

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 12:

Speakers: Professor Mark Stuart and Denis Neumann

Mark: Welcome to this Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Podcast, and I'm Mark Stuart, Professor of Human Resource Management and Employment Relations.

Denis: I'm Denis Neumann and I'm a researcher at CERIC.

Mark: And today we're going to talk about the Leeds Platform Worker Protest Index, a research project that Denis and I have been involved with for the past 12 months, working with other colleagues at Leeds. And the Index aims to map recent protests in the platform economy. This is a particularly live and interesting issue. We've seen a lot of news articles over the last couple of years of workers in companies such as Deliveroo protesting around their term and conditions of employment. We've also seen ongoing disputes in companies such as Uber around the employment status of workers. And the Protest Index is really set in that context. But Denis, I wonder if you could maybe talk us through a little bit more around the methodology of the index and what you think is actually novel about this index that we're looking to develop.

Denis: I think the novel thing about it is that there are only single case studies in the gig economy and there are just estimations on what the protest is looking like regarding the amount of protests globally, and I think this is the starting point for our research because we try to somehow make a global claim, and we try to develop a methodology that tries to grasp what is going on in the world, in the gig economy.

And this is something that gets really interesting when you try to think about how this could be done, and the first thing we started with was to try to find out what companies are there, in the first place, in those sectors or in the gig economy in general, and so the first task was to find out what companies are there, in which regions of the world, which companies are operating globally, which companies are just relevant in a regional context and then search news articles on these companies and try to find out about as many protest events as we could. And I think what is interesting about that is that those companies are covered really

well in the media in general, because there is a big interest in tech companies as well, because in the public there is a debate on robots taking away workplaces from real workers, human workers.

And, yes, every time you hear the name Uber, for example, or Deliveroo, something is popping up in the imagination of the people. So, the press has a lot of interest in covering everything regarding those companies, and I guess this is one of the reasons we have that we cannot cover all protests that are going on, but we have a good database based on these articles, I guess, because... yes, there is a lot of coverage.

Mark:

And I think it's a really exciting project, and I think you're right to note that there has been quite a lot of interest recently in terms of worker protests or resistance within particular companies. Often, sort of case studies of Deliveroo or riders in particular locations, and looking at how riders are mobilising or going on strike or campaigning about working conditions. But the index represents an attempt to quantify some of this on a truly global scale, to look at what have been the trends in recent years, how many protests have actually been taking place? How has this been changing year on year, and month on month? Are there any particular locations where this is happening in comparison to other places? You mentioned that we've been extracting the data from newspaper articles, could you talk a little bit more around the precise methodology of this? What sort of tools have been used to get this data? Because it's... if we talk about developing a global index, it's not an easy job to do.

Denis:

Yes, it isn't. The precondition for that is that we have an instant that has a global claim as well, and we are using the GDELT project, and the GDELT project is a project developed by Kalev Leetaru of Georgetown University, that tries to monitor all news media streams in the world and tried to code it automatically, but we didn't use the coding system from the GDELT project, we just used the monitoring of the articles. So, we have a search engine, a database that provides news media data that has a global claim, and, yes, there we entered all the company names, and it is translating in real-time in 96 languages. So, it was kind of easy to do that because every time we typed in an English keyword it translated it automatically into 96 languages and... yes.

Mark: Yes. That's a true sense of the scale of this exercise, it's been quite a monumental endeavour collating newspaper articles from around the world, translating them and then reading each of the articles and extrapolating codes against key variables. Can you give us a sense of the scale of the database so far? So, just how large is the database currently? And what types of sectors and companies are covered?

Denis: Yes. Right now... so, the unit of observation in our database is a protest event, and right now we have run about 1300 events taking place in over 50 countries, and protests addressed at least 70 companies right now, and we have different kinds of sectors. We have dominating sectors, so the food delivery sector, clearly, and the ride hailing sector is dominating. But we have also some protests happening the care sector or just tradesperson services like TaskRabbit, and even in cleaning we have some, we have a few events but there is some evidence that something is happening there. And parcel services, courier services, so the gig work principle is making a diffusion in all kinds of sectors right now. So, we have to be aware, yes, of new gig companies coming up, because we tried to somehow cover all sectors that have this kind of mediation of demand and supply of workers on a platform.

Mark: Yes, I think there are some really key sectors that you described there, and it's no surprise that you mentioned the dominant nature of the food delivery sector, and obviously the delivery sector more generally. I think, we've seen that just over the last few months, during the COVID crisis, how significant this has become, and how it's likely to develop in the future. So, it has been great to be able to capture some of this. Could you talk us through a little bit more about when we talk about protests, what we actually mean by protests and what sort of forms of protest we're looking at?

Denis: Yes. I mean the methodology itself is called "protest event analysis", but we have a, kind of, broader definition that developed regarding labour protests. So, we try to cover strikes and especially in the gig economy they are called "logouts", because workers are logging off from their apps, and don't work and try to disrupt the companies' profit streams so to say.

Mark: I think one interesting angle to this is who are the actors, who initiates these protests?

Denis: Yes. Yes. In general, those protests are initiated by, in the first place... are initiated by the workers, because they are carrying out their protests in surroundings where no collective rights... where they don't have access to collective rights many times because they are independent contractors, or self-employed or bogus self-employed, as you can say. And they are kind of creative in developing strategies towards achieving something or to alleviate the power imbalance in their sector or with the company. This is the first, from my perspective, the initiative of workers is very important in this. And second, I would say, you have new actors emerging such as collectives, workers collectives or independent trade unions just recently established and calling themselves a union, maybe not recognised by the state, or something. But, in general, you have a lot of creativity in there with new kinds of actors, and foremost in the global north, you have established trade unions trying to get a grip in the gig economy and providing their resources to help the workers.

Mark: Interesting. I think, at this stage, we're quite early in the analysis stage of the research. We've managed to build up quite a large dataset, which we're currently mining. Do you think that we have been able to pick up any distinctive comparator of trends? So, are some types of disputes more, I guess more visible in certain parts of the world than others? Or more frequent in certain parts of the world than others?

Denis: Yes. Clearly, yes, our results suggest that regional context plays a large role in explaining differences regarding actors and regarding the means of protest in general. So, you see where the legal system for workers' rights is more developed in the global north, there is more legal action going on, and especially in Asia, in China, in Southeast Asia you have more demonstrations and especially strikes, and in South America, as well. So, I would say the hotspot of legal action is the US, especially with California trying to regulate Uber, and recently they introduced, implemented a law that forbids a user to hire independent contractors and wants to force Uber to employ their drivers. So, I would say this is much further developed compared with other regions in the world.

Mark: All really interesting. And there has been a lot of external interest in this research, so there has been one report published so far, policy brief published so far for the European Trade Union Institute. We've just submitted a report to the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Germany, and we're currently working on the

dataset for a report for the International Labour Organisation, the ILO. What are the next steps, Denis, do you think?

Denis: I think the next steps, or I think the most important next step would be to cover one sector globally to see how well our tool works in general, and maybe to compare our results with experts all over the world and ask them: are we close to what is happening in those kind of regions? So, I think we are aiming at completing food delivery, the food delivery sector, globally and it will be very exciting to see what we get there after we coded one sector, yes, fully coded one sector.

Mark: Okay, great. Well, thanks Denis for this discussion around the Leeds Platform Worker Protest Index. This is something that we're actively working on at the moment, and I guess watch this space. If people are interested in hearing more about it, then please get in touch with us at Leeds University Business School. Thank you.

Denis: Thank you.