

Let's make platform capitalism more accountable

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*What do Google, Uber, and Facebook have in common? You might think that the answer is that they are all technology companies. But actually it is that they all pretend to be technology companies. This shared lie amongst platform companies is both bad for workers and bad for users of those platforms, **Mark Graham** writes.*

Platform companies in the gig economy, in particular, have [a lot to answer for](#). At the moment, there are millions of people around the globe [who make a living](#) from jobs that they source from apps and websites. The World Bank [estimates](#) that there are about five million online outsourcing workers doing tasks that range from transcription to translation to writing fake news articles. And there are many millions more doing gig work that needs to be done in particular places: ranging from driving taxis to delivering parcels and food.

Much of this work is being done in a highly unregulated way. Because there is an oversupply of labour for many jobs, and because so many workers rely on their gig work income for a living, some workers are faced with problematic working conditions. Some workers are paid [below local minimum wages](#), some have to work when they are sick or get back to work just [days after giving birth](#). If your work is precarious and you earn very little, then you simply can't afford to take any time off.

The problem is that companies like Uber or Upwork take very little responsibility for these workers. [Uber's argument](#) is that they are simply a technology company for the reason that they only put customers in touch with drivers (rather than providing a transport service). This sort of logic means that platform companies have [little responsibility](#) to the millions who rely on them for daily income.

Google and Facebook deploy a very similar line of reasoning. When people protest that [Google directs users to racist content](#), Google can claim that it is simply their algorithms efficiently finding the most relevant content to a given search query. If Facebook is being used to share fake news, they claim that it is both the sharers and the creators of the fake news that are to blame rather than the Facebook platform.

If a person ends up working full-time on Upwork and then falls sick, why shouldn't Upwork be liable for some of their sick pay? Upwork pockets up to 20 per cent of their salary in commission after all. If Google and Facebook want to mediate our digital lives, making huge amount of money by selling data and advertising, why shouldn't we hold them responsible for the content that they put in front of our eyeballs. We wouldn't let a magazine running racist advertisements shirk their responsibility by claiming that they are just a paper company, would we? (Unless they are the Daily Mail.)

All of this reminds me of a moment in the pre-platform capitalism days when Expedia accidentally introduced a glitch into their booking engine. They sold rooms at the Tokyo Hilton for \$3 a night instead of \$300 a night. They unsuccessfully tried to claim that the confirmation emails that they sent to the lucky customers who booked tickets were void due to the error. But Expedia is a company that was able to get to where it is by automating tasks that were previously done manually by travel agents. Its automated approach allowed it to cut costs and thus capture huge market share. If the same technologies that enabled this business model to work at scale also introduce unforeseen costs, due to glitches, why should we not expect this to be their responsibility?

None of this is a plea to return to a simpler pre-digital world. On one level, all of these platform companies are correct. Uber, Upwork, Google, and Facebook are different businesses from their pre-digital precursors. They do not own the means of production. But they do own the means of consumption. And, in doing so, they are afforded with great power.

Gig economy firms, search engines, and social networks are no more just technology companies than a factory is just a building. They all reap rewards from their oligopolistic positions as economic and informational intermediaries, so isn't it fair that we ask them to shoulder more of the risk and responsibilities for the sectors of the economy that they profit from?

The problem is that these firms are not going to voluntarily become more responsible, and much of our current regulation is not designed for the platform economy. Until we do that, we'll have to live with platform companies enjoying the best of both worlds. Rewards without risks and responsibilities.

There might be no way back from platform capitalism, but this does not mean that we cannot hold platforms to account. They need to stop passing on costs to the publics who use them, to governments in the territories in which they operate, and to the workers that make all of their services possible. There are many efforts to change this .

The ways that we hold them to account will vary by country and by service and will require regulators, activists, and collectives of workers who understand how platform capitalism works. There are a range of ongoing efforts by unions, regulators, [co-operatives](#), and [hackers](#). But a prerequisite for any of this is recognising that there is nothing sacred about the digital medium. There is nothing about it that absolves a firm of its sectoral responsibilities. We need to stop imagining that the digital is somehow a [separate realm of society](#). These are not technology companies. They are transport companies, employment agencies, media companies, and delivery companies. Let's treat them that way.

Mark Graham is the Professor of Internet Geography at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. See more of his work at markgraham.space or follow him [@geoplace](https://twitter.com/geoplace).