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## **DIGITAL LABOR *DESDE* LATIN AMERICA: A PLURIVERSAL LENS**

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### **Introductory Statement**

With the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) annual meeting coming to Brazil and Latin America for the first time, we are excited to propose a panel that highlights and integrates research conducted by scholars from the region, about the region, and contributing to the development of academic concepts and theories from the region, specifically around the topic of digital labor. The aim of this panel is to provide a discussion of Latin America not only as a site of research but also as a way of understanding the world, highlighting digital labor through Latin American epistemological lenses. We follow Édgar Gómez-Cruz and colleagues' (2023) assertion, "thinking both "from" and "with" Latin America (hence our use of the Spanish and Portuguese "desde" in the title), particularly when discussing instances of digital labor in the region.

We understand Latin America—a term imposed through 19th-century colonialist endeavors that have led many to prefer the Kuna language term *Abya Yala* instead—as a pluriverse, or a world where many worlds co-exist, following Arturo Escobar (2018). By this, we acknowledge

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the complex and, in many cases, shared histories, politics, and cultures. It is within this pluriversal context that we focus on the progression of the gig or platform economy, as well as the development of artificial intelligence and other data-based technologies that have impacted how computer-mediated forms of work are adopted and reconstructed by many in the region.

The papers in this panel focus on different types of work and different geographies. The first one introduces *viração* as a concept that challenges formal/informal labor binaries, showing how digital labor in Latin America is shaped by historical informal work structures. Based on life histories of two Brazilian women currently working as data workers and data workers for click farms, it shows that informal labor is not absorbed but reshaped through local circuits of gendered digital labor. The paper situates digital labor within longstanding economic survival strategies beyond standard global AI/data chains.

The second paper looks at feminist unionism in location-based gig economy platforms through the concept of *biosindicalismo* and decolonial thinking. *Biosindicalismo* challenges Eurocentric traditions of syndicalism by advocating for labor organizing that integrates social reproduction, care work, and broader struggles for dignity and life itself. Through these lenses, it highlights the role of gendered precarity, algorithmic exploitation, and reproductive labor in platform economies. The findings underscore how women's organizing are reshaping labor movements and demands policy recognition, disrupting masculinizing structures and advocating for intersectional labor rights.

The third paper explores freelance platforms through the Brazilian political economy of communication. The theoretical focus is on the mediation of intellectual work by digital platforms in Latin America. Mediation, as theorized in Latin American critical thought, is framed as a mechanism that adjusts contradictions without resolving them, deepening the subsumption of intellectual labor. Empirically, the research analyzes how freelance platforms structure work relations by controlling pricing, payment, and data extraction.

The fourth paper studies data workers through the concept of extractivism. By focusing on the emergence of platforms for AI data production in Venezuela during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper explores the adoption of these platforms in the country and their impact on workers. The paper analyzes this phenomenon as part of larger conversations around extractivism, a concept originated in Latin American scholarship to designate the unsustainable systems of resource extraction and how they deplete life. The paper links the phenomenon of data work to the historical processes of extractivism from the periphery to the core in the region.

The final paper explores how Participatory Action Research (PAR), particularly its Latin American tradition, can offer alternative forms of engagement that address critiques of exploitation in academia and journalism when studying data workers. The paper describes a project that engages data workers worldwide as co-researchers, allowing them to lead studies in their own workplace and create informative, political, journalistic, and artistic pieces reflecting their lived experiences. This approach, inspired by Marx's Workers' Inquiry, focuses

on collective sensemaking of the structures and dynamics shaping data work. By centering data workers as experts in their own material conditions and giving them control over the research process, the project aims to overcome difficulties in field access and build trust.

Together, these contributions from scholars in the region on forms of digital labor demonstrate a variety of theoretical approaches, provide an overview of the field sites and theories that contribute to these studies, and, crucially, go beyond regional contexts as mere sites of research to engage with ideas and peoples in ways that enhance our understanding of the world. The panel also demonstrates how digital labor is embedded in Latin American historical structures of informality, coloniality, and gendered labor relations. It also highlights pathways for workers' struggles, highlighting the importance of knowledge production that centers workers' voices.

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## **VIRAÇÃO AS PAST AND PRESENT OF DIGITAL LABOR: WOMEN WORKING AS DATA WORKERS AND AI CONSULTANTS**

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### Introduction

Informality has been a major topic in digital labor scholarship, but has just begun to be theorized in this particular field (Bertolini et al 2024, Ray 2024). However, current frameworks have still fallen short of connecting the historical informal work to digital economies. This paper argues, through the Brazilian concept of *viração* (turnaround, in rough translation), that informality shapes the past and present of digital labor in countries that have not gone through the process of building welfare state policies (Huws 2020). This concept goes beyond formal/informal binaries, understanding how workers navigate different work arrangements in their life histories at work, and their relationships with technologies. This paper draws on research with women working for click farm platforms as data workers and as AI consultants in

Brazil. It illustrates the relationship with the concept of *viração* through the life histories at work of two women interviewed for these researches. These cases demonstrate that, especially through the resale of products, historical informality is updated in local digital labor circuits, with gendered components, and not necessarily connected to global AI/data value chains. This temporal issue is also a way of going “beyond the point of production” (van Doorn & Shapiro 2023).

### ***Viração*: Permanent Movement, Resale and Update of Informal Work**

The term gig economy overlooks that, in the Majority World, economies have historically relied on “gigs” for working-class survival. (Abilio 2020, Zhang 2023, Athique 2019). According to this body of literature, many of these work arrangements are family-based and typically female led. They do not cease to exist because of digital economies. On the contrary, digital economies continue this history of *viração*. In Brazil, around 40% of workers are in the informal sector (IBGE 2025).

*Viração* is a vernacular concept theorized in the 2000s in Brazil as a way of overcoming the dichotomies between formal and informal, following the thought of the Brazilian sociologist Francisco de Oliveira (2003). This means “mobility between a series of contingent activities shaped by instability and inconstancy, as well as between legal and illegal activities” (Silva 2011, p. 59). This is a permanent movement between “formal and informal work, family enterprises, activities poorly recognized as labor” (Abilio 2021, p. 22). This concept, grounded in Brazilian workers' experiences (Rizek 2006), is far from being an exceptionalism in the global digital labor context.

A key feature of *viração* in Brazil is the resale of products—cosmetics, beauty products, and toys, many from Paraguay (Pinheiro-Machado 2017). Resale of beauty products (Abilio 2011) evidences how women's labor sustains capital accumulation in the country. In the 1990s, in a pre-platform era, a crowd work structure involved a million women reselling these products. The work culture related to the resale of products - and women's work - is a particular aspect that is updated in the digital economy in the country. Pinheiro-Machado et al. (2024) argue that social media platforms, particularly Instagram, function as digital labor platforms, reshaping informal work. They also highlight the role of women in selling and reselling products and services through social media, from cakes to online courses. Resale and the permanent movement between work activities are central to both women data workers and AI consultants.

### **Illustrating the *Viração* in Digital Labor**

The two life histories at work here illustrate that *viração* continues to shape digital labor in Brazil, connecting past and present labor relationships with digital technologies. Marcela, 31, worked in her parents' lunch box business as a teenager, held a secretarial job for less than a year, and then took on informal work, often covering vacations as a secretary. In 2020, unemployed and caring for a child, she discovered click farm platforms on YouTube. These

jobs paid less than \$0.01 per task for liking and following social media accounts (Grohmann et al 2022). This is a specific type of data work that does not fit into traditional AI data work typologies (Muldoon et al 2024), as it is used to artificially boost social media profiles. Marcela said that she started working on these platforms to earn extra income: “but it’s difficult as I’m not always available for these websites all day long, as I have a child to take care of and a house to clean” - in line with research on the role of social reproduction in data work (Posada 2022). To have more chances of earning an income, she borrowed a cellphone from her mother and works with two cellphones for click farms. After having several accounts blocked by Instagram, she learned to create fake accounts - another aspect related to *viração*, between piracy and illegality. Then, she saw in WhatsApp groups that there was another opportunity to make money in the click farm circuit as a reseller of fake accounts: “you can now resell good accounts”. Her work for click farms took on a dual role: 1) working for these platforms by liking and following accounts; 2) working in an informal circuit outside the platforms by reselling accounts to other people who are working for these platforms. She also occasionally does “gigs” as secretary in offices.

Fernanda, 55, has engaged in resale since the 1980s, initially traveling to Paraguay to sell toys and whiskey in Brazil. In the 1990s, she started reselling plated/fake jewelry with her husband. “Sometimes we had strong disagreements and I decided to pursue other businesses. I once had a small business repairing computers. I already resold devices to connect the Internet to the TV in the 1990s!”. Her career has been shaped by a back and forth between working with her husband and having her own small businesses. In 2015, she worked as a reseller of sex toys through e-commerce. Her life history at work is involved in both the *viração* and different types of technologies. During the pandemic, she completed formal training in data protection, following the Brazilian law on the topic, and founded a small company to offer consulting and training in data protection. In 2023, with the explosion of generative AI, the main focus of the business became AI consulting for small businesses in small cities. Currently, Fernanda sells courses and training on the use of AI for small businesses, and offers mentoring to women who have small businesses. One of Fernanda’s mentoring ads states: “This exclusive mentoring is aimed at women who want to apply AI in a practical and strategic way in their professional lives.” Currently, she considers herself an AI consultant.

## **Conclusion**

These two cases illustrate both how *viração* is at the heart of what precedes the emergence of digital labor in Brazil and continues to shape the present of digital labor through the introduction of new work activities that go beyond what has been previously designed by tech companies in the Global North. Both Marcela and Fernanda work as a kind of semi-intermediary, and to date, their role in global production networks of AI/data has been overlooked. Both operate in local circuits - whose direct clients and suppliers are Brazilian - of digital labor in activities that combine *viração* with digital technologies. Resale is a synthesis of *viração*: resale activities, as language and practice updated in digital economies, and mainly gendered activities.

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## **BIOSINDICALISMO: LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN WORKERS RESHAPING UNION ORGANIZING IN RIDE-HAILING AND DELIVERY APPS**

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### **Introduction**

The global platform economy has intensified precarious work, particularly where structural inequalities run deep. In Latin America, women platform workers face several challenges: sexual harassment, lack of maternity protections, double burden of paid and unpaid care work. For migrant women, xenophobia and racialized sexism compound these struggles. Yet despite these obstacles, women's participation and leadership in platform worker organizations disrupts traditional masculinized union structures, opening pathways toward a more inclusive and intersectional labor movement. This research employs decolonial feminist theories to analyze workers' epistemological contributions like *biosindicalismo*. Methodologically, I

conducted Militant Research rooted in activist engagement—knowledge production must emerge from within struggles to strengthen collective action.

### **Militant Research and Political Friendship**

Platforms perpetuate exploitation structures in the Global South through coloniality of power and necropolitics (Quijano, 2000; Mbembe, 2003), as well as devalue care work and reproductive labor (Federici, 2012). Epistemologically, I conducted Militant Research—rooted in activist engagement and co-research as decolonial praxis (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010; Lugones, 2003). This positions the researcher as co-participant in struggles for transformation rather than neutral observer (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003). Drawing on Latin American popular education and feminist epistemologies, this approach holds that knowledge production must emerge "from within a specific struggle and serves to strengthen collective capacities for action" (Malo, 2004).

This standpoint rejects the separation between knowledge production and political action. It stems from my work accompanying platform workers and their unionization processes across different geographies since 2019. Through my activist organization, the *Observatorio de Plataformas*, I have engaged in securing funding, union organizing, and generating militant research. This intimate accompaniment, especially with women workers, has forged close networks and political friendships. Feminist research pays attention to power relations within the research process and accountability to the communities involved (Hale, 2008; Vargas, 2008). This radical collaborative ethos allows us to recognize platform workers as 'experts by experience' (Ordorika, 2021) and as legitimate subjects producing knowledge (Espinosa et al., 2013). Using workers' own categories of analysis as the backbone of the research (Leite, 2011) commits to everyday theorization and opposes colonial practices that write about groups without including them.

Political Friendship serves as a vital theoretical and analytical category for understanding the dynamics of organizing among precarious women workers. This concept transcends liberal ideas of private affection, instead positioning friendship as "a practice of solidarity that sustains collective struggle and creates networks of mutual care and accountability" (hooks, 2000). Political friendship is a relational technology that enables women to build counter publics and spaces of resistance against patriarchal structures (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lugones, 2003). As these workers navigate precarious labor, their political bonds constitute 'commons of affection' (Federici, 2012). Thus, political friendship is analyzed here as both an organizing method and prefigurative politics that models the horizontal, caring relations feminist movements seek to build.

### **Biosindicalismo: Women-led Delivery and Ride-hailing Unions**

Historically, labor unions have been male-dominated spaces. Even as women have increasingly entered these spaces, they have often been forced to conform to masculinized norms or take on roles that reinforce gender stereotypes. However, the weakening of traditional union structures globally has sparked urgent debates about the need for

democratization and transformation within labor organizations. In this context, feminist unionism emerges as a critical framework for reimagining labor struggles. *Biosindicalismo*— an epistemic framework proposed by the migrant domestic workers of Latin America based in Spain *Territorio Doméstico*—which advocates for a unionism that extends “beyond the fight for labor rights: it is a form of struggle for the right of all people to have lives that are worthwhile and, above all, the joy of being lived [...] for all the rights that are at stake in everyday life” (Pimentel, et al., 2021) is enlightening. Through these lenses, it highlights the role of gendered precarity, algorithmic exploitation, and reproductive labor in platform economies. The findings underscore how women’s organizing are reshaping labor movements and demand policy recognition, disrupting masculinizing structures and advocating for intersectional labor rights.

The organizing efforts of women platform workers in Latin America offer a powerful counter-narrative to the exploitative practices of digital platforms. Their leadership not only challenges the masculinized structures of traditional unionism but also opens new possibilities for a more inclusive and intersectional labor movement. They highlighted the importance of transnational solidarity and the need for a global response to the challenges posed by the platform economy. They also emphasized the role of feminist unionism in advocating for labor rights that go beyond the workplace, addressing issues such as care work, reproductive rights, and the right to a dignified life.

In this presentation, the central academic contribution is its empirical data on the organizational leadership in Latin American platform unions, presented in the "Status of Union Recognition" Table 1. In the heavily male-dominated delivery and ride-hailing sectors, where 90% of workers are men, the findings show that out of 32 organizations analyzed, 11 are led by women, representing 34.4% of the total leadership. This figure is significant because it surpasses the regional average for female leadership in unions, which typically falls under 20% according to the ILO. Most strikingly, when excluding Brazil, the data reveal that women hold the majority of leadership positions (60%) across the region—6 out of 10 organizations.

**Table 1**  
**Leadership and Status of Union Recognition**  
 Regional Overview - Latin America

Country	Union	Trade Union Federation	Union Registration	Leadership
Colombia	UNIDAPP	CUT Colombia	✓ YES	Women
Colombia	SINATRAP	CTC	✓ YES	Women

Country	Union	Trade Union Federation	Union Registration	Leadership
Mexico	UNTA	Nueva Central	✓ YES	Men
Ecuador	FRENAPP	Not affiliated	✗ NO	Women
Panama	UNCOPLADIS	Not affiliated	✓ YES	Men
Peru	SINTRAPLADI	CGTP	✓ YES	Men
Chile	Sindicato Cornershop by Uber	CUT Chile	✓ YES	Women
Chile	SINTAPP	CUT Chile	✓ YES	Women
Chile	SINTREDAPP	CUT Chile	✓ YES	Men
Brazil	22 Unions	Various - CUT Brazil	✗ NO	5 Women 17 Men
Uruguay	UTP	PIT-CNT	✓ YES	Women

*Note.* Created by author.

Women leaders develop feminist agendas beyond traditional labor demands, addressing sexual harassment protocols, establishing safe zones through city alliances, and tackling issues of children and migrant documentation. These leaders utilize relational technologies—techno-affections (Ciacci & Ricaurte, 2024)—and political friendship as resistance tools. By cultivating mutual support ethics and transforming organizing from individual struggle into collective care practice, personal bonds between women become the foundation for

sustainable labor movements reflecting their lived experiences as mothers, migrants, and community members, creating a more comprehensive vision of labor organizing.

## Conclusion

The evidence reveals a striking phenomenon: women's leadership in delivery and ride-hailing platform worker organizations significantly surpasses Latin American averages for traditional unions; something that only happens in this region. This shift represents a fundamental transformation in labor organizing. Confronting patriarchal codes in traditional union spaces and precarious platform conditions, women leaders pioneer *biosindicalismo*—an epistemic framework extending struggle "beyond the fight for labor rights." Central to this transformation is Political Friendship as resistance technology. Facing fear and normalized violence, women unionists deploy relational technologies to act from political hope. Through mutual support and solidarity ethics, they create 'commons of affection'—political bonds essential for social reproduction and organizing. These leaders transform organizing from individual struggle into collective care practice, where friendship becomes infrastructure for sustainable labor movements.

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## **THE MEDIATION OF INTELLECTUAL WORK BY PLATFORMS: AN ANALYSIS OF TEN DIGITAL PLATFORMS**

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### **Introduction**

The research discusses transformations in the world of work associated with the technological mediation of digital platforms. It is part of the collective research. Based on the Political Economy of Communication (EPC), it situates the phenomenon as part of the deepening subsumption of intellectual work, which has been ongoing since the systemic restructuring that began in the 1970s (Bolaño 2015 [2000]), which currently has particularities associated with the neoliberal crisis, digitalization and the datafication of society (van Dijck 2014). To this end, it postulates the perspective of “work mediated by digital platforms”, which helps to connect the different levels of abstraction of the analysis. It details different mediations exercised by the platforms, including the mediation about capital in general and those based on the actions of economic agents that directly exploit and connect various sides of the labor relationship. Then, it details how ten digital platforms mediate the supply and purchase of what has been treated as freelance work: Workana, Freela Web, 99Freelas, GetNinjas, Freelas Conecta, Comunica Freelancer, We Do Logos, VintePila, Vinteconto and Rock Content Talent Network. In the third section, the paper discusses the impact of this type of mediation on worker's autonomy. It concludes that the mediation of work by platforms is functional to systemic transformations, and details the most favorable models to deepen the subsumption of intellectual work and the

exploitation of work, in general because they develop greater material dependence, surveillance, and information control.

### **Mediation: An Analytical Perspective**

The paper is based on theoretical perspectives of the Political Economy of Communication (PEC) developed in Brazil. It builds on Marx's main work to expand "the critical tools of political economy critique to understand the structures of social mediation characteristic of the capitalist mode of production" (Bolaño, Dourado Bastos 2020, p. 177). The concept of mediation taken up by the PEC comes from Latin American critical theory, which rejects the functionalist approach (Martin Serrano 1978). The PEC refers to mediation as a mechanism for adjusting contradictions, which are then not resolved, but moved to higher levels of articulation. From this perspective, digital platforms consist of mediators of adjustments in the world of work. The question is to understand what mechanisms are developed for this and what contradictions this process generates.

The paper argues that mediation should be considered in three dimensions, which are dialectically related. The first occurs not only about the actors on the Internet but about society as a whole, promoting a dialectical relationship with the totality through technological regulation (Valente 2021). In this process, the evolution of these socio-technical systems is shaped by social vectors (as general and specific determinants of the reproduction of the capitalist system) and by specific vectors of technological development (shaped by specific technological paradigms). The result of which also forges new relationships on the Internet and in society as a whole.

This second mediation concerns the work involved in developing the platforms that regulate and condition interactions within them. Digital platforms have become the organizing agents of this mediation process because their main asset is their ability to produce actions between individuals, collectives, and organizations and to enhance this active mediation. These phenomena are only possible through the development of platforms such as sociotechnical systems, which are done by exploiting the largely intellectual and scientific work of groups of engineers, programmers, and other categories.

The third mediation, in turn, occurs when digital platforms are specifically dedicated to facilitating the hiring of an on-demand workforce, as in the case of the platforms analyzed in this research. In these cases, the platforms operate a relationship between those who want to buy labor and those who need to sell it. As active mediators, they define the contours of these relationships, affecting the development of the work itself.

By relating more general transformations to specific practices, this proposal avoids the mistake of thinking of platforms as mediators that act on market failures and reduce transaction costs (which are generally borne by workers), as advocated by Drahekoupil and Piasna (2021). It also avoids a decontextualized approach to the idea of the "gig economy" presented by

Woodcock and Graham (2019). For whom, this economy comprises “[...] labor markets characterized by independent hiring that takes place through and on digital platforms”. The mediation of platforms favors changes in labor markets, including regulated professions. It also avoids the term "crowdwork" by Howcroft and Bergvall-Kareborn (2019), who argue that this modality opens space for “entrepreneurs”, a term closely aligned with neoliberal ideology and its defense of the end of formal employment.

## **Case study**

Ten digital platforms that mediate the purchase and sale of the workforce of communicators (among other professionals) were selected for analysis. The analysis was based on 55 items, which were grouped into the following categories: i) hiring model; ii) salary ratio; iii) platform remuneration; and iv) data collection. After detailing how platforms work, we finally discuss how this impacts the content of work. Platforms participate in two types of employment relationships: direct and indirect hiring of workers to work on the platforms themselves and mediation of the purchase and sale of labor between third parties. The difference between them shows that external employment is the most common. The basis of the platform companies examined here is the informal hiring of workers, who are considered “independent,” to perform specific work activities. These activities are described by the contractors, who approve or disapprove the final result. Salaries are generally paid by piecework, which increases precariousness, the search for greater agility, and overload. Platforms earn resources from the mediation they perform, through percentages of workers’ pay or by charging for additional uses. They control the circulation of information while collecting data since the registration.

In the mediation exercised by platforms, workers’ autonomy of creation and production is doubly subordinated: to the formats and rules of the platform, on the one hand, and to the decisions of the contractor, on the other. As a result, once again, “[...] control over their time is challenged by the feast-or-famine nature of freelancing: an avalanche of work tempered by stretches of time with no work at all, resulting in persistent insecurity and stress” (Cohen, 2015, p. 523). Other aspects noted by Marx (1996) are present in these new arrangements, such as the apparent freedom, the self-control of workers, and the competition between some and others, making it possible to lower wages.

On the other hand, there is total security for the buyer of the workforce, who will receive the product they want, directly, on order, within a given timeframe. There is, therefore, greater inequality of power, which is intensified by the fragility of links and organization. Even though intellectual work is not completely subsumed, because there is still a certain independence about what is necessary to carry out the work or because there is a certain degree of autonomy, as demonstrated by the examples of platforms that allow for negotiation of the content of the work, the mechanisms used by the platforms, in defining demand, controlling production, accelerating, evaluating and conditioning payment to client approval, deepen the subsumption of intellectual work.

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# DATA WORK AND THE EXTRACTIVIST CYCLE OF PLATFORMS

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Cecilia, a medical student from Venezuela, encountered significant financial challenges when the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns affected her hometown of Coro in the state of Zulia. Her mother, uncle, and cousin went on leave or lost their jobs because of the restrictions, requiring alternative sources of income. With the country experiencing a severe financial crisis since 2014—marked by the highest inflation rates globally—alongside foreign sanctions and a political crisis marked by authoritarianism (Cheatham & Cara Labrador, 2021), many individuals like herself turned to online labor platforms. These platforms, where technically anyone with a computer and internet connection could create an account, offered opportunities to earn income in U.S. dollars, thereby bridging critical financial gaps in a high inflationary context.

Recent advancements in machine learning and substantial investments in the field—from facial recognition technology to autonomous vehicles and large language models—have driven the artificial intelligence (AI) industry to increasingly rely on remote workers. These workers log into digital platforms to perform various tasks, such as inputting data (for example, taking pictures of themselves or documents), labeling data (for example, by tagging images of roads to train autonomous vehicles), verifying or assessing the outcome of model outputs (for example, moderating if outputs follow legal guidelines), and even impersonating AI systems (Tubaro et al., 2020). For this work, workers like Cecilia earn a few dollars weekly, which is significantly higher than the local minimum wage of one U.S. dollar per month in 2021 but still inadequate to provide a decent living. For perspective, workers that I interviewed told me that basic staple foods for the week could cost several dollars at the time, meaning considerably more than what the minimum wage allowed.

The platform Cecilia joined, anonymized here as Tasksource, offered an hourly payment program—uncommon in the gig economy—along with bonuses for more complex tasks like labeling 3D images, which they created to incentivize workers to join in. Initially, she and her family could make up to sixty U.S. dollars in one week. However, after the Christmas holiday, the platform discontinued the hourly payment program, citing issues with workers logging unworked time. Many workers disputed this, instead pointing out instances of wage theft when the platform would log less time than the one they were counting individually. As a consequence of the alleged issues by the platform, bonuses were significantly reduced, causing a sharp decline in the family's income from the platform to the point they were making less than fifty dollars per week. With the easing of pandemic restrictions later in 2021, and especially with an increase in oil revenue since the Russian invasion of Ukraine the following year, the country had a slight improvement in its economic situation. Not back to where they were before the crisis started in 2014, workers told me, but much better since pandemic times.

In this context, Cecilia eventually sought alternative opportunities and ceased to work for the platform.

Cecilia's experience mirrors a broader trend among the many data work platforms. Analyzing the web traffic from 14 platforms between 2017 and 2020 reveals cyclical patterns. Major data work platforms in Venezuela experienced fluctuating traffic. The Philippines peaked in traffic in 2018 before declining, followed by Venezuela peaking in 2021 and then decreasing, aligning with the accounts of dozens of workers interviewed for this research. More recently, Kenya emerged as a significant source of traffic until it too declined over the past year. These traffic patterns reflect platform economics, where digital infrastructures like Facebook and Uber rise by consolidating markets and generating network effects. As more people join a platform, it becomes difficult for individuals to leave since their social and professional circles are also there. Data production platforms function similarly, explaining their adoption. However, once a critical mass of workers was reached, bonuses were removed to increase profits. This pattern recurred in countries like the Philippines, Venezuela, and Kenya, where sufficient infrastructure for online work existed, coupled with economic crises driving people to work for minimal pay.

This research situates these patterns within the broader context of extractivism in Latin America. In their review paper on the concept, Chagnon and colleagues (2022) argue that extractivism designates systems of “capital accumulation and centralization of power” within capitalism that, crucially, appropriate wealth by draining life and resources from periphery to core. For decades, scholars like Gudynas (2020), Klein (2015), and Svampa (2012) have pointed out the extractivist policies of Latin American governments primed on resource extraction and depletion of land and territories as unsustainable and inequality-exacerbating processes. In the realm of AI, data has emerged as a new resource extracted, although, as scholars in critical data studies have mentioned, a false resource or commodity since it represents an abstraction of reality unlike other types of commodities (Bowker, 2005; Ricaurte, 2023). Furthermore, the digital platform, as infrastructure and firm, emerges as a powerful entity that enables this type of accumulation.

Economic platform theory explains the effect seen in the web traffic data and corroborated with worker interviews. Platforms, as multi-sided markets, need to create network effects to guarantee value transfer for users and complementors (Barwise & Watkins, 2018). In the case of platforms like Tasksource, replicating previous gig economy examples like Uber, workers like Cecilia received a pay-per-hour program, bonus incentives, and low barriers to entry to work for the platform. Once a critical mass of users was achieved, the platform eliminated these subsidies, prompting many workers but a few to leave the platform. Many workers I interviewed who remained on the platform after bonuses were cut off did so for several reasons, including health issues preventing them from accessing in-person jobs, care duties at home, or the impact of the crisis on their former jobs. Many were therefore dependent on the platform and did not have another choice but to continue to work for reduced wages and reduced working conditions.

That web traffic data illustrates an “extractivist cycle” in the way platforms operate, first in the Philippines, then in Venezuela, and more recently in Kenya in the case of Tasksource, shows how digital labor platforms can enable access to local pools of labor for the benefit of powerful technology corporations in a continuation of historical extractivism in Latin America and other places, and how systems of exploitation predicated on high power differentials, capital accumulation, and extraction from periphery to core, all characteristics of capitalism, are well-present in the digital realm and are a backbone of contemporary developments in AI.

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# **CO-RESEARCHING WITH DATA WORKERS: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH FROM A LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Introduction**

When we first invited Oskarina Fuentes to take part in our project, she was very hesitant. The Venezuelan data worker, who like many others is employed to collect, curate, classify, label and verify data for AI systems (Miceli & Posada, 2022), explained how a previous experience with journalists, who twisted her words to fit their narrative and interpretation had left her feeling disrespected, used and disillusioned with the prospect of sharing her perspective again. The exploitative pattern of reaching out to workers for insights and information for publications that offer benefits to the workers themselves is common to both journalism and academia.

This contribution explores how the Latin American tradition of participatory action research (PAR) can offer alternative forms of engagement that address the critiques of exploitation by academia through solidarity praxis. Drawing on a project where data workers worldwide are engaged as co-researchers to lead studies in their own workplace, it highlights how PAR can open paths for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of data work and workers' resistance.

## **Collective Sensemaking**

The project partners with data workers who serve as community researchers and create informative, political, journalistic, and/or artistic pieces that relate to their lived experience and reflect their needs and priorities regarding building collective power and advocating for change (Miceli et al., 2025). This work builds on the tradition of participatory action research, seeking to promote change at the grassroots level combining scientific research with political action (Fals-Borda, 1987). Taking inspiration from Marx's *Workers' Inquiry* (1880) the focus of the project is on collective sensemaking of the structures and dynamics shaping data work.

This project embodies our commitment to producing actionable knowledge through centering data workers as experts in their own material conditions. Acknowledging the problems with exploitative academic research and positivist epistemologies more broadly, our work advances the task of deconstructing the researcher/researched binary (Krohling Peruzzo, 2017; Fals Borda, 1981). Our community researchers share ownership of the process as equal partners from planning to execution and are compensated as such. They autonomously decide the angle, breadth, and depth of their research. Dialogue is a key tool in our collaboration and following in the tradition of Latin American PAR we understand knowledge creation,

conscientization, and articulation of action as collectively articulated processes (Peruzzo et al. 2022).

For *O.F.*, having control of the process and narrative was decisive for joining the project. We argue that shifting from “data collection” towards the co-creation of interpretations, which presupposes a recognition of the multiple shapes and origins of knowledge (De Castro Pitano et al., 2021; Krohling Peruzzo, 2017), can be a path to overcoming difficulties of field access. The data work industry is characterized by strictly enforced confidentiality agreements and economic dependency (Webster, 2016), which are strong deterrents to workers’ participation. Adopting PAR as a framework did not annul the difficulties of finding workers in the anonymous and globally dispersed workforce employed by platforms or business process outsourcing companies (Braz, 2021; Dias, 2024). In fact, the process of working with community researchers, explaining the scope and shape of the proposed participation, establishing rapport, and negotiating goals was intensive and time-consuming. Nevertheless, prioritising dialogue and knowledge that serves our community researchers (De Castro Pitano et al., 2021; Krohling Peruzzo, 2017) facilitated building trust.

## **Research and Action**

Our experience has shown that data workers, whose voices are often silenced by employers (Miceli & Posada, 2022) are enthusiastic about telling their stories and denouncing the oppression they face when given the opportunity to do so on their own terms. The concrete outcomes of the project are media products in different formats articulating the unfair and exploitative practices in the data work industry. They reflect the diversity of our cohort, as well as the multiplicity of issues within this industry, denouncing dependency and exploitation, documenting the organization efforts of data workers and articulating demands for change. Making the reality of their work visible to a broad audience was a goal shared by most workers, especially those with the strictest non-disclosure agreements who chose to publish anonymously.

Aligned with a Latin American approach to PAR, that combines epistemological critiques of knowledge production with a denunciation of historic inequality and capitalist oppression (Faermann, 2014), we are committed to transforming exploitative structures. Following in the Freirean tradition, we maintain that investigating their own reality can deepen individuals’ comprehension of problems and be an awareness-building moment (*conscientização*) opening resilience possibilities (De Castro Pitano et al., 2021; Gajardo, 1999; Freire 1971). A report produced by Fasica Gebrekidan, for instance, is a detailed and scolding account of the trauma content moderators in Kenya were subjected to, the profound ramifications it has on their health, and the continuing failure of their employer to address the harms (Gebrekidan, 2024) . Her work illustrates how research can inform action: Starting from her own experiences, she documents the issues faced by herself and her colleagues, identifying systematic patterns and conveying the demands emerging from their position. Similarly, Oskarina Fuentes identifies global chains of dependency as they materialize themselves at the local level. She partnered with an animator from her community to produce an account of the economic conditions that

keep her dependent on data work paid in dollars to sustain her family (Fuentes, 2024). The richness of the grounded and contextualized analysis developed by the community researchers is a testament to the value of collaboration and illustrates how the exchange of different knowledge forms can create a more complete understanding of the necessary changes to reality (Fals-Borda, 1987).

Concretely, we are continuously in dialogue with our community researchers, guiding research strategies and offering suggestions, but also supporting the production of the pieces financially and taking steps to ensure workers' safety. We understand this co-production and preservation of knowledge as one possible path towards workers' resistance. Investigating their own reality can deepen individuals' comprehension of problems, but it can also be understood within a Freirean framework as the basis for transformation, as the denunciation of oppression and announcement of resilience possibilities (De Castro Pitano et al., 2021). With this in mind, we worked to create opportunities for dialogue and joint reflection between all our partners with the goal of fostering international community and solidarity in the face of atomization and global competition in data work.

## Conclusion

This project sheds light on profound injustices within the data work industry, but despite the structurally enforced isolation and anonymity, workers are already taking the lead in organizing for change. They find paths for connection, consolidate demands, and work to create better conditions (Mathengue, 2024). It is not our intention to take the lead in this process, much less ignore the material tensions between our position as external agents and that of the workers. Rather we are committed to show up in solidarity, explicitly siding with data workers (Fals-Borda, 1981). We offer our expertise and support in the process of collective interpretation as contributions to their fight for change. In doing so, we embody the tradition of Latin American PAR of politically committed research, that includes and echoes a plurality of voices and takes the side of the oppressed (Medrado & Verdegem, 2024, Brandão, 2006).

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