

## Book Review

**Mohammad Amir Anwar and Mark Graham (2022) *The Digital Continent: Placing Africa in Networks of Work*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 260 pp. ISBN 9780198840800. Hardcover £75. Open Access ebook.**

*Reviewed by*  
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*The Digital Continent* is an extremely interesting and important book. In the 1990s Manuel Castells famously wrote about Africa as the “black hole of informational capitalism”, replicating previous problematic tropes about the continent. This book dispels such a reading of the continent’s economic geography by showing the ways in which Africa is now integrated into digital worlds of work.

The book is based on a multi-year project funded by the European Research Council, and some of the chapters have been previously published as journal articles; fieldwork took place in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda. The aim of the book is to assess the impacts of the digital economy on livelihoods and working conditions for African workers who engage in it. It is very well written and accessible to academic audiences from undergraduate level on. The fact that it is open access may make it popular, and it may be a suitable text for some classes. The authors have a comprehensive understanding and knowledge of the subject area, but this is a highly original contribution given its focus and empirical depth.

It starts cleverly by describing a machine-learning training centre housed in shipping containers in a rural African town. This is disarming because the ramshackle nature of the structure belies its insertion into the global informational economy. In a sense, this serves as a metaphor for Africa’s “hidden” engagement in this sphere, as call centre workers are sometimes trained to have “neutral” accents for European markets, for example.

The main finding of the book is that workers are not powerless in their relations with platform capitalist companies, even though the ways in which these companies deploy the “algorithmic governance” of “digital Taylorism” is authoritarian. Often workers are not told, for example, how their “microwork”, such as image tagging to train autonomous vehicles, will be used. They use a variety of strategies and forms of association to resist the “race to the bottom” that the “planetary labour market” might otherwise impose on them.

Organising is easier in the physical gig economy, where Uber drivers can meet and organise protests or strikes for example, but there are many other forms of resistance, including in the remote gig economy. For example, sometimes platforms monitor what “contractors” are doing on their computers and dock their income if they are found to be looking at other websites. One of the ways in which workers resist this is through “dual screening”, where one computer may be logged into the platform portal, while another may be used for social purposes. However, the negative impacts of digital Taylorism are increased due to workers’ often poor socioeconomic backgrounds.

A variety of surprising facts are presented in the book, such as that there are an estimated 618 digital technology hubs on the continent or that Kenya and Ghana are higher ranked than Ireland by Kearney as locations for offshore services work. The authors' focus is on digital labour, by which they mean "types of work activities involving the paid manipulation of digital data by humans through ICTs such as mobile phones, computers, laptops, etc." (p. 5). Whereas the CEOs of digital platform companies present their businesses as empowering workers to manage their lives flexibly, Anwar and Graham find that working for these companies is dialectical. It contains elements of empowerment and disempowerment, and race, class, gender and geography still strongly influence labour outcomes despite the seeming erasure of space facilitated by planetary labour markets. For example, some freelancers with higher education (often correlated with social status) may earn relatively good incomes from working on platforms. However, more than 90 per cent of South African workers who earned more than US\$10 000 on the Upwork platform were "white". Other workers with lower ratings or experience may earn nothing at all, like the majority of workers registered on the platform.

Sometimes clients engage in "accumulation by dispossession" of labour by not paying workers for outputs, using spurious reasons or demanding they work for free to get good ratings in order to open up possibilities of other work. Again, however, examples of how this is contested are given, and bargaining by workers who have demonstrated good output enables them to achieve higher pay rates. Unsurprisingly, the main picture that emerges is one of labour exploitation, with the bulk of the value that is created going to a narrow digital-financial elite globally.

The book studies different areas of work in the African digital economy, such as business process outsourcing. It examines government policy toward this sector in the ways in which these have incentivised growth through time, although competitive advantage may be fleeting, based on currency movements, for example. Adverse movements may result in "decoupling" from global digital work networks.

One of the attractions of the book is that it is extensively illustrated with maps, graphs, photos and tables. If there is one quibble with the book, it might be that the title is somewhat misleading. The authors note that Africa has relatively little digital economy activity compared to other continents. For example, the continent only has 5.2 per cent of registered workers globally on Upwork, which is less than the Philippines, so the moniker "digital continent" may be misplaced. This is partly a result of the relatively low penetration rate of "ICT tools" and costly broadband services, which in some countries may cost more than a third of the average annual income. There may also be racial bias at play by clients sourcing work from North America and Europe.

Given its scope for growth, the digital economy will be a key sector in Africa's development in future decades. It has the potential to include women and migrants, who may experience exclusion from other formal and informal labour markets. Currently, the digital economy enables or encourages geographically and socially differentiated freedoms, precarities, flexibilities and vulnerabilities. However, given the intense concentration of power in digital networks and the offshoring of many of its benefits, stronger regulation will be key to achieving a digital development dividend. This is challenging, however, given the ways in which platform companies' online operations often allow them to evade, sidestep or arbitrage regulation. Nonetheless, some interesting policy alternatives are presented. Generating political will and momentum behind them will be more difficult. This important book is required reading for all those interested in the subject matter.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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