

Who's Driving the Rideshare Economy: Developing Worker-Centered Data Narratives

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Abstract: Rideshare workers, who make up a large part of the emerging platform labor economy, face significant barriers in accessing employer-owned documentation of their working conditions as well as communicating about these conditions with fellow drivers due to the isolated and distributed nature of their work. This prevents them from forming shared narratives, articulating workplace issues, and collectively organizing for workplace justice. Additionally, workers do not have access to the data assets which they create as a by-product of their driving for rideshare apps. As a result, rideshare companies hold the exclusive ability to shape the conversation around working conditions utilizing data narratives built on driver data assets as their source of evidence. This project seeks to move workers' lived experiences from the margins of epistemology to the center through the co-creation of data narratives with rideshare drivers. Data narratives are defined as quantitative data that is contextualized by and situated in the lived experiences of those who create the data. By taking a community-based approach in collaboration with Colorado Independent Drivers United (CIDU), this project seeks to accurately recount the stories of the rideshare driver community through data that they create and own. Towards this end, we will apply the traditional labor organizing tactic of workplace wage surveys

to an atomized workforce that has no central physical worksite. This project offers a unique opportunity to study the intersections of traditional labor organizing, data governance, and community-led narrative building in the context of an atomized workforce.

Rationale:

This project applies feminist practices to data collection and analysis to develop nuanced, contextualized worker-centered narratives that will be used to facilitate community organizing and raise awareness about the realities of working in the rideshare economy. Unfortunately, most dominant narratives about driving for rideshare companies are created by the rideshare platforms themselves. These narratives come in the form of advertisements that cite compelling, yet internally-generated wage statistics whose claims are difficult to audit. These narratives exclude worker voice in two primary ways: (1) workers have no say or knowledge over how their driving data is used to create the wage statistics advertised and (2) negative driver experiences are censored by cherry picking only the positive aspects of drivers' work.

This project seeks to assist the rideshare community to better understand the current working conditions in which they operate and to develop an alternative narrative to that being propagated by rideshare companies that centers workers not only in content but also in the creation process. Using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, this project will “focus on social, structural, and physical environmental inequities through active involvement of community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process.” (Israel et. al, 2001).

Subjugated knowledge refers to “forms of knowledge that have been pushed out of mainstream institutions and the conversations they encourage.” (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

Drawing from principles of CBPR that emphasize community voice and agency, the subjugated knowledge of rideshare drivers regarding their lived experience as workers will guide both the contextualization of quantitative wage and expense data and the development of worker-centered data narratives (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Holkup et al., 2004). Wage and expense data will be gathered through a data cooperative model, meaning community members will have full ownership and control over their data assets. Ensuring that community members maintain ownership over their quantitative assets serves to counter potential power imbalances between rideshare drivers and researchers, in line with core values of CBPR (Hall, 1992).

Contextualized quantitative wage and expense data will serve as the basis for our data narratives, similar in form to the Explainer report series produced by Data & Society (Mateescu & Ngyuen, 2019). These data narratives will be constructed *with* rather than *for* the rideshare driver community, centering community expertise and experiences. By recounting the story of what it means to be a driver in the rideshare economy and supporting that narrative with quantitative data, this project will aid the community in developing organizational tools to advocate for stronger worker protections. While some view academic research as an inappropriate venue for pursuing partisan topics, such as developing labor organizing resources, CBPR approaches provide a toolkit and moral argument for performing research for the purpose of bringing about radical social change (Maguire, 1987). It is with this specific goal in mind – bringing about radical social change for rideshare drivers who exist at the margins of the labor market– that this project aims to accomplish through the creation of worker-centered data narratives.

Research Methodology

The development of data narratives aligns with CIDU's desire to better understand their members' work experiences for organizing purposes and the researcher's desire to understand the role of technology in supporting labor organizing efforts. The research partner had been working with CIDU to explore how technical interventions could be used to gather and democratically administer driver data as an alternative to traditional wage surveys. This project builds on that relationship to understand how platform data cooperatives can be deployed for advocacy purposes. This project combines quantitative data with contextual information gathered from semi-structured interviews to paint a picture of what it means to be a rideshare driver based directly on their lived experiences. The research goals are as follows:

- Understand how drivers adopt and use wage and expense tracking mobile applications
- Identify alignment and incongruencies between wage and expense data gathered and driver perceptions of these
- Collect data through a life story interview process on how drivers perceive their role in the rideshare economy, focusing on how they weave work into their lives
- Assess how drivers contextualize wage and expense data in light of their personal experiences working in the rideshare economy
- Co-design and distribute data driven narratives based on quantitative wage and expense data alongside context gained from interview process

To gather wage and expense data, we will employ a data cooperative third party mobile application, called Drivers Seat Cooperative (DSC). DSC is a California-based data cooperative that provides rideshare drivers with legible information regarding their wages and expenses

through a mobile application that tracks the distance and time spent driving. Drivers also have full control and ownership over the data they produce while using the application, meaning that drivers share any profits realized when DSC partners with an organization that uses driver data. DSC will gather driving data produced by CIDU members, and aggregate, anonymize, and share it with the CU Boulder partner for analysis. The CU Boulder partner will analyze the driving data provided by DSC to create a community-level summary of wages and expenses.

After this data collection period, drivers will be invited to participate in a life storytelling interview mediated by data about their driving. The life storytelling interview method allows us to understand how work fits into drivers' lives and how they negotiate the purported flexibility of rideshare driving (Chilisa, 2019). Community informants will then be asked to reflect on their individual driving data in terms of how they might incorporate that data into their work practices and how reflective they believe that data is of their labor production value.

This project will culminate in a co-design session in which CIDU members and researchers co-construct data narratives that use contextualized quantitative DSC data to reveal the realities of being a rideshare driver in ways useful for labor organizing. Taking inspiration from Desmond Patton's work with youth of color online, this project will employ deep listening techniques to contextualize community-level quantitative data with individual interpretations of working conditions (Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013).

Project Significance

This project contributes to stakeholders in several ways. First, it allows CIDU to better understand driver working conditions and concerns in anticipation of legislation similar to Proposition 22 in California being introduced in the Colorado legislature. Proposition 22 undermines rideshare driver security and rights by exempting them from protective worker

classifications. CIDU is gathering information on the state of the rideshare economy to counter misleading narratives propagated by rideshare platforms. This project will provide CIDU with quantitative and qualitative data in future campaigns for gig economy worker rights. There is also a direct impact on drivers in two ways. First, by introducing drivers to the DSC application, they will be able to easily capture and analyze their individual driving statistics, to inform important decision-making around driving activity. In addition, the data narratives produced in this project can be leveraged by individual workers and CIDU to advocate for stronger worker protections.

This project contributes to the field of information science by highlighting the tensions between labor and managerial power in contemporary information platforms worker organizing—a topic attracting increasingly theoretical and empirical attention (Irani & Silberman, 2013; Salehi et. al, 2015; Harrington, Erete, & Piper, 2019; D'Ignazio, Graeff, Harrington, & Rosner, 2020).

This project aligns directly with the researcher's academic focus on the future(s) of work and implications for worker advocacy, organizing, and identity formation. Through this project, the researcher will gain valuable experience with engaging community partners in work that seeks to not only understand the rideshare economy, but also transform it in ways that benefit those who (literally) drive it.

Personal Professional Narrative

My research area is situated at the intersection of technology and labor, specifically focusing on the future(s) of work and implications for worker advocacy, organizing, and identity formation. Within this field, I study how technology can be used to not only support work, but also worker organizing. This project offers a valuable opportunity to partner with a community

organization in an effort to understand how technology, in the form of platform data cooperatives, can be used to support worker organizing efforts. I aim to build upon this work throughout my graduate career to design systems that support equitability and democratic principles in the workplace.

As part of my research trajectory, I plan to utilize community-based and ethnographic methods to develop rich understandings of the social systems in which work takes place. This project, and the corresponding fellowship program, offers a unique opportunity to practice and implement ethnographic methods that I have been learning through my coursework. In addition, this fellowship would allow me to connect with and learn from leading experts in the CBR field.

Finally, as a newcomer to academia, the CBR fellowship would provide me with a valuable opportunity to lead my own study in a supportive environment in which I can receive feedback and advice from experts in the field. This project, and the corresponding CBR fellowship program, would enable me to develop the skills, partnerships, and support needed to do research that will center workers and their experiences in the academic space.

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