



'It's a Big Brother Type Thing': Technology and the Labour Process in Parcel Delivery in the UK

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15:30 – 17:00 (coffee and tea at 15:15)

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Abstract

The expansion of e-commerce has increased the demand for rapid home delivery, transformed logistics and distribution and facilitated the growth of sub-contracting by retailers to a diversified logistics/parcel delivery market. Recent critical debate has focussed upon the contractual and competitive pressures faced by parcel delivery companies and how these pressures impact upon the work and employment conditions of workers within the logistics sector (Cowen 2014, Newsome 2015, Moore and Newsome 2018). The degradation of parcel delivery work, in particular, has attracted growing media and public policy interest in the UK. This paper will report on a research project exploring the experiences of key workers in the contemporary economy notably parcel delivery workers. It will report on stakeholder interviews with employers, trade union officials as well as both directly employed and 'self-employed' parcel delivery workers from two case-study organisations.

The focus of the paper will be to examine the impact of technology on the social relations of production and on the contractual status of workers (for example in zero-hour contracts and/or self-employment). It will also explore the role of technology in monitoring not only the movement of products, but also the management of labour and labour time where work is episodic, remote and undertaken from home and/or vehicles. The evidence will reveal how algorithmic tools and routing software has the capacity to accelerate circulation through the 'annihilation of space by time'. It will explore how the measurement of real-time labour performance creates the capacity for greater labour optimisation, removing the porosity of the working day and thus reducing costs. However, the paper will also uncover the experiences of parcel delivery workers and consider how they resist and recast attempts to further quantify their labour process.

About the Speaker

Kirsty Newsome is Professor of Employment Relations and Associate Dean Research at the Sheffield University Management School. She is currently Co-I on the ESRC-funded Productivity Insights Network (PIN) and leads the theme on 'Work and Employment'. The PIN is a multi-disciplinary network of social science researchers engaged with public, private, and third sector partners with an aim of changing the tone of debates on the 'productivity puzzle'. Her wider research interests are concerned with exploring the dynamic interplay of global value chains and the labour process with a focus on employment change in distribution and logistics. In recent years her research has also been exploring the shifts and transformations in the politics of production and the nature of work with an emphasis on workplace insecurity and non-standard forms of work.