Algorithmized but not Atomized?

How Digital Platforms Engender New Forms of Worker Solidarity in Jakarta

Rida Qadri

Department of Urban Studies and Planning Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA, USA
rqadri@mit.edu

ABSTRACT

Jakarta's roads are green, filled as they are with the fluorescent green jackets, bright green logos and fluttering green banners of basecamps created by the city's digitized, 'online' motorbike-taxi drivers (ojol). These spaces function as waiting posts, regulatory institutions, information networks and spaces of solidarity for the ojol working for mobility-app companies, Grab and GoJek. Their existence though, presents a puzzle. In the world of on-demand matching, literature either predicts an isolated, atomized, disempowered digital worker or expects workers to have only temporary, online, ephemeral networks of mutual aid.

Yet, Jakarta's ojol then introduce us to a new form of labor action that relies on an interface of the physical world and digital realm, complete with permanent shelters, quirky names, emblems, social media accounts and even their own emergency response service. This paper explores the contours of these labor formations and asks why digital workers in Jakarta are able to create collective structures of solidarity, even as app-mediated work may force them towards an individualized labor regime? I argue that these digital labor collectives are not accidental but a product of interactions between histories of social organization structures in Jakarta and affordances created by technological-mediation. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews I excavate the bi-directional conversation between globalizing digital platforms and social norms, civic culture and labor market conditions in Jakarta which has allowed for particular forms of digital worker resistances to emerge. I recover power for the digital worker, who provides us with a path to resisting algorithmization of work while still participating in it through agentic labor actions rooted in shared identities, enabled by technological fluency and borne out of a desire for community.

KEYWORDS

Digital Labor, Mobility Platforms, Labor Solidarity, Global South