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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# CROWDSOURCING PLATFORMS AS DEVICES TO ACTIVATE SUBJECTIVITIES

## Narratives on Digital Precarity and Freelance Knowledge Workers

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**ABSTRACT:** Our contribution examines the phenomenon of crowdsourcing platforms and its shaping of workers' subjectivities. We focus on the process of soliciting unpaid services from (often precarious) knowledge workers operating through digital platforms, whose hope is to increase their employability chances. The paper presents and discusses the results of a qualitative research conducted during 2017-18 period, consisting of in-depth interviews with freelancers digital designers, who work in the Milan area, Italy. The findings contribute to enrich the conceptualization of 'free work' by acknowledging the process of platforms mediation and their distinctive way of activating subjects. We also claim that while the term 'crowd' highlights the collective and participatory dimension of 'crowdsourced' projects, it obscures the fundamental mechanisms in determining their success: competition among participants, as well as the logic behind the so-called jackpot economy.

**KEYWORDS:** Crowdsourcing Platforms, Freelance knowledge workers, Qualitative research, Subjectivities, Free Work.

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of crowdsourcing, which we understand as a practice aimed at obtaining ideas or services by soliciting contributions generally coming from a recruited team of knowledge workers, who participate in calls-for-projects. In order to explore the mechanisms affecting the subjectivities involved in this type of activity, we pose the following questions: what are the underlying motivations for participating in projects where the chance of not being compensated is much greater than the expectation of winning the call? What are the mechanisms that motivate the enlisted participants to respond to the call? How does the experience and condition of working change when is mostly unpaid?

We address those research questions by elaborating on the data of a qualitative study produced by interviewing digital designers about their first-hand experience of crowdsourcing. Our goal is to identify those particular practices and social representations (Bruni and Gherardi, 2007) that in a freelance environment are activated by crowdsourcing platforms.

In order to advance our argument, the paper is divided in three parts: the first part outlines the theoretical contours of the object of study, the framework within which our scholarly intervention takes place, and the rationale behind our research questions; the second part illustrates the research background, our methodological strategy and how we accessed the field; the third part focuses on the main and ambivalent nodes that emerge from our empirical inquiry, presenting and discussing the results of the study. Finally, in the conclusions we consider the lights and shadows of the processes operating in the crowdsourcing context.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

With the purpose of reviewing the main themes shaping the current debate on crowdsourcing, we consider in this section the notions of freelance knowledge work, free work and digital crowd platforms. We will later on enrich and qualify those concepts based on our findings and the interviewees' input.

## **2.1 Freelance knowledge workers as peculiar type of knowledge workers**

The particular approach to the topic here addressed joins a broader conversation on work and *knowledge economy* (Rullani, 2004). We are particularly interested in the rise of *freelance knowledge work* (Cappelli and Keller 2013; Osnowitz, 2010; Bologna, 2015; 2018) in the context of digital platforms (Fumagalli, 2016; Snircek, 2016; Armano, Murgia, Teli, 2017).

We understand (cognitive and) knowledge work as describing those productive activities mainly relying on workers' capability of processing information as well as employing technological and communicational skills. Within the broad category of knowledge work, by freelance knowledge workers we refer to a more specific kind mainly characterized by self-employment, which is understood both as a contractual condition as well as an identity constructed through the workers' practices and imagery (Bologna, 2015). In fact, and as we shall see later on, while self-reliance seems to be an important feature of knowledge work as a whole, in the case of freelance knowledge workers appear as a constitutive aspect of their identity.

In this sense, when using social platforms, those kind of workers tend to develop narratives indissolubly linking the self and their own professional experiences, as well as combining those two elements into *biographical capital* (Cohen, 2002; Delory Momberger, 2010). By biographical capital we refer to a compound kind of capital comprising various aspects: it is relational in so far as those workers purposely invest resources in knowing how to interact and engage in productive relationships with colleagues; it is cognitive in so far as those workers develop human and professional projects involving intellectual skills; and finally it is affective because involves managing people's emotions, hope and expectations.

Especially, when it comes to material published online by knowledge workers who have recently entered the job market, biographical capital provides opportunities for 'weak' ties and showcases of self-exposure. In other words, the combination of biographical and professional elements provides those professionals with an individualized profile (Bologn, Banfi, 2010), which is then made available by the intermediary agency of digital platforms.

Thus, by pointing to the significance of mediated social capital, the article also explores general features of contemporary forms of work such as: processes of *social display* (Codeluppi, 2007); processes of self-promotion of subjective resources in the context of *bio-capitalism* (Raunig, 2012); and the workers' profuse commitment in building their own *reputational capital*, especially online (Arvidsson, Giordano, 2013; Gandini, 2016).

## 2.2 The paradoxes of (free) working

In the existing literature, a body of studies of various theoretical approaches has recently focused on the phenomenon of the so-called free work, especially in the aftermath of 2007-'08 crisis and the consequent increasing precariousness of working conditions (Terranova, 2013; Beverungen, Otto, Spoelstra and Kenny, 2013; Armano, Chicchi, Fisher, Risi, 2014; De Peuter, Cohen, Brophy, 2015; Beverungen, Bohm, Land, 2015; Graziano, 2015; Ciccarelli, 2015; Armano and Murgia, 2016; Bascetta, 2016; Armano, Briziarelli, Chicchi, Risi, 2017).

Within such literature, we identify various concepts such as: "free labor", "free work", and "unpaid work." All of which refer to ambivalent analytical categories that account for those contradictory everyday working experiences and social practices framed by digital ecosystems. Although these three notions are frequently used interchangeably, in our view "free work" is particularly useful in order to explore the online environment. Such notion draws on critical approaches to media studies (Castells, 2002) and *digital capitalism* (Huws, 2016) in order to highlight the extreme ambiguity of work processes, the strong involvement of workers' cognitive and relational faculties, and the development of the so-called *platform capitalism* (Fumagalli, 2016; Armano, Murgia, Teli, 2017).

Operating through the 'spontaneous' adhesion of social actors, and constituting an extraordinary instrument of depreciation of freelancers' labor, free work raises important questions about both its gratuitousness (the first ambiguous meaning of being 'free'), and the workers' professional autonomy and their passion for work (the second ambiguous meaning of being 'free'). Thus, we argue that understanding why in some cases workers are willing to get involved in unpaid work activities (Formenti, 2012) constitutes an important sociological theme worth exploring. This is especially true when it comes to understanding a neoliberal model of work, in which the level of social integration to professional networks is almost totally delegated to individual merit and performance.

Drawing on studies on networking (Pais and Provasi, 2016), and contextualized within the so called *hi-tech gift economy*<sup>1</sup> (Barbrook, 1998) and *Californian ideology*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By high tech economy, we refer to a productive and consumptive system based on gifts exchange, reciprocal recognition and on the mediation of digital networks (Barbrook, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> By California Ideology, we refer to that technology-driven neoliberal worldview developed in the mid 1990s, according to which the expansion of digital technology would liberate people from traditional forms of hierarchical power and develop knowledge horizontally (Barbrook and Cameron, 1995)

(Barbrook and Cameron, 1996), we intend to investigate through the category of free work several united but distinct aspects: the informal and affective relationships produced by precarious knowledge workers involved in crowdsourcing enterprises and mediated by digital platforms; their willingness to share information; the indefinite boundaries between free time and free work; the expression of digital identity through the so-called impression management (Gill & Prat, 2008); and finally the workers' ability to "network" through digital platforms and seizing an opportunity for self-realization (Fisher, 2013).

Empirical studies on online free-work (Cossetta, 2014) show how identitarian and symbolic (non-monetary) rewards constitute central motivational elements: personal reputation becomes on the one hand the currency of those professional relations; on the other hand, as an invisible type of digital hand (Formenti, 2012), a condition acquired through peer-reviewed evaluations (Arvidsson and Giordano 2013; Gandini, 2015; 2016). Hence, reputation turns the web into a ground for new working practices, which, while independent from their traditional premise, are consistently linked to a persistent remuneration logic (Gorz, 1994).

Thus, while featuring social recognition, free work does not necessarily turn into contractually regulated compensation, since it mainly operates without the mediation of traditional labor relations, and provides therefore fewer opportunities to be monetized. Consequently, free work's reputational mechanisms produce ambivalent outcomes: on the one hand, workers can promote practices and qualities oriented towards the common good (Arvidsson and Pietersen 2009); on the other hand, those mechanisms can lead to a sense of renewed individualism and exclusivity of the workers' professional circle (Papacharissi 2011; Haern 2010).

### **2.3 The phenomenon of crowdsourcing**

Crowding refers to those mechanisms enabling a crowd to assemble and work together. The existing literature defines it as those situations in which individuals, companies or institutions turn to a community in order to develop a project, a product or a service (i.e. crowdsourcing), or to finance it (i.e. crowdfunding) (Lambert and Schwiendbacher, 2010). In their various configurations, these initiatives are guided by some common features: dis-intermediation through technological platforms; the centrality of trust and reputation; and the dynamics of connective action (Bennett and Segeberg, 2013).

The term crowdsourcing was first used by Jeff Howe in a Wired article, *The Rise of Crowdsourcing* (2006), which described the potential of such practice to recruit the most suitable profiles in order to carry out projects, to solve problems of varying complexity, and to create workshops for new ideas. The article also pointed out how crowdsourcing would become both a new business model for companies, and a new way for freelancers to offer their services.

Deriving from the meaning of the words "crowd" and "outsourcing," crowdsourcing describes the collective development of a project by a group of people operating outside the organization that originally crafted the project call. In fact, crowdsource proposals mostly come from subjects typically operating outside the professional network of the client, such as non-professional participants, freelancers, or small agencies. Thus, according to its advocates, crowdsourcing would be beneficial for all the parties involved: on the one hand, the recruited workers would satisfy concrete needs such as income, recognition, self-esteem, and development of personal skills; on the other hand, the crowd-sourcer would effectively maximize the resources invested by rewarding only the best result (Estellés Arolas, et al, 2012).

People who join crowdsource initiatives usually do it so voluntarily, responding to a call. This process is facilitated by digital platforms that publish the calls and operate as intermediaries. In this sense, we characterize the work implied by crowdsourcing as digital because its activity concerns the manipulation of logical-mathematical, linguistic and information codes, and rely on online networks as an infrastructural and organizational medium (Vecchi, 2017).

The main difference between crowdsourcing and traditional outsourcing consists in the fact that the former enlists an unrelated group of people, hence a crowd, and is compensated outside a traditional contractual framework. Crowdsourcing also differs from open-source productions at the level of motivations for individual participation (Brabham, 2013): while the former implies vested professional interests, the latter refers to cooperation activities carried out voluntarily by a group/network of subjects who participate exclusively in the name of ideal reciprocity and belonging to a virtual community.

Crowdsourcing companies exploit the neoliberal rhetoric of the opportunity for workers to be independent, i.e. "choosing to work and how much to earn", thus capitalizing on an ideologically loaded image of work. According to Brabham (2013), the alleged win-win situation of produced by crowdsourcing should be qualified because its practice consistently implies pros and cons; for example, while it can produce more solutions to the same problem and open up the innovation process, it may

also lead to the violation of intellectual property and workers' rights (Eurofound Report, 2018<sup>3</sup>)

Crowdsourcing is particularly developed in the so called (crowd-)creative sector: as creative workers are invited to submit their proposal to carry out projects concerning graphics design, architecture, images editing, and digital/visual content. Crowd-creative platforms activate a consolidated dynamic: a given client publishes a call via digital platforms; based on the specific features of the call (e.g. budget available, the type of work, the style, and the subject), creative professionals submit proposals; then, among the pool of such proposals, the crowd-sourcer can pick the winner, who is awarded with cash or alternative kind of compensations.

While the term "crowd" highlights the collective and participatory dimension of the project, it also seems to obscure the fundamental mechanisms in determining its success, such as the competition between the various participants, as well as the logic behind the so-called *jackpot economy* (Ross, 2009). According to such economy, only one-to-few participants are given a monetary compensation, as for most knowledge workers the expected remuneration consists in reaching a professional turning point while surviving harsh competition. Thus, to a variable degree, its participants experience crowdsourcing as a free activity, thus free work. In this sense, according to Marazzi, crowdsourcing represents a "linguistic machine" that captures "sociality, emotions, relational capacity [and] free labor" (2010: 56).

In the context of crowdsourcing, we can identify three main actors: platform managers, contest participants, and crowdsourcers. While each one of them has different expectations and deploys different resources, their interests are clearly interconnected: for instance, in addition to making available the budget for the project, clients invest time and money to effectively circulate the call, since the freelance knowledge workers that could potentially respond to the call maybe already involved in or prioritizing other projects. Furthermore, those two actors' stakes align with the digital platforms' interests as well. That is because, by publishing successful calls, on top of generating value for their clients, those platforms generate value for themselves by making public their success as intermediaries.

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<sup>3</sup> The steady rise of platform crowdsourcing and its potential implications for workers' rights has triggered several studies commissioned by institutional subjects such as the European Foundation Eurofound. See for instance <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/it/publications/report/2018/employment-and-working-conditions-of-selected-types-of-platform-work>, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/platform-economy/records/a-preliminary-taxonomy-of-crowdsourcing>, and <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/platform-economy/records/labour-market-on-the-web-rules-and-opportunities-mercato-del-lavoro-sul-web-regole-e-opportunita>

### **3. Accessing the Field and Methodology: An elusive phenomenon and the Opaqueness of Representation**

Among the broader field dedicated to professional networking and candidates selection (Gandini, 2015; Pais and Gandini, 2015), we focus on more specialized platforms dedicated to crowdsource creative. Crowdsourcing platforms such as zooppa.com, twago.it, starbytes.it and bestcreativity.com attract both companies and freelancers with advertising such as, "look for the best skills to carry out your project," or "BestCreativity provides you with a community of ever growing number of creative professional," as well as with the access "to many creative proposals designed specifically for you and your business" (www.bestcreativity.com, 2019).

In this context, we have focused on online self-representation practices and on the informants' engagement with crowd-sourcing platforms, as they participate in on-demand graphics projects. We have conducted a qualitative study based on a sample of knowledge workers involved in cooperative and communicative practices. Our sample consisted of 18 young professionals, men and women ranging from 26 to 43 years old (14 of them were under the age of 30 years old, while 4 ranged between 30 to 40 years old), who work in Milan in the creative fields of visual design and digital graphics (refer to the table -1 below for the main demographics of our informants).

The interviewees are all graduates of the Master's Degree in Communication Design awarded by the New Academy of Fine Arts in Milan during the academic year of 2014-15.

Our interviews aim to collect the biographies (of both study and work) of freelancers and their experiences in the use of crowd platforms. Such reports allowed us to generate narrative structures that offer important insights about the subjects' professional experiences, their self-understanding as workers, and about the material and symbolic aspects of their cognitive tasks while involved in crowdsourcing.

While mostly self-describing as self-employed, our informants mirror the experience of young workers who operate in a permanent condition of fluidity and precarity, who navigate from one contract format to another, from part-time temporary employment to pure free-lance. In this sense, the concept of precariousness also refers to a discourse and an imaginary about work in continuous transformation, in which the subjects' perceptions about work boundaries are constantly being redefined and challenged.



**Table 1 –Our informants' basic demographics**

	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Highest level of education</i>	<i>Occupational activity</i>	<i>Used crowdsourcing platforms</i>
1	26	Female	Master Degree	Visual Design	twago.it, starbytes.it
2	26	Man	Master Degree	Digital Design	bestcreativity.com
3	26	Female	Master Degree	Digital Design	bestcreativity.com
4	27	Man	Master Degree	Visual Design	zooppa.com, starbytes.it
5	27	Female	Master Degree	Visual Design	twago.it
6	27	Man	Master Degree	Consultant	twago.it, zooppa.com
7	27	Female	Master Degree	Web marketing Design	bestcreativity.com, starbytes.it
8	28	Man	Master Degree	Digital Design	bestcreativity.com
9	28	Female	Master Degree	Content Marketing	zooppa.com
10	28	Male	Master Degree	Content Marketing	twago.it, zooppa.com
11	28	Female	Master Degree	Web Design	zooppa.com
12	28	Male	Master Degree	Graphic & Web Design	bestcreativity.com, starbytes.it
13	29	Female	Master Degree	Web marketing Design	twago.it, bestcreativity.com
14	29	Male	Master Degree	Visual Web Management	zooppa.com, bestcreativity.com
15	30	Male	Master Degree	Visual Design	starbytes.it
16	32	Man	Master Degree	Digital Graphic	bestcreativity.com
17	33	Man	Master Degree	Web Design	twago.it, starbytes.it
18	33	Female	Master Degree	Consultant	zooppa.com, gopillar.com

**Source: our own**

Through a biographical narrative approach (Reissman 1993; Poggio, 2004), we conducted 18 interviews, ten via Skype videoconference and eight via face to face. As Di Fraia points out (2004), the very practice of sharing and making public their professional undertakings via digital platforms leads those workers to become particularly self-reflexive about how they narrate themselves. Accordingly, and based on such insight, in the next section, we will employ a triadic heuristic model drawing on Di Fraia's taxonomy (2004), which consists of categories examining three distinct modes of sharing:

1) *expressing*, i.e. the description of one's abilities through narrating the self and its history (e.g. both personal, as per diary blogs, and professional, as in the case of *ad hoc* platforms);

2) *exposing*, i.e. the will and practice of disclosing and opening up to the reader;

3) *exhibiting*, i.e. the practice of making visible particular content, such as the designer's own portfolio via digital/web supports.

As we shall discuss later on, the present analytical framework has been used in order to account for dynamics such as *self-branding*<sup>4</sup>, i.e. generating motivations behind free work, and the specific context in which crowdsourcing platforms operate.

## 4. Main findings

### 4.1 *Expressing: Building on biographical capital and self-branding via platforms.*

By the *expression* mode of sharing one's experience, we point to the first narrating level emerging from our study. Whereas the semantic tools made available by crowd platforms significantly shape 'expressing,' they also lead crowd-workers towards attitudes of pro-activity and voluntary self-exposure. We thus point to how the very platforms mediating crowdsourcing ask the candidates to tell about themselves, which therefore stimulates self-branding:

*tell us about yourself. We only connect you with projects that best allow to express your self. Whether you want to strengthen your street credibility, become more experienced*

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<sup>4</sup> By self-branding (Barile, 2017), we refer to those strategies enacted online for self-promotion purposes. Similarly to the notion of personal marketing, self-branding intertwines professional and personal features (Hearn, 2008; 2010).

*in some fields or try something completely new, we will direct you to projects that match your experience.*

*(<https://www.zooppa.com/it/creatives/>).*

As indicated by the above description, frequently the platform appointed to evaluate proposals is also supposed to check at online profiles in order to make the final cut (<https://www.twago.it/how-it-works/>).

At the level of expressing, several mechanisms activate such as pushing subjects to invest in a continuous work of communication and refinement of their online biographical capital. In fact, research has shown how candidates seem to be increasingly aware of the importance of digital reputation: 70% of our respondents constantly search for their own names online. Indeed, our informants reflect such concerns and the fact that most recruiters (circa 77% of them) claim to analyze their candidates' online information, mainly to check their profile and even to draw information about their personality (Pais, 2012).

Therefore, expressing oneself means enacting a process of self-management, aimed at transforming subjects into both brands and enterprises. Such process is leading towards a model of subjectivity based on techniques of self-motivation, flexibility, individual performance, responsibility, and construction of an adequate portfolio of skills (Chicchi and Simone, 2017). This is exemplified by the particular care and sense of necessity in assembling of online profiles, which shows the less spontaneous side of the phenomenon of crowdsourcing. In fact, in between the lines of the rhetoric of voluntariness, we detect a process of *self-disciplinization* (Morini, 2013), a sort of *self-control* (Hochschild, 1998), according to which coercive aspects coexist with emancipatory ones:

*I continually update my LinkedIn profile, I keep myself updated. [...] when I decided to join the contest (crowdsourcing) for the first time the call seemed made for me ... I launched myself. Not so much for the prize. But in any case, I wanted to experiment, to put into practice what I can do, and in the end I would have had a product to show anyway" (Man 27 years, visual designer).*

As mentioned above, our informants frequently mentioned services like LinkedIn: through crowdsourcing they accumulate *biographical and reputational capital*, which then become spendable on sites such as LinkedIn. That is therefore emblematic of how digital platforms have acquired the function of infrastructures of total

mobilization and transformation of the workforce into a "crowd": millions of profiles managed as "reserve industrial army" of (frequently) over-qualified work.

Such reserve army moves around a gig economy landscape characterized by the propensity for innovation, the reduction of face-to-face relationships to individual-to-digital platform one, a disenchanting relationship with work ethic, and finally, by the need to accumulate intellectual capital to be spent on the (job) market. This is the same context also inhabited by "mechanical Turks" and app-delivery bikers, all emblematic subjects living digital neo-Taylorism.

Crowd working represents the operational translation of the ideologically loaded figure of the individual owner (Vecchi, 2017). Accordingly, we refer to a subjectivity that is an entrepreneur of him/herself and therefore poorly prone to conflict, subject to remote controls that measure his/her productivity (Formenti, 2010); a subjectivity shaped by the imaginary and the corporate rhetoric of being free. That is a subjectivity acting as both product and producer of the neoliberal utopia that spreads around digital environments:

*We need to know how to create our own image online, knowing how to manage different profiles in different platforms. I participate in a contest because I have in mind what I am trying to sell ... (Informants, 27, M)*

*When you sign up on those platforms you have to know how to sell yourself well. It is not just a matter of writing a CV, or of depicting oneself in an appealing way "(Visual Designer, 26, F).*

Those above are examples of how those workers consider their human and social capital as something to put to profit. Therefore, the status of being freelance becomes, on the one hand, the condition of standard professional employment, communication and creativity (Blair, 2001); on the other, the process of workers' entrepreneurialization of their trajectory towards *personal branding* (Hearn, 2008; 2010), all of which amplify the dimension of subjectivities in need to be economically valorized (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Bologna and Banfi, 2010).

Especially in sectors in evolution as in the case of digital design, the mechanisms highlighted here can be understood as consequential aspects of the acceptance of such peculiar nature of working, which is characterized by instability, the requirement of high levels of mobility, and the strong self-identification with professional performances (Gill and Pratt, 2008). It is precisely the identification with one's work (Morini, 2013) that increasingly blurs the boundaries of working.

Such perspective is conveyed by discourses such as: ‘inventing oneself’ and ‘training in performance’ (Chicchi and Simone, 2017). The implied injunction to become a subject-enterprise (Gorz, 1994) almost rules out all other possible identifications, condemning those kinds of workers to look for self-realization right where is denied. That is a strabismus that more broadly characterizes the contemporary labor force (Ciccarelli, 2015): freedom, autonomy, cooperation, self-determination are formally affirmed while simultaneously entailing self-exploitation and self-subjection.

#### **4.2 Exposing to others: Networks and the Limelight of Relational Capital**

Another aspect linked to crowdsourcing we wanted to explore concerns all the activity aimed at building professional networks, which, although not perceived as "work", constitutes a field of investment and meaning production. In fact, the generation and maintenance of relationships is especially important in those professions that are implemented in an ‘invisible’ and immaterial environment (Armano et al, 2017), i.e. governed by informal but also strict rules that require constant sociability skills. In relation to that, the agency of digital technologies and social networks is fostered by social interaction needs, in other words, in a context where networking and personal contacts historically represent a decisive element for professional success (Granovetter, 1983; Blair, 2001).

The link between digital platforms and networking necessities appears to be rather ambiguous. In fact, most of our interviewees describe the construction of reticular forms of relationships within which contradictory aspects are concealed: while the web makes their social networks visible and offers social shortcuts (Boccia Artieri, 2012) capable of activating weak ties (Granovetter, 1983), it also provides a common language and sense of solidarity. Thus, in the typical worldview of those professionals, the autonomous, selfish and rational action features of *homo oeconomicus* combine with the hyper-socialized action typical of many current social movements: i.e. filling the field with actors whose agency is rooted in social networks and communicational rationality, thus collective action gives way to connective action, solidarity and collaboration (Pais, 2012):

*Those who operate with and through the Internet and social networks work hard to create a network of contacts around them. Nobody tells you how you should to do it, but the network of contacts that is created constitutes an investment for our work and for our future "(Informant, 28, M)*

Furthermore, our informants' stories reflect a continuous overlapping of offline and online dimensions (Risi, 2015), and how the changes in the working environment are intimately connected to the evolution of digital communication technologies. In fact, while belonging to a class or a professional category, those workers also pertain to a network where their information and knowledge are exchanged.

Thus, the network theme should be also understood metaphorically because it refers to those principles of neoliberal information technology rhetoric, and more specifically to issues related to free access to networks and equality among members. Our interviewees talk about the network as a terrain of identity formation, thus suggesting that work as socializing agent still maintains its centrality. This is especially evident for freelance knowledge workers, whose work is difficult to circumscribe in physical places, which lead to the erosion of the boundaries between "creative" work time and time dedicated to re-creative activities.

*You can do this job without knowing anyone, working with only few customers, but never being able to grow professionally [...] If you are out of this network it is very difficult to be contacted for a project: we never really look for a work, but we directly promote ourselves, showing on social media who we are and what we do. Our customers are those who are looking for us because they already know who we are (Web Designer, 33, M).*

The comment above indicates how the preponderance of networking is linked to relational capital: in order to find work through digital platforms it is especially important to display to others a performing self in order to cultivate and integrate a rich network of relationships. As a result, the construction of networks of relationships leads us back to those aspects previously mentioned of sharing and social cooperation, which unfold horizontally, overturn hierarchies, and advance models of "equal production" (Benkler, 2004). However, the subjects who join these digital networks do not only respond to contemporary imperatives of transparency and autonomy, but also to the management control that those subjectivities must exercise on themselves.

#### ***4.3 To expose: building portfolios and reputational capital in between rating and ranking***

The creation and management of social and professional networks constitutes a form of protection and validation for freelance knowledge workers, which provides

opportunities through which they obtain recognition. Professional achievement becomes in fact proportional to the number of projects and the relationships that one is able to manage (Chicchi et al, 2016). Moreover, peer professional recognition within networks generates a cycle in which the construction of trust and professional identity becomes crucial for getting involved in new projects, especially in those activities organized by crowdsourced projects.

While the awareness about the necessity of creating and managing one's "profile" through online social networks (e.g. Facebook and LinkedIn) becomes instrumental to the demands of the current labor market and to the reputation among peers, it does not completely replace the importance of face-to-face relationships and interactions (Risi, 2015): workers must in fact provide a coherent self-representation across online and physical contexts in which they operate:

*We invest time on Facebook ... not just for pleasure or satisfaction, but to find a place to actively build relationships and make new contacts. It is useful to display what you create: in other words, you construct a certain image when you show the things you do. (Content manager, 28, Woman)*

Building an online reputation does not only mean creating contacts, but also being able to exhibit a portfolio of successfully completed projects and names of companies one has worked with. The purpose of this practice of managing professional production is not only to gain new contacts or visibility for purely promotional purposes, but also to acquire an individual status, to build reputational capital that works like a reservoir of acquired references.

*By participating in BestCreativity I have expanded my clients portfolio. I am now a veteran. It depends for whom you have worked with, you have to enrich your portfolio as a useful tool to promote your talent: so, if you worked for that pizzeria down the street, well, little use...But If you have made the banner for the Hotel Principe di Savoia in Milan then you are displaying it in your portfolio and starting to create a reputation for yourself. "(Web Marketing Designer, 29, F)*

*We work on quantity and quality ... work for a thousand of minor customers who don't know how to make a website, but then you have to try to work for some big name. There are many kind of platforms contests, but time is short, so I still select those that have a name: if there is a call for a project of a certain brand, then I can spend it like references. "(Graphic & Web Designer, 28, M)*

Indeed, digital reputation and the creation of trust networks in online environments play a key role, as confirmed by the interviews. Mediated reputation means also trust, which, based on interpersonal or community relationships (Coleman, 1990), generates the willingness to join a collaborative economy. In the so-called "fiduciary age" (Mazzella and Sandurajaran 2016, p.13), a given user has access to the biographical and relational capital of another, which is made visible on the digital platform. In this respect, the last question under consideration in this paper is therefore about the role played by reputation in crowdsourcing.

According to Blair (2001), we live in a context where professionals are considered 'as good as their last job', which brings out a strong dimension of value linked to an idea of capital centered around individual reputation: it is not enough to narrate oneself, to express oneself via digital platforms, or to join professional networks, it is also important to know how to expose and valorize one's projects and the of the clients for whom one has worked

Social network sites can therefore be considered as trade-fairs (Pais, 2012), where people can exhibit their products:

*Agencies require experienced employees. Working on these projects allows you on the one hand to put into practice what you've learned to do, and on the other, to accumulate experience, project by project, so that you can expose them to agencies, show your work is a way to professionally tell who you are "(Digital Graphics, 27, Woman)*

*I would certainly recommend signing up for these sites. You can also jeopardize your reputation there: it is difficult to prove to a company that you are capable of doing one thing well. Through these sites you get a chance of publishing your work. It is the best of possible investments, even if you work for free, but if you have really creative ideas and do something that is distinctive, even if not rewarded now, if one works well sooner or later it will be and maybe even from some big customer ... " (Content manager, 28, M)*

Especially for less experienced professionals, participating in online contests is particularly useful as it allows them to become familiar with the issues and demands of the sector. It is a *work for exposure* (Ross, 2014) in the hope of being recognized and valued (also monetarily):



*The first time I have attended a contest was with a classmate of mine. We combined my technological skills and his artistic skills. [...] I understood how important it is to have an online portfolio. You can show the logo you created, a site template, a graphic studio... Your curriculum is not enough for those of us working in the graphics industry, you must be able to communicate who you are and what you can do" (Man, 26 years, digital designer)*

In addition, crowdsourcing allows professionals to enter into relations with companies and institutions that may be interested in furthering their collaboration. Even when the proposed projects are not rewarded by the crowdsourcing prize, those proposals are "kept aside "to be re-adapted and recycled for other calls or "showcased" as samples of work.

*When you are still a student and at the beginning of your career, you're doing your best to build your image. The first goal is visibility. This is what is needed to make a career in this field and to knock on the door of other companies. Of course, I expect that once I consolidate my reputation on social media, showing who I am and what I do, then I will reap the benefits of my work "(Consultant, 33, F).*

From the study here discussed also emerges how intense, problematic and implosive is the urge to merge personal with work relationships. Thus, the work chosen and carried out by the interviewees is based on identification dynamics (e.g. "what you do and you have to exhibit mirrors who you are as a professional") and on the production of innovation and creative content. At the base of those free work experiences lies the idea of a cumulative and self-made trajectory, able to give materiality and visibility to one's know-how. In fact, in a context such as crowdsourcing, in which the compensation is given only to the winner, unpaid activities contribute to enrich workers' portfolio quantitatively and qualitatively, with projects that could eventually lead to paid work or a professional activity.

Personal reputation among peers—which unlike reciprocity is individually expressed in a rational actor logic framework—becomes through information publicly available on the web the preferred currency (Arvidsson and Giordano 2013). It is because of the credit reserved to reputation that the web becomes a place of emerging working practices, which while still linked to some kind of remuneration issued in the form of reputation (Gorz, 1994), are characterized by a new and different, autonomous form. Thus, regardless of the jackpot obtained, the work done is

therefore accompanied by both social recognition as well as by the absence of guarantees to turn it into steady source of income.

## **5. Conclusion. A final picture with (decidedly) blurred outlines**

Echoing critical approaches to media studies and to informational (Castells, 2000) and digital capitalism (Huws, 2014), in this paper we have shed light on the ambivalences of the work process inherent the specific context of the so-called platform capitalism. Platform capitalism is characterized by the co-presence of an informal economy alongside a specific accumulation regime (Armano, Murgia, Teli, 2017), a context inhabited by young professionals who manage the limelight and an audience that attends their various performances (Goffman, 1959).

By exploring such a realm, we pointed to mechanisms operating inside crowdsourcing platforms that both structure social interactions and shape workers' subjectivity, thus comprising both dynamics of coercion and self-control that organize and colonize their lives. The combination of external control and inner motivations also operates while those workers are constantly mediatically displayed, which makes their action particularly performance-driven.

Our findings also provide insights about how those platforms contribute to the erratic professional trajectories of free-lance knowledge work, which, rather than establishing a pre-ordered path of professional growth, pave the way for task-oriented and short-term planning courses. Those trajectories are significantly shaped by identitarian factors and sense of belonging to particular social environments.

Our informants navigate such context with little security about whether and when they will get paid, but still motivated by the hope and promise of rewards. In fact, rather than a *promise economy* (Bascetta, 2016), crowdsourcing could be defined as *jackpot economy* (Ross, 2009), which more closely epitomizes the neoliberal logic according to which "we all must play but only very few win".

Still, while exasperating the condition of uncertainty of free-lancers, the jackpot economy becomes attractive in so far as it seems to offer opportunities and freedom. As a result, this kind of workers is constantly engaged in free work.

Furthermore, our study reveals how our free-lancers also exasperate, and in many cases spectacularize, those features also shared by most knowledge workers, such as the necessity of self-displaying in order to be recognized, and the tendency to join a network propelled by both reputation and carefully crafted online profiles (Corsani and Lazzarato, 2008).

In this sense, our study depicts digital networks as technological and relational spaces of socialization and social acceleration, which allow users to express themselves and interact on the web. In those networked interactions, the reward of the work performed in terms of identity building (Cossetta, Labate, 2014), social recognition and biographic /reputational capital, represents an economic fact, but not necessarily a monetary and contractual one. Thus, such a reward logics becomes a social fact centered on the recognition that the involved actors acquire through information, which is cumulatively published online.

On the one hand, the freelancers' task of managing profiles on digital platforms implies choosing and updating their biographical-informative capital, which is experienced in terms of investing in the future, while waiting for the promise to have one's ability publicly recognized. On the other hand, such work has totalizing effects on the workers' lives, placing subjects into an entrapping vicious cycle.

In these terms, building relational networks is "free work," i.e. monetarily unpaid, but also freely given, equipped with a sense of self-reliance in which the production of social relations is both autonomous with respect to capital as well as captured by it (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). As knowledge workers, they are therefore experiencing a fusion of life and work spheres that translates on the one hand into free and unpaid work (Armano et al, 2014; 2017), and on the other, in the enhancement of weak ties. Thus, in order for value to be produced, the (apparent) autonomous participation of subjects becomes necessary (Fumagalli, 2016).

Based on our findings, it also emerges how workers believe in the effectiveness of building and managing online profiles and accessing freelance recruitment systems. In various cases, the interviewees' utilization of those platforms could be explained in terms of processes of *social display* (Codeluppi, 2007) and the *becoming of self-enterprise* (Gorz, 1994), which significantly shape the informants' subjectivity. Such aspect is particularly relevant when it comes to free-lance knowledge work because of the implied process of spectacularization of the workers' online profile.

We therefore point to a kind of work built on individual enterprises temporarily competing with each other in the context of a given crowdsourcing call, as well as aimed at accumulating positive feedback and reputational capital. Thus, both digital production and circulation is based on the workers' motivation to accumulate social and reputational capital, aside the monetary one.

The overlapping of those capitals triggers a crucial question about whether crowdsourcing platforms can be better understood as job intermediary agencies or more specific tools for self-representation. Our research suggests that the power of those platforms reside precisely in being able to provide both an opportunity to look

for jobs whose characteristics go beyond traditional contractual features, as well as a chance for display and recognition. Furthermore, through dynamics of play-labor (e.g. scoring points, assessment of performance), those platforms also trigger phenomena of self-quantifications.

In the context of such intrinsic ambivalence we identify the most seductive aspects of crowdsourcing platforms: with their capability to promote opaque free work and, at the same time, offering opportunities for expression, identity building and cultivation of social and professional relations. From this point of view, the platforms' function of intermediation should be understood more as the mediating link between technology and social construction processes, rather than mere technological agency on its own right. Thus, those platforms exercise a kind of *pastoral power* (Cremonesi, 2019; Foucault, 2005): in other words, they effectively shape behaviour by offering seemingly optimal individual and collective role-models of existence, which are then easily normalized.

We therefore wonder how sustainable over time this kind of work built on bare hopes for economic remuneration and performativity might be, where is then the limit of such dynamic? Based on the informants' account, we claim that such limit cannot be found at the individual level. In fact, the capability of rejecting free work and a labor process promulgated by platform capitalism depends on people' socio-economic position. In respect to that, especially for young labor seekers, the current social settings most frequently do not allow such capability and create instead social inequalities that function by a selective inclusion principle. Indeed, such scenario calls for a redefinition of the current social security system far beyond the question of self-employment and subordinate work.

We thus conclude our reflection pointing to a pressing underlying question: "how can collective action be mobilized when value extraction devices merge with the expression of passions, when free work becomes self-gratifying, when the wage represents more a promise than a reality, and when professional relationships become intimate and personal" (Armano, Murgia, 2017; p. 57)? While, our study provides cues about how collective ties can be formed, trying to answer this question means exploring further, beyond the reach of this paper, the link between subjectivity formation and collective action afar the realm of traditional employment.

Some interviewees have reported initiatives based on the construction of social networks promoting more active participation compared to keeping those professionals *hostage* of digital work. However, from the same informants' accounts, it also emerges how the sharing economy and the possibility of building (weak) bonds among workers does not seem to give rise to any substantial antagonistic position, as

historically happened for the working class in the past. Thus, we should talk about the emergence of a sort of *weak solidarity* (Arvidsson, 2015):

*then you meet professionals who are exquisite people you can relate to and understand how valuable your work is. From some of them I learned not to accept all the mandates: now when they ask me to do a job, there are some colleagues I call right away to work together. Before I used to accept everything came my way, I worked like a madman, all alone and often underpaid. Now, it's always two or three of us working together, we divide the labor by skills, and we try to make estimates that can help us assess whether the work we would put into it is really worth the value. Sometimes it goes well, sometimes does not, but these are the rules of the game. "(Visual web manager, 29, M).*

All in all, our conclusions aligns with the general assessment concerning digital platforms and their increasingly colonization of all spheres of social life. In the case of knowledge working, the utilization of digital platforms have considerably affected both job recruitment and production process. In this sense, while with this paper we state the importance of identifying the distinctiveness and specificities of each facet of digital work, we also think it is crucial to develop a sustained critical scholarship capable of recognizing common traits among different modalities of work, in order to facilitate and incentivize collective action (Huws, 2016).

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