

Article

Trusted strangers: Carework platforms' cultural entrepreneurship in the on-demand economy

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Julia Ticona and Alexandra Mateescu

Data & Society Research Institute, USA

Abstract

On-demand labor platforms offer many in-person services, from ride-hailing to childcare. However, scholars have focused on ride-hailing, leading to a model of “Uberization” that entails the informalization of work. We argue that online carework platforms that match nannies and babysitters to families show the limits of this narrative. Based on a discourse analysis of carework platforms and interviews with workers using them, we illustrate that these platforms seek to formalize employment relationships through technologies that increase visibility. We argue that carework platforms are “cultural entrepreneurs” that create and maintain cultural distinctions between populations of workers, and institutionalize those distinctions into platform features. Ultimately, the visibility created by platforms does not realize the formalization of employment relationships, but does serve the interests of platform companies and clients and exacerbate existing inequalities for workers. As one of the first analyses of carework platforms, this study also points to gendered bias in the scholarly literature about the on-demand economy.

Keywords

Carework, culture, gender, invisible work, labor platforms, on-demand labor, sharing/gig economy

Introduction

Online labor platforms, such as Uber, Amazon Mechanical Turk, and TaskRabbit, have been the focus of debates about the changing shape of employment. These companies

Corresponding author:

Julia Ticona, Data & Society Research Institute, New York, NY 10012, USA.

Email: Julia@datasociety.net

claim to function as marketplaces that use algorithms to match entrepreneurial workers to consumers looking to purchase their goods and services. By doing so, they position themselves as intermediaries, matchmakers, or communications platforms, rather than as employers. Platform companies often frame their value by appealing to the democratizing potential of the Internet to connect people to entrepreneurial work (Gillespie, 2010). However, critics have pointed to the ways these multi-sided markets casualize employment and degrade working conditions (Cherry, 2016; Scholz, 2016; see also, Pasquale, 2016).

The issue of digitally mediated or “networked” labor has focused on the production of media and other creative products, through both waged and unwaged labor (Fish and Srinivasan, 2012; Terranova, 2000; Zhao, 2016), as well as low-status clerical work in the form of crowdsourced “cognitive piecework” (Gray et al., 2016; Irani, 2013). Studies of Uber and other task platforms consider similar dynamics in the realm of in-person services (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Schor, 2017). However, these analyses are based on platforms that are intervening into sectors of the economy where formal and relatively regulated employment is the norm, or where platforms are creating altogether new kinds of work.

In the past decade, labor platforms have started to offer domestic care services such as childcare and eldercare, sectors of work where workers have been formally excluded from many official protections, where informal and unregulated conditions prevail, and where management takes place behind the closed doors of private homes. As businesses utilize platforms to offer domestic services, it is necessary to reexamine the role of platforms in labor markets. Focusing on childcare, this article will address this gap through an analysis of carework platforms—including Care.com, UrbanSitter, and SitterCity—that have created multi-sided markets for childcare services.

We find that, in contrast to the “Uberization” narrative (Scholz, 2016), carework platforms have attempted to formalize aspects of the hiring process and employment relationship. Through the education of clients and workers and the use of payment interfaces, carework platforms urge more formal standards by equating professionalism with visibility to formal institutions, such as through IRS (Internal Revenue Service) registration and tax compliance. We argue that these efforts are a form of “cultural entrepreneurship” that frame careworkers found through their services as safer, as opposed to through more traditional and informal networks. However, these efforts toward formalization are mainly aspirational, as interviews with workers highlight the ways that, in practice, platforms permit a wide variety of employment relationships and do not require this type of institutional visibility. Carework platforms do indeed create visibility, but it is a highly individualized visibility that serves to make workers more visible to potential clients and the platforms themselves, and exacerbates existing inequalities for workers. These findings point to the importance of context-specific analyses of labor platforms, which account for the type of work and for grounding empirical analysis of platform work in the dynamics of existing labor markets. Finally, as one of the first empirical analyses of online carework platforms, this study also points to a gendered bias in both scholarship and public attention about on-demand labor, as male-dominated Uber has become metonymic of this economic sector to the neglect of the larger, but less controversial, carework platforms where women make up the vast majority of the workforce.

Literature

Carework and online labor marketplaces

Over the past 45 years, the United States and other post-industrial nations have faced dual care crises, one facilitated by women's move into the paid labor force and the other by increased life-spans among the Baby Boomer generation. These crises have created a rising demand for careworkers and health para-professionals such as personal care and home health aides, whose occupations are among the fastest growing in the United States (Bureau of Labor Force Statistics, 2017). Online carework platforms have stepped into this breach in the form of marketplaces for direct care, with the broad national coverage that smaller agencies and informal networks cannot provide.

Careworkers are employed within a largely unregulated "gray" economy, facing a litany of labor market challenges, such as low wages (England et al., 2002), discrimination, and political disenfranchisement resulting from informal working arrangements (Glenn, 2000). The domestic workforce is also dominated by immigrant women, with estimates ranging between 35 and 47% of whom are living in the United States without legal documentation (National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2012: 12, 41). Domestic workers were intentionally excluded from many key federal labor protections, such as the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act. A large proportion of careworkers are, moreover, paid "off the books" with as many as 74% of US households that hire careworkers evading proper tax registration (Haskins, 2010: 124). Working conditions are largely governed by interpersonal negotiation, caught "in limbo between the law of the market and the law of the family," wherein clients hold significant power over employment relationships (Schoenbaum, 2016: 1). This relationship is sometimes codified in a "nanny contract," a document often drafted by clients that delineates agreed-upon rules regarding work hours, salary, overtime pay, benefits, and day-to-day work duties. However, adherence to contracts tends to break down over time (National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2012: 25).

While a small percentage of families employ full-time childcare workers, referred to in this article as "nannies," most families rely on a combination of paid and unpaid care, including daycare, unpaid care by a family member, and flexible and part-time in-home careworkers referred to as "babysitters" (Schulte and Durana, 2016: 45).¹ Outside of word-of-mouth referrals, job boards like Craigslist, and community-based forums and email lists, nanny agencies have traditionally played the role of labor brokers in direct childcare services, facilitating job matching and placement, contract negotiation, and payroll. However, the added costs for these services have limited their scale and scope to address demand.

Within this patchwork environment, large online platforms have created pools of careworkers at a significantly greater scale. Care.com launched in 2006 has been described as an "Amazon.com for caregivers" (Farrell, 2014). As of 2017, the site had more than 9.2 million registered worker profiles in the United States and \$162 million in revenue (Care.com, 2017). These platforms resemble online job boards in that employers place job listings and members contact each other and negotiate the terms of employment. However, in other ways, carework platforms have embraced features of the "on-demand" economy, such as incentivizing worker flexibility and responsiveness. They

also provide infrastructure beyond the point of job matching and hiring, such as payment interfaces, contract templates, and tax tools.

Paid domestic work is often cited as a quintessential example of “invisible work,” due to its social devaluation, low pay, and legal disenfranchisement, among other factors (Rollins, 1996). However, as Hatton (2017) points out, the invisibility of certain types of work is not inevitable, but the result of social mechanisms that obscure the bodies, labor, and physical contexts of work. Others have pointed to new digital technologies of work, such as labor platforms, as yet another mechanism creating conditions wherein labor is invisible (Cherry, 2016; Irani, 2013). However, digital technologies also serve as conduits for surveillance that make domestic workers visible in new ways (Brown, 2011). There is little research that examines how platforms are intervening in the visibility of paid carework and shaping the ways that careworkers themselves navigate these complex politics. Given the increasing importance of carework within the labor market, its unique history and current state of mixed regulation, this is an understudied area.

Platform labor and the casualization of work

Many labor platforms have been criticized by scholars and labor organizations for exploiting workers, avoiding responsibilities for providing benefits and job security, and evading industry regulation (International Labour Office [ILO], 2016; Scholz, 2016). In addition to other macro-socioeconomic forces, the gig or on-demand economy has been linked to the demise of the “standard employment relationship,” pushing labor markets deeper into the casualization and informalization of work (Cherry and Aloisi, 2017; Van Doorn, 2017). These processes refer to the movement of formerly full-time, year-round employment under a single employer to part-time, temporary, and other forms of non-standard work (Kalleberg, 2009). Uber, a company that has become metonymic of the gig economy, has contributed to these shifts within the taxi industry.

Uber’s interventions have achieved more than a reconfiguration of employment relationships. Calo and Rosenblat (2017) argue that Uber is aiming at a much farther-reaching cultural project, one that aims to redefine the categories of workers and consumers to a single category of users, therefore avoiding the regulatory obligations that define those relationships. In a similar vein, Irani (2013: 16, 18) observes that Amazon’s Mechanical Turk reinscribes distinctions between “high technology” work which is highly valued and collaborative and low-status, invisible “infrastructural work” done by lone Turkers. Both of these analyses point out that labor platforms are strategically redefining and reinforcing cultural categories used to think about work. Gillespie (2010: 348) points out that, in calling themselves “platforms,” content creation and curation intermediaries like YouTube do both political and discursive work to define a “regulatory sweet spot” and construct a narrative about themselves that aids in public sense-making. In this way, labor platforms have acted as “cultural entrepreneurs,” meaning that they not only use symbolic “boundary work” to create new categories and reinforce old ones but they also institutionalize these distinctions by building them into technical structures and user interfaces (Dimaggio, 1982; Lamont, 2000, respectively, see also, Hatton, 2015). We argue that, while all on-demand labor platforms may share ambitions to be “cultural entrepreneurs” in re-shaping

their particular markets, the particular type of work that companies seek to redefine matters to the types of boundaries they draw, the ways they seek to institutionalize these boundaries into their platforms, and the effects of these efforts on workers.

Reputation, reviews, and the construction of trust

Labor platforms facilitate “trust” between strangers in order to enable exchanges of services for pay. Indeed, reputation and trust were touted as the “currency” of the gig economy by its early proponents (Tanz, 2014). The major way on-demand companies have tackled this challenge is by creating reputation systems that solicit clients and workers for reviews of one another after a job is completed. Rating systems are therefore important to workers, because “the processes by which reputation is calculated and displayed affect market outcomes” (Irani and Silberman, 2016: 508).

Ensuring consumer safety places high stakes on the measurement of quality and reliability of services within labor platforms. Since their inception, fears about the proper vetting of on-demand workers have shaped public perceptions about the safety of online services. However, childcare is arguably even more fraught with fear around the risks of seeking services from strangers online. Care.com, for example, has faced several law suits from parents who have been victimized by workers they hired through the site. Individual incidents damage the general public trust, which is further cemented through negative press coverage and parenting blogs. From the perspective of carework platform companies, the high stakes of safety and the intimacy of carework have made trust a valuable, yet volatile commodity in different ways from other on-demand labor platforms, warranting empirical investigation.

By design, ranking and rating systems are “reactive,” meaning they do not simply count and rank things, but actively intervene in shaping people’s behaviors by creating or reinforcing the categories used to evaluate people, goods, and services (Espeland and Stevens, 2008). While reputation systems have been used to facilitate interpersonal trust and enable transactions between strangers since early e-commerce marketplaces (Kollock, 1999), the ways these systems have been deployed in labor platforms mark a distinct application. Like early reputation systems, they allow consumers to more accurately assess the quality of services, provide feedback that allows companies to exclude problematic participants, and feed into algorithmic matching of consumers and sellers, with higher-rated sellers being more visible to prospective consumers. In these ways, they facilitate the management of risks by clients and platform companies. However, this study finds that carework platforms do not allow workers to use these same systems to review their interactions with clients, prioritizing the ability of clients and platform companies to manage their risks and trust workers, but neglecting workers’ ability to do the same. In this way, labor platform reputation systems are an extension of the data-driven actuarial techniques used across an increasing number of institutions, such as police departments and welfare agencies, that use technologies to focus an increasingly bright light on the activities of some populations in ways that amplify disadvantage for them while shielding themselves from risk (Brayne, 2017; Eubanks, 2018).

Table 1. On-demand care platforms.

Company	Type	Description
Care.com	Public corporation. Founded: 2006.	Types of services: Online marketplace and mobile app for carework including childcare (in-home and centers); tutoring; special needs, senior, pet care; housekeeping. Size: 9.2 million US registered workers (11 million global). Membership model: Freemium membership for clients and careworkers.
UrbanSitter	Private company. Founded: 2010.	Types of services: Online marketplace and on-demand mobile app for childcare. Size: Available in more than 60 cities (in the United States); more than 160,000 careworkers. Membership model: Freemium membership for clients and careworkers.
SitterCity	Private company. Founded: 2001.	Types of services: Online marketplace and on-demand mobile app for carework including in-home childcare, and pet, senior, special needs care. Size: Available in more than 25 cities (the United States); more than 2 million careworkers (Rao, 2011). Membership model: Freemium membership for clients and careworkers.

Descriptive information about carework platform, company, size, and membership. All information is from companies' own reports and websites, except as noted by alternative citation.

Data and methods. In this research, we undertook an in-depth content analysis of material from carework platforms, including marketing and recruitment materials, app- and web-based platforms, public statements, and other company produced discourse. These materials were aimed at both the clients and careworkers, and were coded according to a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Drawing on research about the Uber platform (including Rosenblat and Stark, 2016), we identified the ways that carework platforms narrated their role in the worker–client relationship, and described the value of their technologies for workers and clients. After a round of open-coding, we identified several salient themes, including the formalization of employer relationships and technical features designed to make workers visible to clients.

We also drew on in-depth interviews with 43 careworkers in New York City, Atlanta, and Washington, DC, who regularly seek work through these platforms. In October 2016, we focused our analysis on the three platforms that were the most widely used among interviewed careworkers, including Care.com, UrbanSitter, and SitterCity (see Tables 1 and 2). Interviewees were recruited through local nanny agencies, Craigslist, email lists, and local occupationally focused Facebook groups. Interviews were conducted in person and via Skype by the authors and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. Interviewees received their choice of \$20 in cash or an equivalent giftcard to Amazon.com. Interviewees were asked questions derived from the initial analysis of carework platforms, as well as general questions about their relationships with clients they met through platforms. From the analysis of platform materials, we identified key moments

Table 2. Interview participants—survey (43 total).

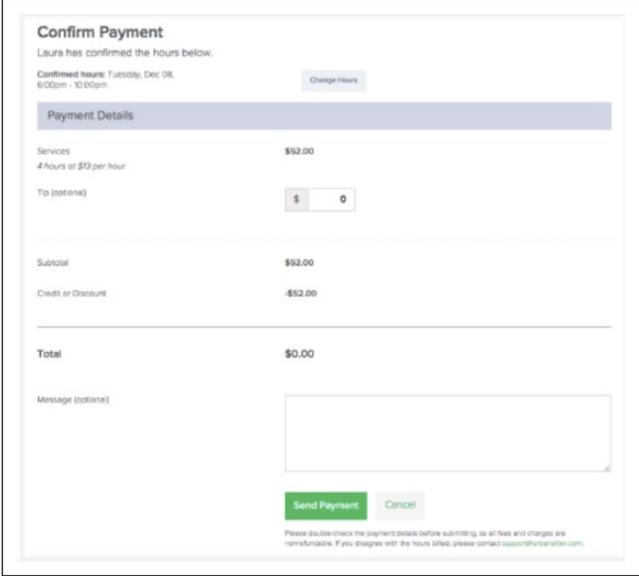
Selected Demographic Characteristics	Number of Participants
Age	
18–24	13
25–34	21
35–44	5
44–54	4
55–64	0
64+	0
Gender	
Female	42
Male	1
Other	0
Race	
Black	18
White	14
Hispanic/Latino	5
Asian	1
American Indian	0
Multiracial	3
Other	2
Immigration	
US-born	37
Foreign-born	6

in which platforms mediated the relationship between workers and clients: sign-up and profile creation, applying for jobs, communicating with prospective families, and interacting with ratings systems, and asked interviewees about their experiences with each of these moments. Within these experiences, we asked follow-up questions probing for their experiences of formal and informal work, and their experiences of visibility through platforms. When interviewees volunteered to show us their profiles or messages they received from platforms, we asked them to send screen shots. Interviewees also filled out a brief demographic survey. Interviews were recorded, with permission, and transcribed. Transcriptions were coded, in an iterative process along with platform materials, according to methods of content analysis (Corbin, 2007).

Findings

Facilitating institutional visibility

While carework has often been traditionally performed “off the books,” carework platforms actively encourage workers’ visibility to institutions such as the IRS. Each carework platform provides tools for documenting employment, including online payment interfaces, contract templates, and guidelines for employers about complying with



Confirm Payment

Laura has confirmed the hours below.

Confirmed hours: Tuesday, Dec 08,
6:00am - 10:00am [Change Hours](#)

Payment Details

Services	\$52.00
4 Hours at \$13 per hour	
To (optional)	\$ 0
<hr/>	
Subtotal	\$52.00
Credit or Discount	-\$52.00
<hr/>	
Total	\$0.00

Message (optional)

[Send Payment](#) [Cancel](#)

Please double-check the payment details before submitting, as all fees and charges are non-refundable. If you disagree with the hours listed, please contact support@thesitter.com.

Figure 1. Payment confirmation on UrbanSitter.

federal and state labor laws. The platforms also provide integrated payment interfaces to reduce the presumed inconveniences associated with paying by cash or check. In the UrbanSitter application, parents receive a summary of hours, rate, and amount due, and can pay their careworkers directly by credit card. Although framed from the standpoint of efficiency and convenience for the client, providing a receipt (see Figure 1) also formalizes the commodification of care as a service and further distances it from its origins in the informal economy.

Importantly, the option of digital payment not only creates documentation of wages but also pushes users to report careworkers' income to the IRS. Care.com's "HomePay" system does not only provide a payment interface but a "comprehensive resource for busy families dealing with household payroll ... to minimize risk, maximize tax breaks, eliminate mountains of paperwork ..." HomePay requires that families register as household employers, an IRS distinction that requires them to pay state and federal employment taxes. The HomePay service handles pay, generates paystubs, and withholds required taxes. However, Care.com does not require the use of HomePay.

In addition, these platforms attempt to shape clients' understanding of their household as small businesses. An introductory video to HomePay describes, "No parent goes it alone. Just like a business has a payroll and an HR [Human Resources] department, you have Care.com HomePay ..." UrbanSitter similarly compares parents to a "hiring manager looking to benefit their company with the right personnel" (Holzschuh, n.d.). By comparing clients to businesses with the resources to formally account for their employees and also encouraging the home employer tax classification, care platforms are actively attempting to formalize the purchase of carework.

In addition to documenting hours and wages, carework platforms also position themselves as educators that guide parents toward an ideal employment relationship that is contractually documented. In 2015, Care.c partnered with the National Domestic Workers Alliance, a domestic worker advocacy organization, and Hand-in-Hand, a domestic employer organization, to create the “Fair Care Pledge,” which encourages domestic employers to adhere to fair employment practices. The pledge comprises a questionnaire about employers’ current practices, including questions about whether they provide cost-of-living adjustments, reimbursements for daily expenses, and severance pay (Hand in Hand, n.d.). If the parent chooses “no,” they are informed about the relevant labor laws or directed to a webpage with additional tools.

Carework platforms frame the decision to go “off the books” by failing to report income as risky for both parents and careworkers. Materials produced by and published on platform-hosted blogs warn that this is a risky decision for careworkers, and may have consequences for their access to car loans or mortgages which typically require documented employment history. SitterCity frames their payment system, SurePayroll, as mutually beneficial for both parents and careworkers, including the ability of careworkers to build a documented employment history in order to receive unemployment, Social Security, and Medicare benefits (Sittercity.com, 2014). Care.com cautions workers that “[i]f your employment is not documented, it is as if you do not work,” adding that “[p]art of being a professional is being paid legally rather than under the table” (Breedlove, n.d.). All platforms cautioned parents to verify that their hired careworker is legally eligible to work in the United States, specifically by filling out an I-9 form from the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, and requesting that careworkers provide proof of their employment authorization (see Yosucio, n.d.).

Formal employment is a “surveilling institution,” in that employers are legally required to keep a variety of “detailed formal records” about their employees in the normal course of business (Brayne, 2014: 368). This type of formal surveillance is, in large part, what distinguishes formal from informal work arrangements. Certainly, workers with both formal and informal arrangements are subject to many forms of personal surveillance in the course of their work; however, formal documentation of identification and wages is what often legally distinguishes formal from informal work. In this way, the formalization of work entails the creation of new types of visibility between workers and their employers. While carework platforms have built various kinds of visibility into the technical features of their platforms, as described in the previous section, as intermediaries (and not employers) in this labor market they have few incentives to ensure that the relationships that they broker actually conform to the requirements of formal employment in practice.

In our interviews, we found that careworkers were strongly aware of platforms’ low liability to enforce fair employment relationships. Care.com’s terms of use reminds workers and families that, with some exceptions, careworkers are subject to federal, state, and local minimum wage laws to which parents are responsible for adhering. On SitterCity, failure to comply with “wage and hour and working condition laws and regulation” is a violation of the platform’s Terms of Use. However, our interviewees related various tactics parents used to evade these rules. For example, when posting a job, Care.com presents parents with a sliding scale to indicate the hourly rate they are offering. The

The screenshot shows a form titled "Select a rate and post job". It features a "Hourly Rate" section with a horizontal slider ranging from 10 to 16. A green marker is positioned at 10, and a green asterisk is at 13, with the text "*Average rate in your area" below it. Below the slider, it says "Total \$10 x 4 hrs = \$40". There is a "Preferred payment" dropdown menu set to "Select..." and an "Add a message" text input field. At the bottom, there are "Back" and "Continue" buttons.

Figure 2. Sliding pay scale for posting job listings on Care.com.

The screenshot shows a checkbox prompt: **Show on my profile that I'm interested in professional pay**. Below the checkbox, the text reads: "Are you willing to work with families who want to pay 'on the books'? Check this box to let families know you're willing to have employment taxes withheld from your pay, helping you qualify for important benefits like unemployment coverage, Social Security and more."

Figure 3. Prompt shown to careworkers when filling out an online profile on Care.com.

center of the scale indicates the pay rate that the platform has determined is the “[a]verage rate in your area,” and the scale has a lower limit meant to restrict clients from listing a job below that pay rate (see Figure 2). In our interviews, careworkers related experiences of encountering job listings with one pay rate listed, and seeing an entirely different rate communicated by clients via the platform’s private messaging feature or in the job description section of a listing. In job descriptions, wages were sometimes listed as a lump weekly sum that translates to below minimum wage. Mae,² a Black woman who works full-time as a nanny in DC, pointed out the disparity between carework platforms’ rhetoric and a lack of enforcement:

It’s hard, because Care.com definitely has information about being paid legally, and all that kind of thing ... But, they don’t stress it to the parent. They don’t even stress to pay minimum wage, which drives me bonkers ... So I think, again, there’s that disparity. Like, “Here you go, nannies, this is what you should ask for”; But, “Hey, if the parents are going to pay us, we don’t care what they pay you.”

While carework platforms encourage formalized, documented employment, in practice, they permit a wide variety of employment relationships. Unlike Uber and other labor platform companies, that classify their workers as independent contractors, carework platforms encourage but do not enforce a particular employment relationship (see Figure 3). This was most evident in careworkers’ widely varying attitudes toward pursuing “on-” or “off-the-books” employment and the perception that both parents

and careworkers could easily ignore care platforms' features that encourage formal employment.³ These decisions did not solely rest with clients, as many workers described strategic decisions to document and report their wages when it worked to their advantage. For years, Ayn, a White nanny in Atlanta, had used carework platforms to find informal childcare work as supplementary income to her full-time job as a public school teacher. In 2012, she was laid off and turned to childcare full-time, but did not report her pay to maximize her take-home income. Her most recent employment relationship was fully on the books, which she had deliberately sought out because she had future plans to purchase a home and needed proof of income to obtain a mortgage.

As this section has shown, carework platforms equate professionalism with compliance with federal employment and tax laws. They construct a narrative that draws a sharp boundary between formal and informal employment, which they frame as risky. This kind of formalization would entail facilitating and even enforcing new kinds of visibility into employment relationships—such as through the collection of identity documents, documenting wages, and ensuring the payment of taxes. However, while platforms offer families these tools, they do not require their use, and therefore only nudge and shape the cultural boundaries within which workers and parents participate toward formalization. For these reasons, they serve as standard-setters among parents and careworkers by urging a more formal standard without enforcing it. As a result, carework platforms are not as distanced from the largely unregulated, informal markets against which they have positioned themselves as innovative departures.

Compelling individualized visibility

While carework platforms do not institutionalize the type of visibility that formal employment would require, they have nevertheless made workers more visible in other ways. This other form of visibility, based in metrics like rating systems, identity verifications via social media, and online profiles, is aimed at maximizing careworkers' visibility as *individuals* to potential clients, displaying specific qualities of workers in standardized and comparable ways. This visibility is important to facilitate hiring, given the high degree of trust required between clients and workers in carework. The unique contexts of this work limit the capacity of carework platforms to completely operate like other on-demand labor platforms that treat workers as fungible. Nevertheless, they have adopted much of the same infrastructure, aesthetics, and rhetoric, touting an abundant and always-available pool of workers. Care.com promises it can help families to find a careworker "in a matter of minutes" (Care.com, n.d.-a), while UrbanSitter's CEO has claimed that its careworkers "respond just as quickly as an on-demand driver" (O'Connor, 2016). Simultaneously, carework platforms emphasize the importance of trust and safety, promising to "connect parents to trusted child care" (UrbanSitter, n.d.-a), and that their tools will help them "evaluate risk and stay savvy about safety" (Care.com, n.d.-b).

To this end, carework platforms market their vetting processes and safety tools as comprehensive and innovative, while narrating a "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977) for parents and other clients within which their services offer solutions. They narrate the process of navigating the largely informal and low-status networks of careworkers as opaque, risky, and potentially dangerous. The tagline that greets parents on UrbanSitter's

Increase your chances of getting hired
92% of families prefer caregivers with a background check. Run one now to show you're serious about safety.

Criminal Records Check

5X more likely to be hired!

- ✓ Appear higher in search results
- ✓ Get more responses to applications
- ✓ Get a profile badge for a full year

Motor Vehicle Records Check

- ✓ Rise higher in search results
- ✓ Get a profile badge for a full year

\$20 [Select](#)

Figure 4. Care.com worker-directed page for submitting to a background check.

website is, “it’s the word-of-mouth babysitter search made easy” and that their payment interface allows parents to “pay with a tap” and avoid “awkward conversations” with their careworkers, with the implication that without the site, finding and booking a careworker is an interpersonally difficult experience, narrating a set of negative emotions in order to frame their value to parents (UrbanSitter, n.d.-a).

One basic form of vetting carework platforms offer are background checks that check criminal and sex offender databases, as well as DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles) records; completion of these checks appear as badges on careworkers’ profiles. On platforms like Care.com, checks are not mandatory but careworkers are given the incentive to submit to background checks or face the “threat of invisibility” (Bucher, 2012) through the obscurity of being placed lower in clients’ search results (see Figure 4).

These platforms further deploy rating and review systems to differentiate workers within their platforms by creating new metrics that prospective clients can use to evaluate them, such as how quickly workers respond to messages and the number of jobs accepted. UrbanSitter’s profiles display information about how many times careworkers have been hired by the same family, their average response time to messages, and whether the parent viewing the profile has any contacts who have hired a particular careworker (Holzschuh, n.d.). Care.com designates a subset of its careworkers as “CarePros,” which displays a badge on a worker’s profile indicating that they have met criteria such as opting in to mobile alerts, maintaining a high star rating from reviewers, and responding to 75% of messages within 24 hours. As a result, careworkers are governed by metrics that optimize for behaviors outside of the skills necessary for carework, by rewarding workers who are highly responsive, actively connected to their mobile phones, and comfortable with digital communication such as private messaging, and have high scheduling flexibility to accommodate booking requests.

In addition, careworkers’ social media profiles are used to verify identity or make social connections visible to parents. Care.com, for example, allows careworkers to verify their identities through their Facebook and Twitter profiles, which then appear as a checklist on their profiles. If a careworker chooses to not connect an account or simply does not have an account to connect, this displays as a grayed out icon that reads, for example, “Twitter-unverified.” UrbanSitter goes further by incorporating parents’ and careworkers’ Facebook information into the sign-in process, allowing users to sign-in through Facebook and LinkedIn in order to view the babysitter recommendations made by their friends or contacts.

Lynn Perkins, the CEO of UrbanSitter, claimed her inspiration for the company came when she noticed that “people placed particular trust in their peer groups—parents from the same preschool, for instance—when it came to finding childcare” (O’Connor, 2016). UrbanSitter claims that its data affirm this by showing that parents are 2.5 times more likely to book someone with whom they have an already existing affiliation (Taurasi, 2016).

In addition to the social graph of Facebook and other online connections, carework platforms provide extensive guidelines on scrutinizing the online identities of careworkers. UrbanSitter urges parents to “do their digital homework” by looking up a job candidate on social media and browsing search results on Google (Holzschuh, n.d.). SitterCity urges them to look for online “clues” to their “personality and hobbies,” searching specifically for any “red flags” (SitterCity.com, 2014). As a result, careworkers’ broader online identities are enrolled into the hiring process, as a complement to the more overt ratings and reviews that appear directly on careworkers’ profiles.

Careworkers have long been subject to scrutiny from employers in ways that blur the boundaries between work and personal life. Carework platforms amplify these practices by foregrounding certain forms of online visibility as the first point of contact between careworkers and families, and by using badges and other metrics as proxies for quality or trustworthiness. As a result, careworkers deploy different practices of visibility management—social media curation, crafting biographical narrative, using photographic and video self-presentation, and optimizing visibility based on platform-determined metrics. These practices differ from off-line methods of finding work, which are largely recommendation-driven or dependent on placement agencies.

In our interviews, careworkers often felt unclear or had varied views on what aspects of profiles mattered most. Some worked to keep up their metrics, aware that they were being made visible to families who visited their profiles. For example, Renee, a Black woman working as a careworker in DC, described how her response rate to messages would drop if a prospective employer was the last person in an on-platform conversation to send a message; worried that this would reduce her visibility in search results or make her appear unresponsive, she always made sure to be the last person to send a message.

Typically, reputation and rating systems on labor platforms are deployed as tools for leveraging control over a large and frequently shifting worker population, allowing clients to serve as “middle managers” whose preferences incentivize workers to maintain high ratings that in part determine their access to work opportunities (Rosenblat and Stark 2016: 3772). However, among careworkers we interviewed, these reputation systems were not consistently utilized by parents and often experienced as arbitrary. Many workers were frustrated at their lack of control to respond to or contest poor ratings, as one negative review could effectively render a careworker unhireable. Linda, a White nanny in her 40s, described what she perceived as the arbitrariness of ratings:

So, the ratings are good, because they bring you jobs. Once you get the rating ... the more parents are going to ask you to go into their house. But, the reason I roll my eyes is because, you never know, some parents are just never good raters.

She added, for example, that a careworker could receive a poor rating for a minor mistake, such as showing up a few minutes late to a job, but could lose access to work as a result. Poor ratings have greater visibility than off-line circulation of reputation, such as

through written letters or by phone, over which careworkers have greater control, although some interviewees believed families took online ratings less seriously.

Careworkers were also attuned to the ways that judgments were strongly influenced by the practices of impression management they engaged in through profile pictures and the rapport they could establish through private messages to obtain an interview. Amanda, a Black woman in her 20s who uses Care.com, spoke in detail about how she chose to present herself in her profile picture. She described her usual hairstyle as “big, puffy, fro-y hair,” which she had decided was not how she wanted to present herself to clients:

I don't know if someone is gonna judge me based off of that. You know? So, I try to keep it as universal as possible. So I'll have my hair in a ponytail or I'll have my hair braided in a neat style.

These dynamics extend widely in online contexts, where social media presence can come under scrutiny from employers. Violet, a Latina woman in her 20s, made sure that her Facebook profile was “on brand” by only posting “goofy” or “funny” content and not posting anything “profane” or “controversial,” while Whitney, a Black woman in her 40s, felt that all of her public activity was being watched: “We literally have to be careful about everything that we do, even in our personal life.” These platform-based practices are shaped by many of the same intersectional inequalities that lead careworkers to carefully craft their appearances and affective dispositions to suit primarily White employers in offline hiring contexts (MacDonald, 2015). Wingfield and Skeete (2016) call these kinds of practices “racial tasks” that racial minorities must invisibly perform in White-dominated workplaces in order to smooth working relationships or advance professionally. However, the type of individualized visibility that platforms allow extends beyond the boundaries of the platform itself and into workers’ personal digital footprints all over the web. This means that while all workers face the burden to present themselves professionally in ways that go far beyond the bounds of face-to-face interactions, workers with marginalized racial and ethnic identities, or immigration status may confront additional hurdles to success.

While most careworkers felt this type of scrutiny was inevitable, some careworkers we interviewed often felt discomfort toward the visibility that carework platforms enabled, and the asymmetry that did not grant them reciprocal transparency in being able to scrutinize clients. Maia, a woman who had come to the United States from Mexico on an au pair program and later used carework platforms to find work, expressed feeling exposed as she gave up considerable information about herself. She explained, “What about them [the clients]? ... Who is your recommendation? What are your previous nannies?” Similarly, Karen, a Black caregiver in Atlanta, felt she was more comfortable finding work through an agency, after her experience searching online: “I felt like I was just too exposed.” Linda noted the lack of reciprocity in rating systems:

I try hard to be nice and kind and do the work ... but ratings are not fair because you can't rate families. That kind of, that's not very nice either, because you never know, we are the ones going to their home.

As this analysis has shown, carework platforms use a variety of tools and practices to render careworkers visible as individuals to families, extending beyond traditional evaluating criteria such as skills or years of experience. This form of visibility may be comforting to families searching for a new careworker but may exacerbate existing intersectional inequalities that have historically characterized domestic work. In addition, these systems are not reciprocal, meaning that while workers are required and rewarded for being individually visible to clients, clients are not subject to the same systems of vetting, ratings, and reviews.

Discussion

Recently, regulators have grappled with the implications of on-demand platforms. As London, Rome, and Austin's showdowns with Uber illustrate, lawmakers have fought to force platforms to conform to standards within the labor markets they sought to disrupt. These conflicts, and a continuous stream of media attention, have solidified a narrative that pits on-demand companies and their efforts to casualize work, against many workers, advocates, and regulators who see these companies as exploitative and misleading.

As platforms enter into labor markets outside of driving and delivery, it is necessary to understand the limitations of the "Uberization" narrative to describe their attempts to shape these markets and the effects these efforts have on workers' experiences. In the case of carework platforms, this narrative is unable to account for attempts at formalizing employment relationships within a largely informal industry. While many labor platforms attempt to exert "cultural entrepreneurship" to re-shape categories of workers (Dimaggio, 1982), carework platforms differ in significant ways from on-demand driving in that their efforts have the effect of demarcating symbolic boundaries between trustworthy and untrustworthy populations of workers.

The consequences of visibility

As these platforms make workers more visible to clients, our findings suggest that they may also exacerbate existing forms of inequality that have long-characterized hiring in carework in traditional, non-platform contexts. Carework subverts economic assumptions that consumers can easily assess quality of goods (Duffy et al., 2015), meaning that hiring judgments have typically drawn on intangible qualities of workers' perceived "cultural matching" or "fit" with employers (Rivera, 2012, Wrigley, 1995), and soft criteria which often map on differences across race and immigration status (MacDonald, 2015). Quantified platform tools such as rating systems may simply reflect or amplify these same biases. In utilizing social media networks for sign-in, identity verification, and matching, platforms privilege those that participate in these networks and practices of online "self-branding" that may advantage some workers over others (Marwick, 2013). In addition, lengthy personal profiles, videos, and written messages exchanged with parents have created penalties for workers without English proficiency or knowledge of the norms of professional communication across a number of different types of media, as parents increasingly use digital communication skills to filter and evaluate candidates (Farris, 2014). Finally, intersectional inequalities—including but not limited

to race, ethnicity, gender, income, and immigration status—shape the ways that people engage in different forms of online sociality, which, as they become increasingly integrated into the process of searching for a job online, may deepen existing inequalities shaping this labor market and others (Lane, 2016; Marwick et al., 2017). For example, Madden (2017: 3) recently found that people in low-income households are more than three times as likely to be concerned that they, or someone in their family, will become the victim of online harassment, than those in high-income households. These dynamics may affect how these groups sign up for and choose to use their social media accounts and are further complicated by the concentration of disadvantage that has historically shaped the populations of workers that rely on carework for their income.

Within the world of on-demand platforms, our findings suggest an important shift in the ways that platforms make workers more visible to potential clients. These findings are in contrast to other studies of on-demand services that emphasize the ways platforms “conceal” or make workers invisible to clients. Drawing on the on-demand butler service Hello Alfred, Van Doorn (2017: 8) argues that on-demand services make service workers invisible by limiting interactions between workers and clients. In this way, on-demand services attempt to sell clients a “post-domestic work fantasy” by concealing the historically gendered and raced “degraded labor” of workers. In a similar vein, Irani (2013) found that the infrastructure of Amazon Mechanical Turk made workers invisible to requesters, maintaining that Amazon Mechanical Turk’s value to investors depends on making human labor invisible. Carework platforms point out the limitations of this literature as platforms move into different areas of the economy.

Carework platforms institutionalize an individualized form of visibility to clients in order to foster trust, but visibility also plays an important role in a growing pro-platform discourse. Creating visible markers of a worker’s reputation and experience, including documenting work and reviews from clients, that are portable between platforms, has been suggested as a benefit to workers looking for work in these ways. For example, Samasource, a global nonprofit platform (see also Fish and Srinivasan, 2012), is partnering with Care.com to create a “care institute” to train low-income individuals to become careworkers and utilize online tools to find clients. Leaders argue that platform workers “benefit from the new reputation systems, background checks, and feedback tools available on web-based work channels” (Janah, 2011). Specifically, Sama is promoting “reputational equity,” proposed to fix a long-standing problem wherein, “many workers in the caregiving industry—along with gig economy workers and day laborers—lack a formal track record of their on-the-job performance” (Zillman, 2016). However, new forms of documentation that may be useful for some workers entail new forms of data collection that may create new vulnerabilities for others (Ticona, 2016). The platform mediation of low-wage work may create troves of data that prove irresistible to advertisers, public agencies looking to eliminate welfare fraud, or even police and immigration enforcement officers seeking ever more accurate sources of location information. Putting vulnerable workers on display is, moreover, a form of power platforms wield over workers (Poster et al., 2016).

As Levy and Barocas (2017) note in a discussion of user interactions, the business models of platforms have enabled them to “largely sidestep the traditional regimes that protect against discrimination and other harms in those interactions” (p. 5). While some platform companies have strived to mitigate inequalities by obscuring users’ information that may contribute to discrimination, these practices are unlikely to be implemented

where the platforms' business models are predicated on making workers more individually visible. As work that was traditionally informal and previously invisible becomes visible through the mediations of labor platforms, difficult issues arise about the politics and ethics of this new visibility for workers, clients, and the institutions that scaffold their interactions.

Conclusion

Domestic work is a paradigmatic example of "invisible" work, facing formal exclusion from many federal workplace protections and subject to contingent and informal employment relationships that take place in clients' private homes (Glenn, 1992). Through an analysis of three major online labor platforms for childcare workers, we argue that the narrative of "Uberization" cannot account for the entrance of labor platforms into different labor markets. The distinct history of domestic work shapes the politics of increased visibility and formalization efforts of domestic work platforms, and may also influence their future trajectories. These findings suggest the importance of context-specific analyses of platforms, which not only account for existing forms of inequality that structure low-status service work generally (Van Doorn, 2017) but also the type of work being done and the specific structures of existing labor markets (see also Chen, 2017).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which scholarship about the on-demand economy has followed the hype cycles and inequalities in coverage that characterize journalism about these businesses. In 2014, Uber had 160,000 drivers actively working on their platform (Hall and Krueger, 2015), while Care.com had 5.3 million careworkers with profiles on their platform in the same year (Care.com, 2014).⁴ Despite these vast differences in the number of workers affected by these platforms, Uber has dominated both public and scholarly discussion about the on-demand economy, to the extent that the company's name has become synonymous with labor market changes that supposedly characterize the entrance of on-demand platforms into labor markets, while to our knowledge, this analysis is the first empirical study of online carework platforms. As the field of carework is among the fastest growing and perhaps the most resistant to automation, it is important that media scholarship does not continue to reinforce journalism's neglect of this traditionally gendered area of work, and to remedy this imbalance in scholarship about the intersections of labor platforms and carework, as these findings may have broad implications for ongoing public discussions about the future of work.

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Notes

1. “Nanny” is the preferred term that these communities of workers use to refer to themselves. It is used in the names of a number of professional associations and national events, for example, the International Nanny Association, National Nanny Training Day, and Nanny-palooza.
2. All names used are pseudonyms.
3. Within our sample, 17 interviewees stated they do not report their income from carework. Six interviewees stated they sometimes reported income, while 6 interviewees stated they always reported income. Finally, this information was unavailable for 14 interviewees, either because the interviewee declined to answer, was unclear about differences in tax status, or the topic was not raised in the course of the interview.
4. “Active” Uber drivers are defined by the company as those who complete at least four trips per month (Hall and Kreuger, 2015). Care.com does not distinguish “active” careworkers from the total number of workers with profiles (Gavilanez, 2018, personal communication).

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Author biographies

Julia Ticona is a post doctoral scholar at the Data & Society Research Institute. Her research focuses on precarious work and data-intensive technologies. She is joining the Annenberg School for Communication as an assistant professor this fall.

Alexandra Mateescu is a research analyst and ethnographer at the Data & Society Research Institute, where she works on issues at the intersection of labor & technology.