

Platform Counterpublics: Networked Gossip and Resistance beyond Platforms

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The production of alternative discourse about labor platforms provides an opportunity to bridge scholarship on activism across platforms. This analysis advances an understanding of platforms' power to shape discourse and users' power to push back. From content producers to Uber drivers, digital laborers find ways to share information. Scholars of online activism have shown that platforms can facilitate counterpublics—communities where excluded voices construct resistant discourses. However, theories of counterpublics are underused in studies of digital labor to examine discursive contestation. Extending feminist counterpublic theories, we examine the online discourse about Care.com, a domestic work platform, finding significant platform control over public discourse. However, despite their formal separation on the platform, workers and clients use “networked gossip” to construct what we call a “platform counterpublic.” By bringing together scholarship on counterpublics and critical literature on labor platforms, this article offers a relational approach to resistance in platform labor.

Keywords: platforms, digital labor, activism, publics, counterpublics, care

The term “platform” encompasses content sharing on social media sites as well as sites that mediate relationships among workers, clients, buyers, and sellers (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Amid the so-called “tech-lash,” or the growing critical awareness of the power of technology platforms and the companies behind them, discursive spaces have arisen where people debate, discuss, and mobilize action around and against platforms. Movements have galvanized to delete Uber, Instacart, and Facebook in protest. However, empirical studies of platforms have become highly specialized, separating the analysis of social media, labor, and other types of platforms, thus limiting the range of theories and possibilities for seeing generalizability in processes that transcend sectors.

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Through an examination of online discourse about a domestic work labor platform, Care.com, we developed the idea of “platform counterpublics,” alternative discursive communities constructed by users coming together to share their experiences using a platform. These communities circulate knowledge based on their experiences, which are marked by vastly unequal power relations between platform companies and everyday users. This circulation occurs through “networked gossip” that is often not limited to a single online space, takes place across the Web and draws in different types of platform users. Interaction among differently oriented users can produce limited forms of community among posters. While scholars have considered how marginalized groups use social media platforms to create counterpublics, we have found that platforms are also the subject of counterpublic discourse, which leaves users looking for ways to “talk back” to platforms. As platforms become even more important players in larger ecosystems of news, media, and labor, the idea of “platform counterpublics” illuminates how platforms are both the focus of resistance and shape the practices of counterpublics seeking to limit their power.

Domestic work labor platforms bring together workers and clients, acting as labor market intermediaries in a largely informal sector. Formally separated by the platform’s architecture, there are few spaces where workers and clients interact. As businesses, platforms are not only apps and websites; they are also companies that have a business interest in shaping public discourse. As brokers of intimate services for vulnerable groups, domestic work platforms are highly motivated to protect their reputations to ensure user trust. We found that while Care.com exerts considerable control over public discourse about itself, workers and clients nevertheless find one another and share their experiences across the Web, especially on consumer review sites.

Scholars of labor platforms have observed many online spaces where workers share information and organize. Meanwhile, scholars of online public discourse have observed that social media platforms facilitate networked counterpublics that hail participants who are excluded from the dominant discourse. By extending feminist theories of counterpublics into the study of labor platforms, this study illustrates the utility of an alternative set of theories to examine platforms’ ability to shape public discourse and exclude the voices of workers and the power of a diverse set of users to push back.

Online Worker Forums and Organizing Beyond Platforms

In studying platform-mediated work, much attention has been given to the interactions that occur on their sites and apps. However, labor platforms also have a social life that extends far beyond the activities that take place within their digital borders. Platform-based workers—from on-demand service providers to content creators—create and exchange information about the platforms they use through channels across the Web, especially through dedicated online forums for workers. Studies of these types of online forums for platform workers have leveled compelling critiques of platforms’ power to dictate the terms of digital labor. However, these studies focus less on the multiplicity of these discourses in terms of the actors and spaces involved and in theorizing about the different forms of resistance surrounding platform-based work online.

Various platform workers use online spaces to come together and share information. These worker forums are sites of collective, often discounted, knowledge production about platforms. Instagram

influencers organize “engagement pods” to boost one another’s content (O’Meara, 2019). Workers on labor platforms like Uber, Lyft, and Amazon Mechanical Turk gather on Facebook, as well as on nonprofit and cooperatively owned online spaces to share information, organize for better conditions, and socialize (Gray, Suri, Ali, & Kulkarni, 2016; Irani & Silberman, 2013; Maffie, 2020; Wood, Lehdonvirta, & Graham, 2018; Woodcock, 2021). Pointing to the unequal power relations between labor platforms and workers, scholars have analyzed online worker forums as actual or potential sites for worker activism, resistance, and other forms of collective organizing. Using labor process theories, which emphasize the antagonistic relationship between management and workers (e.g., Braverman, 1998; Burawoy, 1982), studies of worker forums have focused on the relationship between workers and platforms to the exclusion of other actors, such as clients. Methodologically, this scholarship focuses on single-worker forums rather than networked discourses. This has the effect of pointing out the powerful role of platforms as the subject of discussion and focus of resistance but neglects the role of other kinds of platforms, such as Facebook, in facilitating and hosting these groups. These tendencies in the extant literature have engendered several limitations in understanding domestic workers and their discourses.

Unlike ride-hailing or crowdwork platforms, some domestic work apps do not directly manage workers, therefore they may engender qualitatively different kinds of online worker discourses. While there has been a proliferation of studies on worker forums across many types of platform labor, there are none about domestic labor platforms. Domestic workers have created online spaces for information sharing, but these forums are oriented around the profession and not around the platforms used to find work (Ticona, 2022). To remedy this gap, we sought out online spaces where workers were discussing Care.com, currently one of the largest online domestic work platforms. However, instead of finding any particular social media platform that hosted a dedicated forum or group for workers’ discussions, we found that discussions were scattered across the Web and mainly concentrated in consumer review sites that included clients. Along with Irani and Silberman (2013), we argue that interpreting these discussions through theories of publics and counterpublics allows us to examine multiplicity in both the online spaces where this kind of discourse is created and among the actors constructing it.

Platform Counterpublics: From Medium to Subject

Theories of publics and counterpublics can help identify how different actors around platform labor come to constitute a discursive community. Scholars of online publics and counterpublics have shown the utility of platforms for networked social movements in convening and circulating voices that are excluded from dominant discourses. As counterpublics have moved online, these studies have illuminated the multiplicity of discursive communities and the power dynamics among them. In contrast to the literature on online worker forums, this scholarship has largely examined platforms in their role as hosts or convenors of counterpublics and has not centered on the issues of platform power and its role in processes of exclusion.

Feminist critiques of public sphere theory have countered ideas about the singularity of the bourgeois public sphere by emphasizing the multiplicity of publics and the dynamics of exclusion. “Counterpublic” emerged as a term describing the discursive communities that form as a result of their exclusion from the mainstream public sphere (Asen, 2000; Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Felski, 1989). Fraser (1990) theorized that “subaltern counterpublics” exist to counter the hegemony of the dominant public (p. 67). Extending Fraser’s

work, Squires (2002) pointed out multiple forms of counterpublics, including those that seek to isolate from or change dominant public discourses. This attention to the role of power, exercised through exclusion, makes counterpublics a useful analytical tool to critique the power of elite institutions, such as platform companies, including both social media and labor platforms, to shape public discourse.

Studies of online discourses show the continued relevance of (counter)public sphere theory. "Publics" has become a keyword for understanding groups that engage in shared activity online (Lingel, 2020), and the concept of counterpublics has proved useful to scholars in understanding alternative discursive spaces online (e.g., Kuo, 2018; Papacharissi, 2014; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). As boyd (2010) has highlighted, the affordances of some online sites encourage counterpublic formation. Jackson and Foucault Welles (2015) illustrated the way a counterpublic transformed the meaning of a propagandistic New York Police Department Twitter hashtag meant to celebrate the police into a critique of racist police violence.

Platform companies leverage public narratives to define their business models and services. The successful branding of these companies as "platforms" (as opposed to online publishers, websites, or temporary labor companies) reveals the "discursive work" companies do to make their case for particular kinds of governance (Gillespie, 2010). For instance, in its battles against regulations defining its drivers as employees, Uber sought to shape public discourse by defining itself as a technology company with users rather than as an employer (Dubal, 2016; Rosenblat, 2018). In examining the online discourse on Care.com, we found that the company marginalized workers' and clients' public criticisms. This article draws attention to the process by which these voices become marginalized in the wider public discourse.

By examining the online discourse about the domestic work labor platform company Care.com, this article shows how platform workers and clients circulate discounted knowledge about this platform across the Web. An initial online ethnography revealed many attempts by workers and clients to engage in a critique of the company. These were largely in channels controlled by Care.com, such as its official Facebook page. Care.com's responses privatized these public critiques, leading to fragmented and sporadic critical discourse from workers and clients. However, we found a deep and sustained discourse, largely critical of the platform's business model, on consumer review sites. Consumer review sites more strictly regulate the participation of companies, enabling contributions from those marginalized in other online spaces. We also found links between the consumer review sites and other online spaces where critical conversations about Care.com were occurring, showing that this discounted knowledge was not contained within one online space but circulating across the Web. This suggests that Care.com was not only the subject of this critical discourse but it also shaped the practices of those seeking to criticize it.

Unlike "networked counterpublics," which use platform affordances (e.g., hashtags on Twitter) to gather communities around a cause (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015), what we call "platform counterpublics" emerge through platform users' critiques of being excluded from public discourses dominated by platforms. Warner (2002) theorizes a counterpublic as coming into being "only in relation to texts and their circulation" (p. 50), and platform counterpublics are no different. Through an inductive analysis of online discourse about Care.com, this study offers three defining features of platform counterpublics: First, like other counterpublics, they emerge through exclusion from public discourse about platforms that are largely controlled by platform

companies. Second, they operate beyond and between platforms and, as a result, often appear fragmented. They are self-organized around alternative discourses about a platform company and its users' experiences with its services. They are not hailed by any particular platform affordance (e.g., hashtags) or contained completely within any single online space. Instead, they are hailed by search engines or networked links among threads in different online spaces. Third, they bring together diverse types of users, who are often separated by platform architecture, around shared experiences. In this way, we use the term to refer to platforms as the subject of counterpublic discourse, meaning that participants in platform counterpublics both discuss and often use the platform. However, we also use it in a second, related way to refer to how platforms shape the practices of these communities. As platform counterpublics are convened on the Internet, platforms become powerful actors that shape their discourses. They are powerful both because platform companies attempt to shape positive public narratives about their companies and because their affordances are critical to the practices of counterpublics. From Twitter hashtags that allow people to find their way to an emerging counterpublic to the separate accounts and apps that are required for workers and clients on Care.com, which force users to use Google to find each other on the Internet, the structure of platforms shapes the practices of platform counterpublics. These features highlight that platforms may be both the subject of and a factor that shapes the practices of online counterpublics.

Domestic Work Labor Platforms

While apps that are focused exclusively on domestic cleaning provide on-demand services similar to Uber and Lyft, apps that are oriented toward in-home care work, such as Care.com, bring together workers and clients within an algorithmic marketplace where they search for one another and use in-platform messaging to discuss the terms of employment. In-home domestic workers usually rely on several job-hunting strategies, including local agencies, word-of-mouth referrals, job boards, such as Craigslist, community-based online forums, and e-mail lists (Ticona, Mateescu, & Rosenblat, 2018). Within this fragmented environment, online domestic work platforms have centralized and aggregated the search for work, creating large local pools of workers. Care.com is the largest platform in this sector, launched in 2006, and as of 2019, had 11.5 million registered worker profiles in the United States and recorded \$192 million in revenue (Care.com Inc., 2019).

Prospective clients use Care.com to place job listings, and workers create profiles to highlight their skills, experience, and availability. Workers and clients contact each other through an in-platform messaging system. Workers and clients are separated on the platform, meaning that they navigate separate sides of the platform, requiring separate log-ins for worker and client-facing apps. The only overlapping spaces visible to both workers and clients are private chats, client reviews on workers' profiles (workers cannot leave reviews on client profiles), and discussion threads on the website, which are moderated by the company. Despite the increasing use of digital platforms in domestic work, relatively few studies have examined them (see Fetterolf, 2022; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018).

In the United States, domestic workers, including nannies, babysitters, and house cleaners, are often considered "invisible workers" due to the lack of legal regulations in the sector and low pay, and because they work in private homes (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2004). In the New Deal era, these workers, largely Black women, were formally excluded from basic social safety net protections by racialized labor

laws that excluded agricultural and domestic workers (Perea, 2011). Today, domestic work is no longer exempted. However, in practice, these workers are often excluded from formal protections both because much federal legislation (e.g., Occupational Health and Safety Act, Age Discrimination in Employment Act, Americans with Disabilities Act) only applies to employers of more than one worker and because of the predominance of informal employment relationships (Burnham & Theodore, 2012). As a result of domestic worker organizing, the past five years have seen the passage of domestic worker bills of rights legislation in many states and cities, enshrining rights to rest breaks, overtime pay, and protection from harassment and abuse.

Unlike other labor platforms, some domestic work platforms do not use algorithms to manage the execution of work but instead use them to create marketplaces to connect workers and clients. Care.com creates visibility for workers in this marketplace depending on many factors including client ratings, response time, and membership status. Domestic workers are often excluded from most efforts at platform worker organizing, which has so far focused more on issues of legal misclassification in ride-hailing and delivery platforms (Turner, 2020).

Researchers have shown that gig company narratives of freedom and entrepreneurship often fall short of workers' daily experiences. Platform companies use these narratives to argue for the classification of workers as independent contractors (Ravenelle, 2019; van Doorn, 2017). This worker-centered approach has revealed important gaps between the promise and the reality of platform work for workers' everyday experiences. However, as Gillespie (2010) pointed out, platforms must position themselves to multiple publics simultaneously, and we know less about how different audiences, including not only workers but also clients, interact with company-produced discourse.

By extending theories of counterpublics, this article examines workers and clients engaging in online discourse about Care.com. This approach foregrounds the agency of different groups of platform users and has the advantage of not taking the platforms' definitions of their constituencies for granted. By examining the online spaces where different groups of platform constituencies come together, this study suggests that although platforms exert a great deal of power over discourse, they do not have the power to define it without contestation.

Networked Gossip: Hailing Across the Internet

Separated by domestic work platform architecture, clients and workers have little insight into one another's experiences. They may also be separated by demographic differences in age, race, and social class. Despite these obstacles to shared discourse, these users have a common interest in sharing information. However, they cannot rely on the platform to host this discourse because of its interest in controlling online discourse about its services. Clients and workers, therefore, face obstacles in finding one another online. Many studies on networked counterpublics have focused on Twitter hashtags as hailing these discursive spaces together (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Kuo, 2018; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). However, when voices that platforms have excluded or marginalized from public discourse seek to find or circulate counter-discourses about these companies, platform affordances are not always available to "hail" counterpublics. We offer the concept of "networked gossip" as a descriptive term to explain how

different users might be called to a public that is not contained within a social media platform but instead extends across the Web.

Both on- and offline, marginalized groups create forms of “discounted knowledge,” such as gossip and rumor, to both navigate dominant systems and contest their logics (Feeley & Frost, 2014). While gossip, or “evaluative talk between two parties about an absent third party” (Vaidyanathan, Khalsa, & Ecklund, 2016, p. 557), often has negative connotations, it also plays a protective and pro-social role (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012). Gossip is a feminized form of knowledge production and is often denigrated as trivial in the creation of true public discourse. For instance, Warner (2002) theorized that gossip can never truly produce a public because the “primary orientation” (p. 56) of a public is toward strangers, and “gossip is never a relation among strangers” (p. 59). However, we found that by sharing their experiences using domestic work platforms, users who would not have otherwise shared their experiences with one another formed a counterpublic. Against Warner’s (2002) reading of gossip, this feminist reading sees online gossip circulated across the Internet as a text that can be picked up at different times by unrelated people, creating relationships among strangers.

Feminist approaches to gossip have identified its central role in knowledge production, power struggles among groups, and the maintenance of community (Adkins, 2002; Feeley & Frost, 2014). Studies on gossip on the Internet show that marginalized groups use online gossip to contest oppressive systems. As Pruchniewska (2019) contended, vis-a-vis bell hooks’ (1984) notion of “talk[ing] back,” gossip blogs allow Black women to contest the racism and White centrality of the entertainment industry (see Steele, 2021). Bishop (2019) expands this notion, showing how YouTubers of color share “algorithmic gossip” to combat the ever-changing landscape of monetization. Much of the existing scholarship on gossip in online spaces has examined this kind of knowledge production as it occurs within specific communities of users, such as gig workers, beauty vloggers, and social media influencers.

We demonstrate that networked gossip about care platforms involves various platform users. Through an examination of online discourse about Care.com, this article points to two important facets of networked gossip. First, networked gossip calls together counterpublics in the absence of platform affordances. Second, it is subversive, meaning that it is a response to uneven power between platforms and users (Bishop, 2019); as a contravention of the platform’s intended separation of clients and workers, networked gossip is used to overcome and resist these rules and bring together different platform stakeholders.

Data and Methods

Renninger (2015) pointed out that counterpublic discourse, being rarer than public discourse, requires us to “go looking” for it (p. 1518). However, in this project, we did not set out to find counterpublic discourse. Rather, by seeking out online discourse about Care.com, we found a pattern that required engaging with theories of counterpublic discourse. Drawing on the first author’s larger ethnographic project (Ticona, 2020), we observed discourse and interactions among users in both social media and consumer review sites.

This data collection and analysis was conducted in two stages, following an iterative and inductive approach, as we reflected on the patterns and compared the emergent themes (Charmaz, 2006).

Methodologically, we collected and analyzed these data, informed by Brock's (2018) "critical technocultural discourse analysis" and Recuber's (2017) "digital discourse analysis." First, drawing on Brock's (2018) work, we engaged feminist theories of knowledge production to understand the text of posts and "the cultural practices that take place in these digital spaces" by examining the interactions among posters, and how features of each site may have shaped discourse (p. 1013). According to Moran (2010), discourse "has been used to refer to a mode of thought, cultural practice, or institutional framework that makes sense of and structures the world" (p. 13). Practically, we sought out online spaces where workers using Care.com came together to share their experiences. Informed by scholarship on worker forums showing the widespread use of social media platforms, we began by conducting a broad search for discourse about Care.com on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Instagram). The discourse found through keyword searches for "Care.com" primarily displayed the company's accounts, where the discussion was moderated by paid staff, and most interactions involved this staff responding individually to each post.

Failing to find significant discourse about Care.com among workers, we then undertook a second stage of data collection, conducting a wider Web search for Care.com through major search engines (e.g., Google and Bing) and used these returns as a guide (Christin, 2020; Rogers, 2013). Near the top of the results, behind company-controlled social media accounts, Wikipedia, and news stories, were consumer review websites. Using custom scripts, we scraped 2,216 reviews from six consumer review sites (HighYa, SiteJabber, PissedConsumer, Reviewopedia, Better Business Bureau, and TrustPilot; see Table 1). Following a reflexive approach, we examined the consumer reviews in stages. First, we analyzed a small subsample, "allowing themes to emerge from an initial reading" (Recuber, 2017, p. 53). The reviews were overwhelmingly negative, offering scathing critiques of the platform's subscription model.² Reflecting on the two different sites of discourse—the company-controlled social media channels and the consumer review sites—we found significant differences in themes and types of interactions. These differences prompted us to consider how consumer review sites facilitated counterpublic discourse.

After this insight, we further investigated the ways in which Care.com seeks to shape public discourse. We examined the company's U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filings explaining their advertising strategy, national TV ads, videos linked to the company's social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram, and channels that were also included in the first step of our research process.

² An initial round of coding that included an assessment of whether the reviews were mostly positive or negative found that 34% of the reviews were mostly positive. However, after finding that one review site—Indeed.com—was responsible for nearly 90% of positive reviews, possibly due to the prompts provided in the review interface, we excluded all Indeed.com reviews from the sample.

Table 1. Description of Sample, Consumer Review Sites, and Reviews.

Review Site	Number of Reviews (Care.com)
HighYa ³	104
SiteJabber	898
Pissed Consumer	81
Reviewopedia	173
Better Business Bureau	222
TrustPilot	732
Total	2,216

Care.com's Public Discourse: Affective Ties and Invisible Costs

Care.com dominates the public discourse about itself through advertising and by maintaining narrative control on its social media channels. The company constructs an image as a safe marketplace to find trustworthy domestic workers while making the costs of their services invisible to prospective users. Through many different media, it publicizes the often-private challenges of finding care and situates Care.com as a benevolent actor. However, its own branded media and news coverage of its platform marginalize workers' voices, excluding them from the public discourse about care platforms.

Like other companies, Care.com cultivates a positive public discourse about itself as part of marketing and branding. However, the pressure to present a caring image may be particularly important for domestic platforms, as the intimacy of care work puts pressure on these platforms to maintain user trust (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). Care.com acknowledges this imperative in SEC filings, linking its "investments in national brand advertising" to its status as a "leading and trusted brand for finding care." (Care.com Inc., 2018, p. 6). This benevolent reputation is conditional as the company acknowledges to investors that any negative press increases the "perception of risk" surrounding the platform (Care.com Inc., 2018, p. 16).

Unlike many other online platforms, Care.com invests in advertising in both legacy (television, magazines, direct mail) and new (online and social) media (Care.com Inc., 2018). Care.com's YouTube channel and website host positive testimonials from satisfied users. Each features Care.com playing an essential role in connecting clients and workers. The worker-centered videos focus on the workers attaining self-fulfillment through work, while the client-centered videos focus on the client, often the mother of a young child, "getting the help they need" with the help of a trusted care worker. While some of these videos center on workers' experiences, they are presented within company-established narratives and are predictably positive. Many videos mention that workers and clients can sign up and browse or post a job listing for free, but none clearly state the different levels of paid premium memberships required to apply for jobs or communicate. Instead, they focus on either the affective benefits of domestic work for workers or the necessity of in-home services for prospective clients.

³ At the time of writing, Care.com's reviews were removed from HighYa's website. Quotes from these reviews are cited here as "personal communications."

There are a few notable exceptions to the company's control over public discourse. First, in 2019, a *Wall Street Journal* investigation revealed hundreds of daycare centers with revoked or lapsed licenses listed as licensed on the platform (Grind, Zuckerman, & Shifflett, 2019). This scandal led to the resignation of Care.com's founder and chief executive officer (CEO). This lengthy investigative piece, which contained quotes from a college student who authored a personal blog post about the platform, noticeably contained no quotes from current care workers. For most of 2019, this article appeared on the first page of Google search results for "Care.com," presenting a significant challenge to the company's image as a trustworthy marketplace.

Second, workers' experiences were visible on YouTube, with several videos having substantially more views than most videos on Care.com's official channel. Despite their higher viewership, these videos appeared below the content from the company's official account. The worker video that has been viewed the most presents tips for job seeking. Though the vlogger describes families punishing workers with bad reviews, she remains very positive about Care.com. In contrast, a search for Uber reveals mainly videos from workers about their experiences, many of them critical of the company and with several hundred thousand views each. Many videos are produced by ride-hailing "influencers," each with several hundred videos. While Uber and Care.com are different in many ways, comparing the content produced by workers on YouTube shows the relative exclusion of Care.com's workers' voices from public discourse and the dominance of the company's narratives.

The exclusion results not only from a lack of content produced by workers but also from a more active process through which the platform maintains control. On the company's official Facebook and Twitter accounts, paid staff frequently responded to criticism by encouraging workers to use private messaging to correspond with them. While keeping personal information private may be appropriate for individual issues, staff also use it when responding to posts calling for accountability on issues that transcend the personal, such as asking for background checks on clients to protect workers against abuse. These calls, broadly articulated as warnings or calls to action, were met with responses that attempted to privatize these critiques.

As the quintessential form of "invisible labor," discussions of domestic work are often marginalized within the wider public discourse. The pandemic has altered some of these dynamics, bringing more attention to the unequal burdens of domestic work. Care.com's branding highlights unequal care burdens and positions its services as a solution to these problems of modern family life. However, issues of branding are never only economic; they are also struggles over cultural meaning (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In this case, the politics of public discourse are also a struggle over "who ha[s] the power to successfully and authoritatively define where the line between the public and private [is] drawn" (Fraser, 1992, p. 596). The company's branding and press coverage highlight the seemingly private but actually shared dilemmas of families navigating demands for care. However, the voices and concerns of workers providing this care are marginalized in the public discourse.

Circulating Networked Gossip: Constructing a Platform Counterpublic

Despite these exclusions, workers and clients share information about Care.com online, most extensively on consumer review sites. While counterpublics are often formed around the circulation of

expressly political texts, such as newspapers, consumer review sites are also the site of political discourse. Consumer review sites are used in constructing counterpublic discourse about Care.com, which is then circulated elsewhere across the Web. This circulation illustrates that counterpublics are not necessarily contained within a single online space but constructed between and across them.

In our initial search of social media platforms, we found several comments and responses that urged readers to “check the reviews,” referencing “thousands of negative reviews” about the company. Across the consumer review sites, reviewers of Care.com revealed that information-seeking across the Internet led them to these sites: “I applied for several jobs . . . Nothing. I googled why no one was responding . . . I ran across other people who were having the same problem”(Shirley, 2019). Another reviewer, after being surprised by credit card charges for monthly auto-renewals of her membership, noted that “when I researched online, I found many similar stories since 2014! They keep stealing from people” (personal communication, 2018). Users constructed this counterpublic discourse about the platform by searching for information across the Web and, in doing so, found consumer review sites that brought disparate user experiences into the same online space. This reviewer also illuminates an important aspect of all platform counterpublics: That gossip and other discounted knowledge always exist “in close vicinity” to mainstream discourses (Rogoff, 1995, p. 8). While excluded from the dominant sphere, counterpublic discourse is just “off stage” from the platforms it critiques. The “searchability” of consumer review sites and their higher rank in search engine returns is what allows relationships to develop among strangers around these texts about platforms (boyd, 2010).

Once these “strangers” are brought into a relationship through consumer review sites, the counter-discourse about the platform circulates across and among review sites and comment threads. This circulation is evidenced by the repetition of reviews among sites and the data aggregation among posters. First, several reviews are reposted verbatim across multiple sites, creating an observable circulation of counter-discourse. Second, some users aggregate the breadth of the counter-discourse: One reviewer noted that Care.com has “over 100,000 negative reviews [on] over 200 boards in 16 countries [sic] in at least 20 language[s]” (debcan70, 2016). There are many broad references to “thousands of negative reviews” across review sites as well as in comment threads in company-controlled social media channels as users indicated the broad scope of shared issues.

Using the platform’s name in search engines, users located information outside Care.com’s branding and media coverage. In this way, “strangers” coalesced into a counterpublic using the phrase “Care.com” in search engines as an anchoring text. Unlike “networked counterpublics” that make use of platform affordances such as hashtags to hail counterpublics together, Care.com users could not rely on any particular platform affordance, so a counterpublic was created across the Web indexed by search engines.

Beyond Opposition: Subversive Convergence and Shared Complaints

The counter-discourse about Care.com addressed topics related to different users’ experiences. The convergence of workers and clients in the same discursive space contravenes the platform’s architecture and subverts its intended separation. We found that workers and clients shared many critiques of the platform, referenced one another’s reviews, and discussed similar features of Care.com’s business model.

Care.com provides separate interfaces for each set of users. If a user wants to use the service as both an employer and as a worker, they must register with different e-mail addresses and access different apps. Workers do not see the profiles of other workers and see only job listings, while prospective clients cannot see other job listings but can see the profiles of workers. The platform privileges clients over workers by allowing only clients to review workers, but not vice versa, and making those reviews consequential for the algorithmic ranking of the workers (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). In a 2020 Town Hall for Workers, Care.com's CEO promised to implement a client reviewing system in the future. In contrast, on review sites, workers and clients can read about each other's experiences, providing an alternative space where both are given equal standing.

From complaints about the website's usability and unexplained deactivations to issues with auto-renewals of membership, reviewers note the gaps between advertising and reality. One worker summarized this dissonance: "They just pay the most for advertisement[,] but they should have put that money in customer service" (Egypt, 2019). Two other reviews offer similar commentary on Care's advertising: "They are very deceiving with their advertising," (Val, 2017) "this company is NOT providing what it advertises" (Pamela, 2017). Many of the reviewers note the bait and switch of signing up and browsing listings for free but having to pay for their profile to appear at the top of searches or to apply for jobs.

While criticism of Care.com's advertising is an aspect of the counter-discourse, it is part of a larger dialogue about the practices and perceived inadequacies of the platform. The platform, and its business practices, became an anchor for the counterpublic. Some pointed to the reviews as changing their decision to sign up: "I started the signup process before getting scared off by their bad reviews" (Cooper, 2018). However, even these nonusers found and contributed to the counter-discourse about the platform.

In the reviews that discussed Care.com's business model, workers and clients discussed similar issues. The requirement to pay for background checks came up in 18% of worker reviews and 12% of client reviews. The requirement to pay to communicate with clients and/or workers was mentioned by 61% of the workers and 17% of the clients. The most commonly shared issue was the auto-renew feature on memberships that allowed Care.com to charge clients and workers who had signed up for paid monthly memberships without any notification (mentioned in 14% of worker reviews and 55% of client reviews). Reviews from both clients and workers reference one another: "From all the reviews here it doesn't look like they require background checks of families? But nannies are out here paying \$59?!" (personal communication, 2017); "Families & Sitters avoid this site! Read the reviews!" (personal communication, 2018).

Online forums for labor platform workers are often examined for their potential to foster labor activism. In contrast, examining these review sites within a framework of counterpublic discourse highlights the shifting frame of all platform users as consumers rather than as caregivers or clients. Reviewers leveled critiques of Care.com's advertising and noted the role of the counterpublic in their refusals to use Care.com. These aims lie outside the focus of existing scholarship on online forums' role in coordinating collective resistance, as these refusals are articulated as individual consumer decisions. However, in viewing critical discourse about platforms across the Web, rather than focusing only on worker-centric forums, these data suggest a much wider understanding of political action in the age of platforms as users claim their rights as consumers. By constructing a shared counter-discourse in contravention of the platform's intended

separation of clients and workers, this discourse is subversive even if it does not conform to more traditional forms of resistance, such as strikes, as it brings all kinds of users together to contest platform practices.

"Let's Shut Them Down!": Constituting Community and Redressing Harm

Far from aggregating complaints about Care.com, reviewers often wrote as if they were speaking to an audience. This audience took two distinct forms: A rhetorically defined public of users and a more concrete group of injured parties who could use the legal system to redress harms.

Reviewers referenced fellow reviewers as a community and expressed solidarity with strangers around their negative experiences with Care.com: "Keep safe internet buddies!" (LaBrittany, 2016); "I am not the only one this has happened to" (Cindi, 2018); "Like most of the complaints being mentioned here" (Bastola, 2018). Care.com's platform counterpublic has created a limited community of reviewers who find others whose experiences mirror their own.

The second understanding of the audience was more immediate and material. Multiple users posted about the efficacy of the warnings offered by the counterpublic: "I was about to sign up for this. Arrived here to read the reviews. Thanks for all the warnings" (S k., 2017). Sometimes, reviewers aimed to organize reviewers to pursue legal action. The phrase "class action" appears in 33 reviews (1.5% of the sample): "anybody know if a class action lawsuit has been raised against them?" (Penny, 2017). Several reviews directed others to reach out through e-mail and social media: "Please come to Facebook at <Facebook Page link> . . . let's ban together to get this company accountable for its actions." (Shannon, 2018). In this instance, what began on consumer review sites extended to the mobilization of multiple kinds of media.

Gossip is not merely talking; in this case, networked gossip created a counterpublic and, perhaps, even a legally effective collective. In counter-discourses about Care.com, workers and clients constituted an alternative public through which they could take action. Reflecting on their work building Turkopticon, a platform that allows Amazon Mechanical Turk workers to review requesters, Irani and Silberman (2013) advocate for Haraway's (1990) idea of "partial alliances," or those "built on common cause rather than common experience or identity—as a way to sustain political and ethical action across people with irreducible differences" (p. 6). While domestic workers and clients have irreducible differences, this counterpublic illuminates many common causes in their experiences. While the connection to this community is unclear, in July 2020, Care.com settled a consumer protection lawsuit brought by two California attorney generals surrounding many of the concerns raised by reviewers.

Conclusions

From the #DeleteUber campaign to Instacart clients rallying behind workers to demand transparent tipping practices, digital labor has created surprising allies of different platform users. However, scholarship on platform labor often uses theories that occlude these shifting relationships among clients, workers, and platforms. In this article, we use feminist approaches to online public discourse to examine the circulation of counter-discourse about Care.com. Understanding this as collaboratively constructed discourse, instead of labor organizing done in private back channels or worker-facing online groups, brought to light the ways

platform stakeholders use spaces across the Internet to critique platforms. These findings hold several implications—both theoretical and practical—for studies on digital work and online resistance to platforms.

Understanding the role of workers and clients in constructing *platform counterpublics* is an invitation to a more relational model of resistance that is attuned to the ways power is shaped through relationships that escape the shop floor and bend traditional managerial relationships (Baym, 2018; Irani, 2015; Zelizer, 2013). In the case of Care.com, this approach illuminated the importance of the consumer's role in constructing critiques of platform power.

Consumption occupies a central place in American political culture and has long been a realm in which Americans have articulated their rights as citizens (Cohen, 2003). Today, online consumer review sites are a part of this tradition (Kuehn, 2013; Minocher, 2018). After World War II, purchasing consumer goods was linked to democratic participation and citizenship ideals. Through the expansion of the market for consumer goods and political support for White middle-class consumption, many Americans became aware of the alignment between their interests as consumers and as citizens (Cohen, 2003). In their role as consumers, Americans demanded institutional protections, sparking several waves of consumer rights movements that brought legislation creating the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. This project set out to find online discourse from care workers about Care.com to understand the use of online discourse for platform resistance. However, we ended up finding a critical discourse about platform power originating from an unlikely place: Consumer reviews sites. While scholarship often assumes that labor activism is scarce, requiring specialized skills and knowledge, these findings suggest that labor activism is abundant but may be undertaken within different frameworks than current theories suggest. In her study of informal female workers in India, Agarwala (2013) found that they articulated their claims for workplace protection under the framework of citizenship, rather than work, to skirt the invisibility and irregularity of informal work arrangements in the eyes of the state. This analysis suggests that similar trends are evident among platform workers, who are finding purchase for their claims as consumers that they are denied in their role as workers. However, as Banet-Weiser (2012) reminds us, the politics of consumption are ambivalent. In critiquing platforms through consumption, these alliances articulate a politics that operates within the boundaries of platform capitalism rather than in opposition to it. Many platform labor companies define workers as consumers of their apps rather than as workers, drawing global criticism. As this study shows, leaning into consumer activism may bring new alliances among users or new tactics of resistance. It may also reinforce the *precaritization* of platform workers and deepen the cultural authority of labor platforms to (re)define workers' roles.

The concept of platform counterpublics shows the utility of feminist literature for studies of resistance in platform labor and also that studies of labor platforms may yield analytical insights that bridge scholarly silos between different types of platforms, which have largely considered labor and social media platforms separately. Workers and clients of labor platforms are far from the only ones leveling critiques of platform companies and business models. When Google, Twitter, and Facebook took more aggressive steps to moderate hate speech and misinformation from far-right groups, many of those users moved to other platforms to discuss what they felt was censorship (Donovan, Lewis, & Friedberg, 2019). When Facebook's "real name" policy deactivated profiles that drag performers used to promote their shows, they shared workarounds and protested against this policy across their online and offline networks (Lingel, 2017).

Through company actions surrounding the governance of their online spaces, social media platforms create limited alliances among strange bedfellows. This analysis offers the concept of “platform counterpublics,” which may allow platform scholars to examine how counterpublics are constructed by many different types of users to critique platforms far beyond domestic work.

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