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1. Introduction

The disruption brought by technology to the lives of workers can often evoke images of Silicon Valley and novelty of a wave of innovations based on applications (or 'apps'). In reality, the impact of technological change to working people has been a concern as old as capitalism itself (Engels, 1892; Thompson, 1967). The connection between the development of online technology and its implications for labour markets has been the focus of attention by scholars for at least two decades (Autor, 2001) and more recently has become associated with the development of 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek, 2017) and the 'gig economy' (Woodcock and Graham, 2019).

The contemporary impact of technology has been illustrated by the degree of disruption it has brought to particular sectors such as private transport, food services, parcel delivery, and the implications that such disruption has for working arrangements (De Stefano, 2015; Goods et al, 2019). In fact, innovative technology for use in the service economy has led to the establishment of hybrid employment relationships in which workers are formally autonomous from firms, but firms can still exert control over their working day. As a 'cynical attempt to associate a problematic form of employment with the romance of the entertainment business' (Crouch, 2019: p4), these hybrid work arrangements which occupy an ambiguous space between self-employment and standard employment have been labelled 'the gig economy' (to evoke those peripatetic performers in the entertainment industry who are not attached through a permanent contract to the venues where they play).

Therefore, what the gig economy has come to symbolize for some is an opportunity for flexibility, to earn additional income through short term opportunities and thus yields tangible benefits. For others however, the gig economy has simply meant a decline in the quality of employment in terms of pay and conditions. What this emergent debate presupposes is a common understanding of what is meant by the 'gig economy', when in fact not only does the concept often prove elusive (Brinkley, 2016), it also has come under scrutiny from those who are sceptical of the novel value it confers upon longer standing debates around issues of precarious work (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019), a concept which itself in the past was open to greater contestation (see Quinlan, 2012) than it is now.

Given the growing interest in the gig economy in recent years, what we conduct in this article is a reappraisal of the utility of the concept of the 'gig economy' as a tool for analysis. Given its relative novelty and the nascent position it occupies in the extant

literature on contemporary labour practices, our study emerges at a critical juncture of its development.

In this article we analyse the concept of the gig economy using both primary and secondary data. The structure of the article is set out as follows: i) we explore the gig economy as a contestable concept and reappraise its contribution to expanding the knowledge of developments in the labour market while locating it within the broader literature; ii) we then situate our study within the UK context and elaborate upon the research methods adopted to answer our key research question; iii) we then present the findings from our analysis of interview data with key stakeholders in relation to the development and definition of the gig economy; and iv) finally we reflect on our findings and draw conclusions regarding the utility of the concept of the gig economy and its utility.

2. The gig economy as a 'contestable' concept

Efforts to scrutinise the use of concepts have led to the publication of classic texts in the social sciences. One key text is that of Sartori (1970) whose concern with 'conceptual stretching' stemming from his experience of the field of comparative politics captures very well the concern that we too have encountered when researching the gig economy, that is the careful construction of concepts. The elegant solution Sartori proposed was to understand conceptualisation through a 'ladder of abstraction', where on the one hand concepts are located at the higher end of the ladder as they become ever more abstract and hold fewer characteristics and on the other hand concepts can be located at the lower end of the ladder as they accumulate more properties. Accordingly, such concepts can be categorised as high level, medium level and low level.

This taxonomy has over the years offered scholars a useful heuristic tool for grasping conceptual construction, although it has been critiqued by those arguing that the Sartori model of developing classifications lacks the nuance to capture the sometimes divergent or 'diminished subtypes' of concepts that can avoid conceptual stretching while elaborating the differentiation of the concept from its root definition (e.g. a subtype of 'electoral regime' is 'parliamentary democracy', but a diminished subtype can be 'illiberal democracy') (Collier and Levitsky, 1997). Drawing upon this literature, we understand that during the process of conceptual construction or the precision of concept building, a key challenge is where to draw the boundaries between one concept and another or one concept and its subtype (diminished or not). The core concern of this article is to elaborate an empirically informed answer to the question: *how should we conceptualise the 'gig economy'?* In doing so we shall explore if gig economy work should be understood as a novel concept that stands alone, a concept that is a subtype, or whether it is in fact conceptually redundant.

Underpinning our problematization of the concept of the gig economy is the extent to which it offers a new categorisation for researchers working across relevant disciplines

(e.g. sociology, social policy, political science, law and management) and issue fields (e.g. gender equality, migration, health and safety, industrial relations). Our inquiry into the degree to which the concept offers entirely novel insights for analysis is both empirically and conceptually grounded. For example, when assessing the strengths of the gig economy concept, part of its allure is its connotation with the accelerated short termism of the work that is found in this section of the labour market. However, part of its weakness is revealed when we turn to the work of Gerring (1999) who offers eight criteria for what makes a concept good: familiarity, resonance, parsimony, coherence, differentiation, depth, theoretical utility and field utility.

While not discounting the importance of each of the criteria set out by Gerring (1999), for the purpose of our analysis we shall highlight two key criteria, that of familiarity and differentiation which illustrate the problems posed by the current usage of the 'gig economy'. Exploring the issues surrounding the 'gig economy' with our research participants, we found a great deal of resistance to the use of the term, with many subsuming it within the more established issue of precarious work. Given that those with frontline experience of employment, policymaking and industrial relations in the 'gig economy' expressed scepticism of its utility, we sought to interrogate the concept further, and conducted a review of the well-established literature that exists on the connected and not at all dissimilar phenomena of 'precarious work', which has been forged in conjunction with the increased diffusion of non-standard forms of employment (Gallie and Paugam, 2003; Pollert and Charlwood, 2009; Standing, 2011; Shildrick et al, 2012). This speaks directly to the criteria of 'familiarity' set out by Gerring (1999: p368) who explains that:

> 'The degree to which a new definition "makes sense", or is intuitively "clear", depends critically upon the degree to which it conforms, or clashes, with established usage-within everyday language and within a specialized language community'.

In our study, we discovered that when the concept of the 'gig economy' is placed under scrutiny then it falls short of being ostensibly different from more established concepts such as precarious work. This shortcoming is identified by Gerring (1999: p376) as occurring when, 'a poorly bounded concept has definitional borders which overlap neighbouring concepts'. It is this weak differentiation that leads us to question the validity of the concept as it stands and the need for it to be properly situated in the canon of existing literature.

Therefore, rather than contributing to those debates surrounding 'essentially contested concepts' (Gallie, 1955) our analysis focuses specifically upon the 'contestable' (Gallie, 1956; Collier et al, 2006) nature of the concept of the 'gig economy work' from the perspective of a specific context. Thus we can state from the outset that the limitation of this study is that our (re)conceptualisation is embedded within an exclusively UK context and as such, researchers in other contexts may find that they situate their

conceptualisations in similar ways but against the background of different regimes of welfare (Esping-Andersen, 2013) and industrial relations (Streeck, 1992; Crouch, 1993) as well as the varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskisce, 2001).

Failing to properly recognise the connection between the 'gig economy' and the well-established phenomena of precarious work in the UK is thus what we seek to problematize in this article. Not doing so presents a problem for research through the risk of disconnecting new avenues of inquiry into 'platform work' (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019; Duggan et al, 2020) with long established studies, methodologies and insights that have been gleaned from decades of research on precarious work. Of course, it is not only researchers who face such potential issues of having to 'reinvent the wheel', it is also policymakers, who, as our findings will indicate are themselves grappling with what exactly is meant by the 'gig economy'. Furthermore, failing to explicitly connect the experience of work in the 'gig economy' with precarious work in other sectors risks obscuring the supply chains of the platforms that are at the centre of these new technological changes. Moreover, given the connectedness of these supply chains we present early indications of how organised solidarity between workers who cut across the definitions of 'gig economy' and 'precarious work' represents a growing understanding among workers and trade unions of the connections inherent within these supply chains and the insecure and often low paid work that it is predicated upon.

3. Research context and methods

When analysing the concept of the gig economy, we should first acknowledge that the processes of technological innovation and advancing capitalism are global in nature and thus the impact of such processes are similarly global (Scholte, 2005; Wood et al, 2019). However, positioning an analysis within a given context can serve to illuminate how global processes are (re)constructed at the national and local scale (Swyngedouw, 1997) which helps shape the determinants of the quality of employment (Findlay et al, 2013). With this in mind, our analysis focuses on the UK context where seminal scholarship bridging the economy and society has revealed the disciplinary forces of work and time (Thompson, 1967) and the disruptive societal impact of market driven change (Polanyi, [1944] 2001). More recently, the UK is a context where the advance of deregulation and deindustrialisation (Jessop, 1994) has been charted concurrently with a growing awareness of inequalities in the labour market (Pollert and Charlwood, 2009; Shildrick et al, 2012) and across local geographies (Beatty and Fothergill, 2018). Therefore, the UK provides a relevant context for understanding whether or not the concept of the gig economy is gaining traction and contains enough meaning to differentiate it from more established concepts such as precarious work.

Comprehending the gig economy as a concept more broadly in UK society is difficult to quantify, however one starting point is the very technology that is so often linked with the emergence of these forms of work. To begin to uncover the relevance of the term 'gig

economy' to the UK public consciousness we turned to a platform that has become inextricably linked to the disruptive potential of technology: Google. As we observe in Figure 1, we sought to identify the point at which the 'gig economy' became part of the public discourse and found it in the form of web searches on Google in October 2016, with the first real spike in interest in the summer of 2017.

[Figure 1 here]

What Google trends also offers is an insight into the topic categories of the searches made by users of the platform in relation to the term 'gig economy' and figures reveal that the top five topics in descending order were: 'meaning', 'gig-music', 'employment', 'Uber' and 'laborer'. In addition, Google trends also offers a list of the related specific queries that users searching for the 'gig economy' were also searching for and the top five queries in descending order were: 'the gig economy', 'what is gig economy', 'what is the gig economy', 'gig meaning', and 'gig economy meaning'. Thus, what these results tell us is that the gig economy as a concept remains relatively new in the popular lexicon, that it is connected to employment, sometimes with specific platforms such as Uber, but more importantly the general public in the UK are themselves searching for a clearer understanding of exactly what is meant by the gig economy.

Of course, members of the public can be prompted to explore a specific subject following coverage by the media. In Figure 2, we illustrate the growth in media coverage (specifically the print media) in the UK of the gig economy. Using the Lexis Nexis database, we searched specifically for those news articles that mentioned the two-word phrase "gig economy", with our findings reported below in Figure 2. To clarify, when we analysed our results we did detect a few instances where the search engine picked up articles that contained the words "gig" and "economy" in the same article but separately (this was most apparent in the period leading up to 2016) and although few in number, we shall add the caveat that the numbers below may very slightly over report the coverage of the gig economy in the UK print media. What the findings in Figure 2 once again confirm is the relative novelty of the concept as a subject of public discourse, with no news articles present between 2014-2015, 92 in total during 2015-2016, 902 during 2016-2017, 1164 during 2017-2018 and 965 in the last year 2018-2019.

[Figure 2 here]

We then examined the number of references made in the parliamentary record, Hansard, to the term 'gig economy' across a five year period (1st July 2014 – 1st July 2019) encompassing references made both in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. In total, we found 265 references made to the gig economy including the title of two debates, one on 14th May 2017 in the chamber of the House of Commons entitled 'Gig Economy' and then in Westminster Hall on 20th June 2018 in a debate entitled 'Insecure Work and the Gig Economy', the latter of which represented the largest spike in references during that five year period. When we scrutinised these parliamentary contributions more closely, it became clear that the use of the gig economy was connected

interchangeably with issues of in-work poverty, the use of non-standard forms of employment such as 'zero hours contracts' and the shift from an industrial to a service based economy[1].

As we shall explore later in this article, contestation over the definition of the gig economy is unresolved among policymakers. This does not mean that efforts have not been made to better define the concept for the purposes of policymaking. A report published by the UK Government's Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) which sought to detail the extent of the gig economy in the UK did so by recognising the fluidity of the term 'gig economy' and as such, in collaboration with the Institute for Employment Studies decided upon the following definition to capture the type of employment relationship which underpins it:

> 'The gig economy involves the exchange of labour for money between individuals or companies via digital platforms that actively facilitate matching between providers and customers, on a short-term and payment by task basis'. (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2018: p4).

Consequently, the rise of the so-called gig economy has motivated some policymakers to advocate the scaling up of this new mode of employment and evidence from the UK Government itself suggests such expansion is occurring. For example, the report commissioned by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) provides a snapshot of that segment of the workforce that currently composes the gig economy in the UK. The findings reveal that there are approximately 2.8 million people in the UK who are working in the gig economy. This is a substantial increase in the figures upon which the Taylor Review[2], a group commissioned by the UK Government to explore fairer work practices and led by public policy expert Matthew Taylor, has based its report in 2017, which sets its estimate in line with The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) at 1.3 million.

The blurring of the boundaries between the specific practices and issues generated by employment in the gig economy and the wider economic picture serves as an indication of how the conceptualisation of the gig economy is not always straightforward. It was in this context that our study took place. Moreover, we also undertook an analysis of the wider UK policy context by examining a range of literature that included policy documents from the UK Government, Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and Northern Ireland. These documents were not primarily sourced because of any explicit reference to the gig economy (which is still nascent and extremely scarce as a consequence) but instead encompassed related issues such as fair work, employment security, and pay which, as we shall discover later in this article, connect to the development of the gig economy. We also examined those submissions made by employers, trade unions and other stakeholders to the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (see also Bales et al, 2018).

Building on this foundational knowledge, we draw upon twenty-seven interviews conducted as part of a project examining social dialogue and the future of work. Our sample of participants included a range of key stakeholders encompassing policymakers (e.g., parliamentarians from across central and devolved government) trade unions (e.g. national level officials, regional level organisers) and labour organisations (e.g., social economy organisations engaged in supporting gig economy and precarious workers) as well as gig economy workers (e.g. self-employed delivery drivers whose work depends on online platforms) using a maximum variation (Bryman, 2016) sampling strategy across, mainly urban areas, of the UK. Interviews were conducted between 2018 and early 2019 and on average lasted one hour with participants guaranteed that their contributions would be anonymised. Our interview schedule allowed us to discuss issues of workers' understanding of the gig economy sector, of workers' rights in the sector and working conditions, but we could also discuss how the gig economy could be conceived of as an opportunity or as a challenge in people's lives, as well as the role of trade unions, the potential for renewed forms of social dialogue, as well as capturing infra-UK trends and differences. Our interviews were triangulated by the direct observation of a strike which took place in October 2018.

In the process of negotiating access to our informants, it became immediately clear that there was some hesitation to talk about the gig economy with a number of eventual participants explaining that they were themselves still formulating their impressions of what this term referred to and the implications it had for the future of work. Once our fieldwork was complete we then proceeded towards adopting a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) through which we elicited key themes from the interview data to understand how the impact of gig economy employment is being understood by different stakeholders such as the implications for the future of industrial relations, the consequences for policymaking and the impact of the working conditions experienced by those navigating employment opportunities in this section of the labour market.

4. Findings: Beyond the platform

As we turned to our data analysis, we expected that given the parameters of the research, interviewees would focus on the technological shifts that came with platform companies and thus highlight these employers. Indeed, in our initial exchanges the discussion of the 'gig economy' often revolved around the use of well-known platforms (e.g. Uber or Deliveroo). The focus on such platforms is one that has dominated discourses in the UK perhaps due to the perceived role platforms have played in the rise of the 'gig economy'. In fact, findings in the aforementioned BEIS (2018) study revealed that, among those working in the gig economy, courier services were the most frequent form of gig economy work (42%), along with transport services (28%) and food delivery services (21%). It comes therefore as no surprise that when we examine the responses from interviewees about their understanding of the 'gig economy' it is these types of platforms that often serve as shorthand for it. However, when we delved deeper, the difficulty respondents had with the concept of the gig economy became apparent. An example of this was elicited

in an interview with a senior official in a social economy organisation in Wales that was exploring ways to develop new modes of employment. Explaining that to some extent he did associate the idea of the gig economy with Deliveroo and Uber, he was reluctant to purely focus on these types of workers as solely the representatives of what we understand as the gig economy:

> *'I would take a more general view of it. That type of working is translatable to a far larger section of the economy. This kind of "disruptor" type of approach is how I see this and no areas of the economy are really protected from that, it could happen in lots of different places. That's how I would view it'* (Interviewee 16).

Another interviewee, this time a policy officer whose organisation focuses on tackling gender inequality in the labour market, also associated the gig economy with specific platforms. Echoing research findings in other contexts (Churchill and Craig, 2019) she conveyed a sense that the gig economy was an expression of longstanding gender inequalities in new forms (Van Doorn, 2017). In doing so, she pointed towards the issue of occupational segregation (i.e. women being concentrated in certain sectors and in low paid roles) as simply being replicated in those platforms associated with the gig economy and thus, regardless of the technological novelty associated with the platform work, the reality was that pattern of inequalities were consistent with other areas of the labour market:

> '*The gig economy is just a new arena for women's inequality at work to operate in. The inequality we see in the labour market more broadly is just being replicated in the gig economy….when you look at some of the platforms where it's possible to make more money, they're dominated by men whereas the platforms around cleaning services for example, they are vastly dominated by women: so that occupational segregation has definitely been replicated within the gig economy*' (Interviewee 11).

A consistent issue which we elicited from our interview data was the malleability of the term 'gig economy' and how it presents a significant definitional problem, one that sometimes generates confusion regarding the sectors and occupations to which it applies. Concerned with conceptual precision, we sought to define the gig economy in a more coherent way. Our analysis therefore offers a novel intervention by revealing how key informants perceive the gig economy through a prism of continuity rather than change, identifying it as problematic and connecting it with broader processes of precarity. Thus, our findings moved beyond discussions of the technologies associated with platform work and more towards the domain of employment insecurity.

4.1 Findings II: The 'gig economy' and the (reinvented) future of work

Across our interviews, we elicited perspectives of the gig economy that were couched in historical terms, sometimes these involved generalised references to more 'standard' types of employment that were the norm in post-war Britain. An example of this is elaborated below from one parliamentarian who pointed to the history of heavy industry

in his constituency and how flexibility had always been a feature of labour in the area, leading him to conclude that:

> *'That kind of behaviour in the labour market has existed for a long time…but increasingly we're seeing it in more and more parts of the economy and that's really a question about how that's sustainable in the long term, particularly if it's not able to command a significant compensation for the labour expended….so I guess when we say the gig economy it's a new term maybe, but maybe it's using a term to describe something that has always been there'* (Interviewee 18).

This historical contextualisation of the gig economy was mirrored by another interviewee, a national level organiser in the trade union movement based in the north of England who explained that the gig economy has become a catch-all term that is being used to describe a form of working that is often temporary and insecure and where the relationship between the worker and the employer is vague and tenuous. As a result, he expressed concerns about the adequacy of how the concept of the gig economy was being applied across the UK economy. The interviewee explained that as someone who was previously a trade union organiser in the construction industry:

> *'the building industry was the first industry to use creative employment methods… maybe the methodology behind this was looked at because these things are normally discussed and then an idea is shared'* (Interviewee 10).

Mirroring this conclusion that the gig economy and the employment practices associated with it are unremarkable, another interviewee, this time a senior trade union organiser based in the south east of England, was keen to stress that the issues brought about by the gig economy are often presented as being novel when in reality the use of labour pools stretches far back in history as an example of the exploitation of workers and therefore the issues that the gig economy brings are old problems in new forms and from new sources. Other interviewees, such as one parliamentarian we interviewed, framed the emergence of the gig economy against much more contemporary history, namely the financial crisis in 2008. He claimed that the crisis had given some employers an excuse to engage in non-standard forms of employment which although had been positioned as being a short-term fix during a difficult economic period, had in fact become the new normal:

> *'I think the economic crash of 2008…I think it gave everybody excuses. It gave business the excuse to say 'do you want a job or not? The economy is bad all over the world so we need to all work together to try and make sure we can get out of this'. But it's not changed'* (Interviewee 12).

Scepticism concerning the utility of the gig economy as a concept also stemmed from other interviewees who perceived it as something of a buzzword that was failing to capture anything novel in the labour market. During another interview, one of our participants – a director of an organisation providing support to freelancers – argued that in his view the term 'gig economy' was stealing the limelight from the broader issue of

precarity. The interviewee elaborated that based on the daily experiences of those using his organisation the main issue of precarity is widespread and the insecurity that is experienced by a range of workers (particularly those in self-employment) is the actual central issue, whereas the focus on what has become known as the gig economy he explained as being attributable to the fact that it has become a buzzword associated with platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo when in reality many of the workers he was supporting were undoubtedly in the gig economy but are not receiving the same type of attention:

> *'the terminology is important because the gig economy is also seen by many people as quite sexy, interesting, digital, it becomes all these other things that are associated with it – but it still is precarious'* (Interviewee 17).

This same scepticism was expressed by one senior trade union official who explained that there was an active discussion ongoing within the trade union movement about the extent to which the publicity and buzz around the gig economy was warranted. Consequently, she added that some unions - for example those working in the creative sector - had highlighted that several of the issues associated with the gig economy had been an ongoing experience in other sectors for some years. The interviewee echoed concerns of other participants in our study that there was a need to recognise that the gig economy was affecting sectors other than just those in the often-cited areas of transport or hospitality (pointing to examples in social care). Adding that it was crucial to recognise that although the technology around the gig economy was new, the issues it was creating were long standing and that the fuzzy definition of the gig economy was creating confusion among various stakeholders, but for her the situation was clear:

> *'There has always been this dialogue of precarious work is new, the gig economy is new and I sort of say well alright the technology is new, but the fundamentals…they [gig economy employers] are able to get away with it because the public policymakers don't understand it; we [the trade union movement] don't understand it; researchers don't really understand it; and so it's almost like "oh it's really hard", when actually: no! If people can get away with not paying people, then they do'* (Interviewee 6).

4.2 Findings III: Social policy, social dialogue and the 'gig economy'

When we turned to focus more closely on the policy realm, we found that the concept of the gig economy was somewhat elusive of definition for those actors who normally occupy the role of partner in 'social dialogue' processes (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). For example, one parliamentarian whose remit included labour market policy and the broader economy, articulated a blunt response when reflecting on how policymakers were grasping an understanding of the gig economy. This interviewee explained that although there was an enormous amount of buzz around the gig economy, the data that exists to truly understand its impact on the economy is missing. In fact, the interviewee consistently emphasised the lack of data as a serious issue facing policymakers who were trying to comprehend the problems facing gig economy workers.

Despite this key challenge he emphasised that policymakers were first of all keen to pin down what actually constituted work in the gig economy, with limited progress thus far:

> *'there is a huge amount of publicity about the gig economy but not many people actually know a great deal about it and the amount of data that's available on it is pretty small. So, what our Committee is trying to do is trying to understand what really is the gig economy? What does it comprise of and where is it going? What does it really contribute to the economy?...it's pretty wide ranging because we're not sure where we're going'* (Interviewee 13).

Another senior politician who had been actively involved in campaigning on issues relating to employment insecurity and the trade union movement was vociferous in his opposition to the use of the concept of the 'gig economy' as a way to capture the experience of those who were actually in his view employed for such companies. Mirroring the conclusion of the policymaker above, he expressed a sense of inevitability about the development of fresh legislation which would be needed to deal with the impact of these growing forms of work:

> *'I'm not sure I'm particularly comfortable with the term [gig economy] to be honest with you. I think it's one of these things that's come in to common parlance that I think a lot of people will have a different interpretation…This issue is affecting more and more people so the awareness of it is increasing and ultimately there will have to be, there just will have to be a political and legislative response to that and I do think the time is now where people are thinking that this has went a bit too far'* (Interviewee 26).

Another interviewee, this time from a large trade union and based in the south east of England who had direct responsibility for influencing public policy quite clearly shared the concerns expressed by some policymakers, arguing that the gig economy is far wider than we often envisage, explaining:

> '*we've taken it to mean non-standard forms of employment involving insecure employment…it's a thing that keeps coming up, that the gig economy is being too narrowly defined*' (Interviewee 3).

The interviewee added that she had witnessed the issue of the narrow definition of the gig economy being raised at various trade union conferences she had attended. Reinforcing a concern echoed by other interviewees, she emphasised that the exploitative practices discussed in relation to the gig economy are so widespread that they are impacting upon sectors that are not normally associated with the issue of the 'gig economy' per se (pointing towards examples in education and social care). She explained that from her experience interacting with others working on the issue it was clear that the platform companies which were often inextricably linked with discussions of the gig economy actually comprised a small percentage of the overall economy and that although this was an important area to focus upon, there was a need to expand the discussion to include similar experiences in other sectors. Another trade union official we interviewed,

this time based in central Scotland, was equally cautious about the conceptualisation of these new modes of organising work that had been spurred by technological change. Reflecting on his experience of organising gig workers, he explained that in terms of the issues thrown up by the so called 'gig economy' these were most often placed with specific employers including Uber, UberEats and Deliveroo, adding that there was an increasing number of people who would not necessarily identify themselves as gig workers but who were navigating working conditions which mirrored those found by workers engaging in employment via these type of digital platforms:

> *'You've got that core where everybody knows they're gig workers like Deliveroo and so on and you've got other people that wouldn't relate to that language at all. As I understand it the only people who would say "yes I'm definitely a gig worker" really are couriers'* (Interviewee 2).

What the extract above alludes to is one of the key pragmatic implications for not adequately conceptualising work in the gig economy both in the research literature and in the popular lexicon. On the one hand it suggests that quantifying and forecasting the expansion of 'gig work' may fall prey to one of the issues that has encumbered those researching 'zero hours contracts', namely that when official statistics rely upon self-reporting (Pyper and McGuinness, 2018) this requires a clear understanding on the part of the workers regarding their contractual situation. On the other hand it also creates issues for trade unions and labour organisations seeking to organise workers whose occupational identity (Standing, 2011) is already somewhat malleable and who may not self-report as a 'gig worker' and thus find themselves outside the scope of dedicated actions in this sphere (see Vandaele, 2018). This issue of occupational identity connects somewhat to the question not only how workers view themselves but also view others. This brings us to insights gleaned from observation in the field we conducted as part of our study.

The 'gig economy' strike, which took place on 4th October 2018, was organised across a number of cities in the UK, bringing together workers who frequently associated with gig work (such as couriers for online platforms) and other workers experiencing issues of insecurity in in the hospitality sector (such as fast food outlets which form a key hub in the supply chain of platform work). Although the platforms that shape the employment undertaken in this sector of the economy are online those taking part organised traditional demonstrations and picket lines that created a space for these striking workers to come together. To better understand the strike, we undertook direct observation in one of the cities in the UK where it was occurring. We found a number of different trade union representatives in attendance; including those from within the hospitality sector and part of the trade union movement that is aligned to the Trades Union Congress as well as couriers who were part of a self-organised union. During the day the strikers moved towards the headquarters of Uber in the city centre and later picketed a major restaurant chain and then moving on to demonstrate outside a fast food outlet. Throughout the strike, those participating interchanged their protest slogans, at one stage focusing explicitly on the algorithms of the platform couriers worked for and at

another stage on the wages of hospitality workers. What this illustrated to us was that although there are some practical differences between the experiences of those working via platforms and those experiencing it in 'traditional' workplaces the connections between both (not just in terms of working conditions but also the supply chains themselves) are recognised by those workers themselves. Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to similarly grasp the importance of these connections.

5. Conclusions

Drawing upon the extant literature, we have demonstrated in this article the importance of conceptual clarity and the need to properly locate the phenomenon that is gig economy work within an existing body of research on precarious work. Building upon a review of how the concept of the gig economy has gained a foothold in the popular lexicon across policymaking and the public discourse, our empirical analysis bridges a gap in the existing knowledge base on the subject by elaborating how and where the gig economy can be located in the broader landscape of precarious work. We have done so by revealing how, from the perspective of key stakeholders, the concept of the gig economy falls short in terms of its 'familiarity' (or in other words the clarity with which it is used) and its lack of 'differentiation' (i.e. due to its overlapping boundaries) from another concept, that of precarious work (Gerring, 1999). The aim of this article is not simply to interrogate the concept of the gig economy to ensure its coherent use in the academy. Instead, we hope to open a pathway for scholars across disciplines and issue fields with extant experience of precarious work to excavate some of the extant issues relating to the nexus of technology and employment that have come to be connected with the gig economy. In other words, drawing the conclusion that the gig economy is best understood as a subtype of precarious work does not devalue its currency. Instead we recognise that the gig economy can involve radical technological change that can intensify issues of employment insecurity and worker control (Wood et al, 2019) and understanding the technology will require resources and commitment, nevertheless some of the fundamental issues that are generated have been the subject of extant research for decades.

Our empirical findings also reveal a cloud of confusion over the very term 'gig economy', with those at the very forefront of organising workers and policymaking still ambivalent about its meaning. For most, the term simply could not be disaggregated from the longer running trend of precarious work. Our interviews gave some indication of the risks for policymaking, worker organisation and research in the field if the gig economy should ever become disaggregated from the higher-level concept (Sartori, 1970) of precarity, given that it may result in failing to properly acknowledge the potential asymmetric impact of this type of work for certain groups in society such as young people, women and migrants. Indeed there was a realisation among policymakers that they will need to adopt a much closer interest and perhaps even legislative measures to address the issues associated with the gig economy, there was still a lack of consensus over exactly what the current impact of the gig economy was and scarce information about how it was evolving.

The issue of grasping a clearer understanding of the gig economy and situating it within existing experience and expertise also extends to those who are seeking to represent workers in the labour market. For example, just as in the past the problems of precarious work were sometimes obfuscated by the lack of self-reporting of workers as being within this category, so too we found that those engaged in various forms of employment in the 'gig economy' may similarly not self-report as a gig economy worker. Nevertheless, through our observation of industrial action undertaken by workers tied to online platforms and those who are in more traditional workplaces, we gained insight into how the connections between the gig economy and longstanding issues of precarity were being recognised and articulated by those on the front line. Thus by locating the concept of gig economy work as a subtype of precarious work, we not only connect the expertise of scholars in these complementary fields, we also provide a more inclusive lens for key stakeholders such as trade unions, labour organisations and policymakers to comprehend not only the more obvious examples of 'platform capitalism' (e.g. Uber and Deliveroo) but also those sectors and sub-sectors of the economy that are connected to and learning from these technological changes via new employment practices and evolving supply chains.

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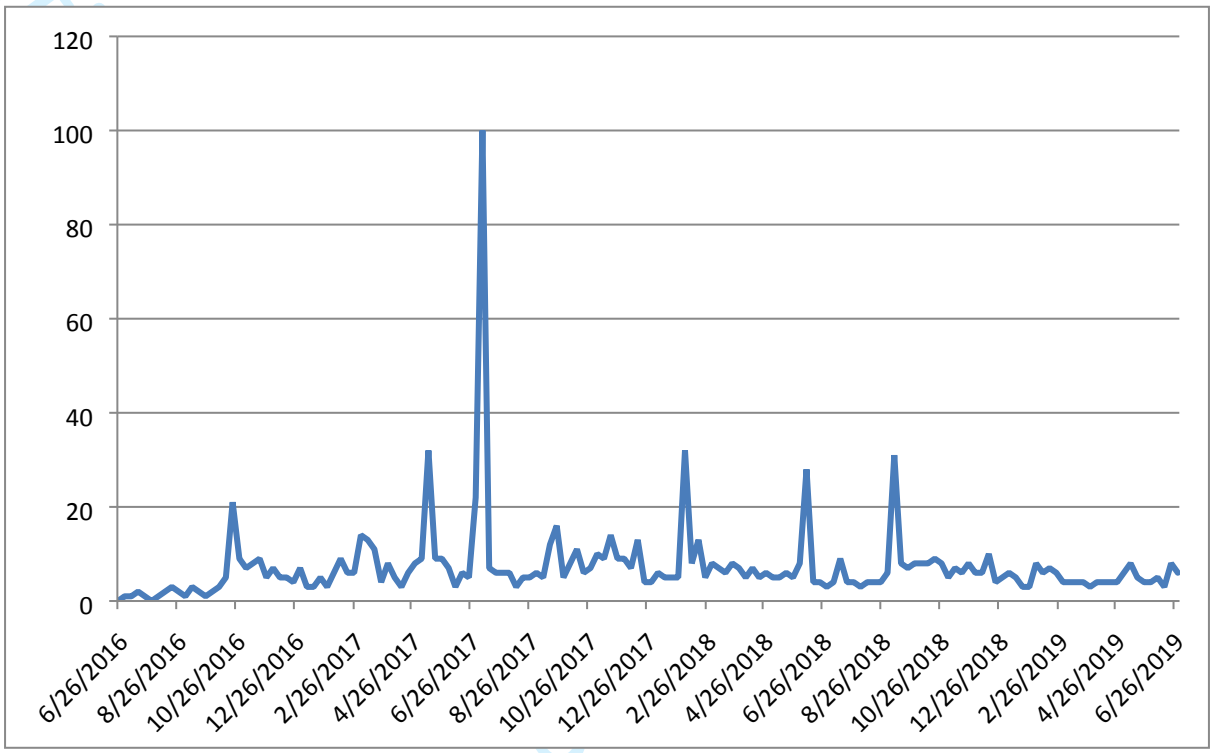
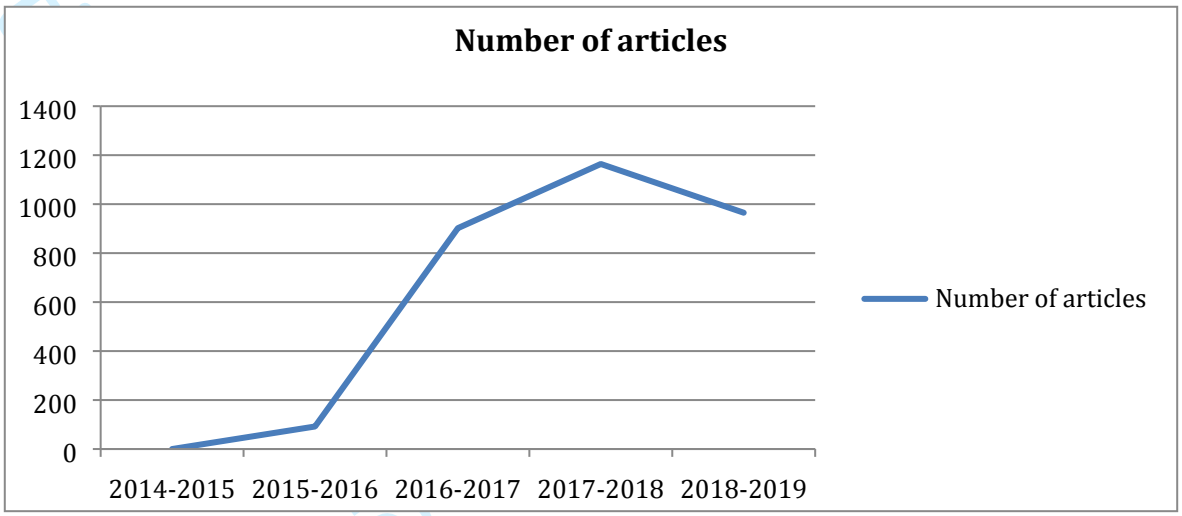
Figure 1: Google Trends Web Search for 'gig economy'



Source: Google Trends, 1st June 2016 – 1st July 2019

Figure 2: Newspaper articles making reference to the "gig economy"



Source: *Lexis Nexis, 1st July 2014 – 1st July 2019*

Endnotes

[1] See for example the exchanges recorded in Hansard between parliamentarians in the 'Insecure Work and the Gig Economy' debate, 20th June 2018.
[2] The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/good-work-the-taylor-review-of-modern-working-practices