their sole income, without having allocated a period of their lives to work. Meanwhile, some part-time workers in Malta had another income, and thus, although not dependent on the work, performed it on the side to increase their income, often only working in hours with high demand.

Duus et al (2023) show how delivery workers in Brussels manipulated the perceived and actual duration of events, as they removed various forms of unwanted time through workarounds, and optimized interactions with the platform. Workers in Aarhus and Malta similarly identified workarounds and optimized their interaction with the platform to improve their earnings.

Elsewhere I have called such efforts 'on-the-road strategies' (Kusk and Bossen, 2022). These include waiting at certain steps of the process to pick up more than one order at a time, thus allowing them to get 'bundle orders', where they carry more than one order from a given restaurant to several customers at the same time. This is then complemented by routine interactions with restaurant staff, customers, and tech support, to reduce waiting time (Kusk et al, 2022).

An equally important part of optimizing efforts occurs when deciding which orders to accept. In Aarhus,[5] this is often up to the individual courier. However, given the slower pace in Malta, workers often have time to confer when an order comes in. This became particularly apparent in one conversation with someone new to the job. As I jot in my fieldnotes:

> After a while, he gets an order that he accepts. Then three guys gather around him, and I can just see the interface as they go through the various menus in the Bolt app. They're helping him with each step of unassigning the order. And they help him to accept the next one he gets, as well, and tell him to change his status to 'bicycle' in the app.

Thus, the workers do not do their time work in isolation but as a group.

The second aspect of manipulating duration is to shorten the perceived time. In Aarhus, this is hardly a problem: time passes quickly, as I am continuously delivering orders. The constant influx of new destinations, combined with a mindset of reducing unwanted time, is only occasionally disturbed by a slow restaurant. One evening I try to add some entertainment by listening to a podcast while working, but soon discover that the speed of activity is generally too high for me to pay proper attention to its content while working. Instead, I decide to settle on music. This is in contrast to Malta, where the apartment always has an ambience of Bollywood movies, which the workers watched while playing smartphone games, scrolling social media, making video calls, cooking, or talking with one another about life in Malta during the long waits between orders.

End of an era

During my weeks in the apartment in Malta, it becomes clear that the domestic setting is significantly shaping their work practices. It offers the workers ample opportunity to manipulate their temporal experience of working, at the same time as forming a social arena where they can communicate. However, this contingent setup did not last long.

One Sunday afternoon I am sitting on the balcony of the apartment and remark that in many ways, this apartment is perfect. The worker next to me nods in agreement, and then goes on to say what a shame it is that they have

to move out the coming Wednesday: their lease is not going to be extended, and so they have found a new place to live through Facebook Marketplace.

The following Thursday morning, I walk around town, looking for members of the group. After looking for a few hours, I text one of them and am given the address of what appears to be a hotel on the other side of town. I walk to the location: 'It's up here, we'll come get you', a worker yells from a window above. Upon entering, I am greeted by an antiquated aparthotel. Their new apartment is noticeably smaller than their old one, and does not have the same amenities: the recliner couch is replaced by worn-down hotel chairs, the kitchen only has two old burners, and the smart TV is replaced by a broken 12" TV.

In addition to the material downgrade, this apartment is not situated in the restaurant district that surrounds the old one. The distance to the restaurant district, and the inconvenient third-floor location, means that the workers are less likely to receive orders there, and also that it takes longer to get to the restaurants once they do get an order. This means that in the days following the move, their daily work habits change drastically. There is no more sitting back and watching movies while waiting for work, now they have to stay out on the roads.

The loss of the apartment illustrates how contingent the work practice was upon a socio-material assemblage that, in Malta, included the apartment. A good waiting location was crucial for the workers in Malta, where the apartment allowed for both social interactions and individual expressions of temporal agency. Notably, neither the workers nor the platform had full control over this aspect, yet, from the workers' perspective, it was central to shaping their work, all of which happened outside of the real-time tracking. In other words, it was disconnected from their 'data double' (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000). Thus, the workers went back to their old way of working outside. However, they did not go back to the square where I first met them; instead, the group started to meet in the street below the apartment where they previously lived. No change had been implemented by the platform, yet over this time the work practice for these workers had significantly changed. The community, fostered by the apartment as a collective space, could no longer watch movies together, now belonging to an informally organized group with ties to the apartment.

A temporal twist

Fluctuations in customer demand are an everyday aspect of working through a food delivery platform, and knowing the nature of these swings helps workers decide when to work. However, these swings in demand occur not only on a day-to-day basis, but also depend on longer-term temporalities, such as seasons. In Aarhus, workers commonly accept that during the summer, the work is slower, whereas in winter, customers are more likely to order, and workers less likely to make themselves available. In Malta,

these seasonal trends are reversed, as the customers were often tourists who mostly visit Malta in the summer months. In Aarhus, I worked from the autumn until early spring, whereas in Malta, I was with the workers in both winter and early summer. Both sets of seasonal conditions explain part of the difference in the relative number of orders in each setting. This means that although I am comparing the temporal dynamics of platform-mediated food delivery work in two different places – Malta and Aarhus – the full story must take into account the seasonality in both.

Even more important are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. When I was conducting my fieldwork in Aarhus, Denmark was under strict lockdown, and customers were not allowed to eat in restaurants. As a consequence, many food delivery platforms more than doubled their revenue, compared to the previous year. Although I never heard of two-hour waits in Denmark, some of the workers who had worked before the pandemic reported that they were seeing more orders during it.

In contrast, most of the workers I interviewed and interacted with in Malta, including all the workers in the apartment, did not work in Malta during the COVID-19 lockdown. Most of the workers in the apartment had arrived in September 2022, when most restaurants had reopened in Malta. However, when I was there, I occasionally met workers who had worked in Malta through the platform during the pandemic. They were not happy about the current situation: 'It's a big s*** now. Write that. … Last summer we earned more than €200 per day.'

This Eastern European worker, and two colleagues who wait with him outside of a centrally located McDonald's, are frustrated that it is impossible to earn as much as they did during and right after the COVID-19 pandemic. They initially blamed this on the fact that customers now went to restaurants to eat, and therefore ordered less. However, as the discussion continues, they go on to complain that more and more workers were arriving from South Asian countries, although there is not enough work to go round to start with.

The slowdown after the pandemic was not only due to a smaller number of orders, but also a greater influx of delivery workers. This was confirmed by two Nepali workers in the square. They tell me that their visa process had been going on for three years: 'We booked three appointments to go … Before the COVID my permit was accepted. Then COVID … and my permit is expired.' Because of the pandemic, the Maltese government put all visa applications from countries like Nepal on hold or rejected them. This in turn entailed increased earnings for the delivery workers who are already in Malta, or from an EU country and thus not required to obtain a visa.

The difference in number of orders per worker between the countries and, consequently, the pace of work should not be regarded as products of the differences between Denmark and Malta. Instead, they should be

considered in terms of temporal dynamics, and as an illustration of the extreme variation in rhythm that is possible when working through these platforms. The number of workers, the number of orders, and local policies all have an impact on these dynamics.

Conclusion

For these food delivery workers, real-time monitoring is a quotidian precondition for working through a platform. Workers share their location continuously, which is then picked up by an opaque and centralized system that then dispatches their orders. In some settings, this real-time monitoring has an accelerating effect, as workers are continually pressed with orders that they deliver to customers to avoid penalties (as in China), or to increase their earnings (as in Aarhus).

The circumstances in Malta, however, demonstrate that real-time monitoring does not necessarily end in acceleration. As the workers waited between orders, this much slower pace of work resulted in low earnings and low productivity. Alongside the significant investment made by the predominantly non-European migrants to get a working visa in Malta, a vicious cycle was created. They continuously worked longer hours but with less work: a spiral that decelerated the flow, altering the rhythm of their day-to-day activities, to the point where they were waiting hours between orders. Although these external circumstances shaped their work, the workers in both Malta and Aarhus also shaped their own experience of working through the platform by engaging in time work, as they manipulated the allocation of time, and the duration of how long events would take and feel. This suggests that while the slowdown was involuntary, it did not produce passive workers. The domestic setting of the apartment in Malta played a central role, particularly in the latter form of time work, as it enabled the workers to spend time off the streets, socializing and watching movies. Because of this much slower pace, this domestic setting possessed a central role that only became apparent when their lease expired, and the workers had to resume working from the streets.

Documenting the perspectives of platform-mediated delivery workers offers ways to think about how working conditions at the local scale might be improved. For example, one way to do this might be to ensure comfortable waiting areas, which facilitate contact with other workers, as well as ensuring that the number of workers is commensurate with the work available. To some extent, the responsibility for such initiatives lies with the platforms. Yet, this ethnography shows the extent to which work practices are shaped beyond the platforms' control. It could be that assuming such responsibilities would entail even more intensive surveillance, which may not favour the workers. Consequently, although political directives help to establish better labour conditions, there are still locally contingent factors better addressed at

a smaller scale. Moreover, the fact that the platforms still attempt to portray themselves as 'technology companies' rather than employers (Gillespie, 2010), in the many legal cases around worker classification in the platform economy at large, makes them even less willing to accommodate these workers through local material initiatives. This makes it even more important to call for locally based initiatives to improve the lives of platform workers.

Besides proposing local alternatives to large-scale initiatives, this chapter, to some extent, also problematizes some of the tacit assumptions that lie beneath, for example, the Fairwork Principles introduced by the Fairwork Foundation (2024). These principles include uncontroversial ideas such as 'a fair wage', where the platforms are rated as fairer when they have a 'mechanism to ensure workers earned above the minimum wage' (Fairwork Indonesia, 2023). The ethnographic work I offer here, however, brings out some of the nuances, showing how workers in Aarhus and Malta actually appreciate the temporal flexibility offered by the absence of set shifts, which is hard to reckon with guaranteed hourly earnings. Thus, a seemingly indisputably just principle envisions a way of working that is at some distance from how work is currently being done through the platforms, and potentially even at odds with some of the workers' own interests in 'shaping work around life'. Staying attuned to delivery drivers' own testimonies and experiences, and the forms of time work they undertake, will be key to ensuring that these principles support workers in the future.

Notes

[1] In fact, Malta is so small that, in food delivery terms, it is only one delivery area, meaning that the same workers could work in the entire country. This justifies the comparison between Aarhus (a city, one delivery area) and Malta (a country, one delivery area) in this chapter.

[2] Between the two periods of fieldwork in Aarhus and Malta, I also spent three months researching food delivery practices in Helsinki, Finland. These three months inevitably also shaped my view of the practice. However, for the sake of clarity here, I focus on examples from the contrasting experiences in Aarhus and Malta.

[3] The lack of penalties also forms the basis of our argument elsewhere (Kusk and Bossen, 2022) that, in our case, the algorithmic management was more 'lenient' than what had been observed in other places.

[4] Malta was chosen as a field-study location for following the same platform (Wolt) in a different setting than its native Nordic region, but one which was still inside the European Union. For this chapter, the two settings mainly perform the function of contrasting with each other, in terms of their temporal dynamics.

[5] The centrality of these efforts was made clear to me during my field study in Helsinki (Kusk and Bossen, 2022).

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