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## PLATFORM COUNTERPUBLICS: GOSSIP & CONTESTED KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ONLINE LABOR PLATFORMS

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As commercial platforms mediate large swaths of online markets for information and services, scholars have shown how users resist, or work around these opaque digital environments. From content producers to Uber drivers, digital laborers are particularly adept at appropriating and gaming platforms like YouTube, and Uber (Chen 2017; Duffy 2017; Rosenblat 2018). Often described as “multi-sided markets,” platforms bring together many different kinds of stakeholders, including consumers, workers, advertisers, and regulators (Gillespie 2010; Lingel 2020). However, investigations of working alongside algorithms have so far focused on workers’ relationship to algorithms, and neglected other stakeholders. Extending counterpublics theories (Warner 2002; Fraser 1990), we examine over 3,000 online reviews of a labor platform, Care.com, finding that both workers and clients use gossip to create a *platform counterpublic* that constructs a counternarrative about platform business practices.<sup>1</sup> While previous studies suggest that different platform stakeholders have conflicting interests, we find that platform counterpublics draw both workers and clients together to draw boundaries demarcating acceptable platform business practices. Second, we point to the implications of platform counterpublics for the investigation of platform labor and algorithms. Consumer reviews of platforms are absent from critical literature on labor platforms. By bringing together scholarship on counterpublics with critical literature on labor platforms, this paper offers a relational approach to platforms.

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<sup>1</sup> Care.com is the world’s largest online marketplace for domestic work. It provides an algorithmically filtered search for a wide range of services - from nannies to dog walkers and tutors. In 2019, Care made \$192 million in annual revenue and had 11.5 million workers profiles in the United States alone (Ticona & Mateescu 2018).

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## **Data & Methods**

Looking for evidence of multiple platform stakeholders in the same online spaces, we found that consumer reviews sites like TrustPilot, SiteJabber, and HighYa appeared at top of multiple search engine results for Care.com, behind only official company pages, Wikipedia, and news stories about company scandals. These consumer reviews sites allow users to write pseudonymous reviews of products, companies, and services (Utz 2009). We scraped over 3,000 reviews from four reviews sites and analyzed them using NVivo software.

## **Networked Gossip Produces Platform Counterpublics**

Gossip, both on and offline, is networked by nature, but networked digital media has provided an opportunity to understand the processes by which marginalized groups engage in alternative practices of knowledge production. From “algorithmic gossip” about how to gain visibility among YouTube beauty vloggers (Bishop 2019), to “rumors” about internet scams (Burrell 2011), scholars have illuminated the ways that networked media allows users create knowledge that runs counter to dominant technological imaginaries and create communities around that knowledge.

Reviewers of Care.com reveal that information-seeking about the platform across the internet lead them to consumer review sites as a useful source of information: “I applied for several jobs...Nothing. I googled why no one was responding and ran across other people here who were having the same problem...”. Through a Google search, this reviewer found others with the same problem. Reviewers also expressed the value of reading other reviews: “I almost paid money to this site. I’m so grateful to have read the reviews of others before I made such a mistake” and referenced the reviewers as a kind of community: “Stay off the site and stay safe internet buddies!” Review sites of Care.com have created a limited kind of community among reviewers who, upon searching for information across the web, find others whose experiences mirror their own. As Rogoff notes, gossip is always-already in close proximity to dominant narratives and the ability of the former to move “...through subterranean and unacknowledged channels and continuously constitutes communities within its listeners’ (1996: 7). As is the case with most networked media, instead of listeners, review site gossip constitutes communities of interactive text-based audiences. Following Warner’s description of counterpublics that “...comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (2002: 413), we contend that consumer review sites constitute a platform counterpublic.

Unlike “networked counterpublics,” that use platform affordances (e.g., hashtags on Twitter) to gather communities around a cause (Jackson & Foucault Welles 2016), platform counterpublics take platforms as their object instead of the medium through which they are formed. For labor platforms, this entails workers and clients overcoming platform design meant to separate them. Care.com provides separate interfaces to each set of stakeholders. If a user wants to use the service as both an employer and as a worker, they must register with different e-mail addresses. The platform also privileges the experiences and accounts of clients over workers by only allowing clients to review workers but not allowing workers to review clients (Ticona & Mateescu 2018). However,

on review sites, workers and clients can read about one another's' experiences, providing an alternative space where accounts from both are given equal standing. Reviews from both clients are workers reference one another: "From all the reviews here it doesn't look like they require background checks of families? But nannies are out here paying \$59?!" "Families & Sitters avoid this site! Read the reviews!"

## **Beyond Discourse: Implications for Research**

From #DeleteUber to Instacart clients rallying behind workers to demand transparent tipping practices, digital labor often creates alliances among diverse stakeholders. However, scholarship on platform labor often uses theories of labor that occlude these shifting relational dynamics between clients, workers, and platforms. Understanding the role of workers and clients in *platform counterpublics* is an invitation to a more relational model of digital labor that is attuned to the ways meaning and power are shaped through relationships that escape the shop-floor and bend traditional managerial relationships (Baym 2015; Zelizer 2013).

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