Labor in the Gig Economy: Opportunities for Information Studies

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Abstract
The gig economy refers to a system in which independent workers perform short-term contracts, or “gigs.” Because these contracts are managed through online applications, understanding information systems has become crucial to understanding emerging forms of work and labor. This poster examines the scholarly discussion surrounding labor in order to understand how scholars in the field of information studies have engaged with the concept of labor. We conducted a literature review of articles published by JASIST, iConference, CSCW and CHI and found that the discussion of labor was minimal. Although there has been a slight increase in interest in labor in recent years, there has been very little research pertaining specifically to the gig economy. As the number of workers participating in the gig economy continues to grow, however, we suggest that information studies scholars are ideally positioned to contribute to future discussions of labor.

Keywords: Labor; Work; Gig Economy; Information Studies


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1 Introduction
The gig economy, as the name implies, is an environment consisting of different short term jobs for independent workers. According to Malin and Chandler (2016), “The gig economies employ digital technologies to turn a variety of leisure time activities... into forms of collective labor.” The gig workforce is currently small, less than one percent of workers (Katz and Krueger, 2016), but is growing rapidly (Farrell and Greig, 2016). Recent polls from Pew Research Center suggests eight percent of adults in the United States earned money last year using digital platforms to take on a job or task and that two percent of Americans had earned money from ride-hailing services (Smith, 2016). Current studies suggest an estimated sixty percent of those employed find the money earned from these platforms as “essential” to their financial situations (Smith, 2016). With this growth, the information systems and platforms within the gig economy are changing how labor is performed and defined. For example, in 2014, a lawsuit was filed against Uber for misclassification of its workers; fighting Uber’s claim that their drivers are not employees, but independent contractors (O’Connor v. Uber technologies, 2014). In August, 2016, disputes broke out in London over updates to Uber’s platform that changed the pay rate without warning or obtaining consent from drivers (O’Connor, 2016).

While information studies is interested in information systems and information behavior, the field has not had a substantial historical interest in labor. In order to better understand how information studies
might engage with the labor issues raised by the gig economy, we conducted a review on information studies publications concerning labor.

2 Methods

Our literature review focuses on four venues. iConference and Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology (JASIST) were selected because they are of common, general interest to the information studies field. CSCW and CHI were also chosen because they are widely read and contributed to by information studies scholars, and we thought they might have a connection to labor and the gig economy.

Within these venues, we searched for publications containing the word “labor,” because of our interest in worker-employee relations. Articles without the term “labor” in the body of the article, articles when “labor” was only used in a survey question, and articles where the context was not applicable (e.g., a study of a medical labor ward) were not included within the articles reviewed.

Because we’re primarily interested in information studies and labor issues, we first categorized the collected articles as either dealing with labor or work. We also inductively created additional codes in an iterative process (see Table 1). To ensure our coding was consistent, we discussed the concepts and coded sample articles to make sure we were in agreement. We individually coded the remaining articles and discussed any articles that were unclear as a group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>“Labor” refers to issues related to employment status and employee-employer relations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>“Labor” is used as a synonym for work, referring to the kinds of work (e.g., emotional labor) but not to the terms of work (e.g., nonstandard labor).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Relations</td>
<td>Articles dealing with the distribution of power and agency among groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowd work</td>
<td>Articles dealing with small-scale, distributed work that is completed on demand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gig economy</td>
<td>Articles dealing with labor in the form of short-term contracts that are formed directly between employers and workers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalized Populations</td>
<td>Articles dealing with groups that are denied full participation in society, for example due to disability or citizenship status.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Coding schema.
3 Findings

We found that there has been minimal interest in labor in the venues chosen, however there has been an increase over time. We found a total of 164 articles that contained the term “labor,” 143 of which were published within the past five years (see figure 1).

![Figure 1. Total articles per year containing the term “labor.”](image)

A majority of the articles reviewed use the term “labor” as a synonym for work. Use of the term to refer to employee-employer relations accounts for only a small percentage of the articles reviewed (see figure 2).

![Figure 2. Articles per year that use the term “labor” to refer to employee-employer relations.](image)
Figure 3 segments the articles about labor by venue. We also considered publications on labor as a percent of venues’ total publications, in order to understand the field’s relative interest in labor (see figure 4). Again, we note that labor is a topic of minimal interest. We also note that CSCW shows a noticeable increase in relative interest in recent years, partially due to increased interest in the gig economy.

![Figure 3. Articles about labor, segmented by publication.](image1)

Figure 4. Articles about labor, as a percentage of venues’ total publications.

We additionally coded the articles about labor into four categories: power relations, marginalized populations, sharing economy and crowd work. Figure 5 depicts the breakdown of the discussion surrounding labor. iConference accounted for a majority of the articles published on marginalized populations and on power relations. CHI accounted for a majority of articles on crowdwork, with 10 articles published between 2011 and 2016. While relatively few articles were published on the sharing economy, CSCW published three articles on the topic between 2015 and 2016, perhaps mirroring recent interest in services like Uber and Lyft. In the following section we will discuss these findings in relation to future research in information studies.
Figure 5. Articles about labor segmented by additional codes.

4 Conclusion

Just as journalists and labor theorists are coming to terms with how work is performed in the context of the gig economy, scholars face a similar challenge. As new information systems change what it means to perform work, information studies scholars are positioned to play a key role in understanding labor relations and related policy issues. However, while we observed a slight increase in information studies scholars’ interest in labor, we also note that the majority of the publications reviewed are not notably engaged in producing new theories or modifying existing theories to better suit new forms of work.

In order to suggest ways that information studies scholars can continue to engage with labor in relation to the gig economy, we look here to several recent publications that serve as examples of how theories—both from within information studies and from other fields—might inform future work:

1. McInnis et al. (2016) is not overtly theoretical but does build on work such as Granovetter (2005) in discussing how information asymmetries preclude trust in relationships between workers and employers on Amazon Mechanical Turk. While Granovetter’s work does not emerge from information studies, it has found wide adoption, and McInnis et al.’s application of it in relation to an information system used to distribute work indicates potentials for future work in the same vein.

2. In considering the relationship between designer and crowdworkers, Irani and Silberman (2016) draw on theories of participatory design that will be familiar to many in information studies. However, they also introduce the work of Antonio Gramsci as a way of reflecting on the limits of design and suggesting ways in which workers’ existing practices can be valued.

3. Drawing on theories related to temporality and emotional labor (emerging from cultural studies and related fields), Raval and Dourish (2016) note that the sharing economy has shifted the site of interaction between a corporation and a customer from traditional work setting to the bodies of workers.

While these scholars draw on information studies’ deep understanding of information systems, they also often supplement the field’s traditional concerns by bringing in theories that help to illuminate core issues around employee-employer relations. Scholarship that bridges the gap between systems for distributing work and labor relations is needed to understand evolving definitions of work and to suggest implications for system design and policy. We suggest that information studies scholars have much to add to this work, despite the field’s historical disengagement from labor.
5 References


