RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tension between autonomy and dependency: insights into platform work of professional (video)bloggers

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The purpose of this article is to extend knowledge and understanding of work in the platform economy by focusing on the phenomenon of (video)blogging on and around social media platforms. The growth of the platform economy has attracted considerable attention in recent years. As yet, however, research has focused almost exclusively on labour platforms that operate to match the supply of and demand for paid work in fields such as food delivery, ride hailing, cleaning or data entry activities. Surprisingly little is known about work and its manifestations on other platforms, despite the fact that the platform economy embraces a huge variety of arrangements for income generation. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 18 German (video)bloggers we show that (video)blogging constitutes a specific form of ‘digital self-employment’ that combines features of traditional self-employment with digitally mediated dependencies. While (video)bloggers enjoy both a great deal of independence from managerial control and a high degree of autonomy, they are also subject to the rules and algorithms set by large tech companies. The example of (video)blogging, together with the experiences of (video)bloggers, highlights the extent to which the platform economy has created new types of work that need to be taken into consideration to enable a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics of the platform economy and how these are transforming the nature of work.

Key words platform economy • content creation • algorithmic control • social-media platforms • self-employment

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Introduction

The platform economy and platform work has attracted enormous attention from both the research and policy communities, with the emergence of online platforms now seen as one of the most significant social and economic developments of
recent years (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Rahman and Thelen, 2019). Numerous qualitative and quantitative studies have provided valuable insights into the diverse forms and features of platform-mediated work (see for example Drahokoupil and Vandaele, 2021; Krzywdzinski and Gerber, 2021). Nonetheless, this research has focused almost exclusively on platforms that match the supply of and demand for paid work, such as food delivery, ride hailing, cleaning and data entry activities. The platform economy constitutes a much broader phenomenon, however, encompassing an enormous variety of digital online platforms (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Dolata, 2019). These not only include labour platforms for, local or remote, gig work (for example, Uber, Deliveroo), but also marketplace platforms (for example, Amazon, eBay, Etsy), crowdfunding platforms (for example, Kickstarter, Patreon), and platforms for search, entertainment and social media (for example, Google, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram). As yet, surprisingly little is known about work and its manifestations on digital platforms other than labour platforms, despite the proliferation of opportunities for income generation within the platform economy. In this sense, an exclusive focus on labour platforms will fail to capture the entirety of the phenomenon of work in the platform economy and what this implies for the transformation of work (see also Kenney and Zysman, 2019).

The purpose of this article is therefore to offer a broader perspective on, and extend our understanding of, work in the platform economy by focusing on (video) blogging on and around social media platforms. We use the term (video)blogging to refer to the creation and circulation of diverse online content, such as texts, videos and photos. Social media platforms not only offer information, communication and entertainment in private contexts but also open up new opportunities for income generation through the production and monetisation of so-called user-generated content. Although platform work has become a steadily growing and increasingly important field of social science research in recent years (see for example Neufeind et al, 2018; Crouch, 2019; Dolber et al, 2021; Meijerink et al, 2021), content creation on social media platforms has, as yet, hardly been researched from this perspective, although it has featured in some recent taxonomies (Vallas and Schor, 2020; Bearson et al, 2021). Existing studies, mostly from communication and cultural studies, often focus on practices of self-representation, visibility or consider aesthetic aspects (Maares and Hanusch, 2020; van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021). Other studies have highlighted how blogging is becoming an increasingly important form of labour and identified several different forms of work-related blogging (Parry and Hracs, 2020). And while some have also offered insights into work practices in the digital culture industries and the algorithmic control of cultural work (O’Meara, 2019; Duffy et al, 2021), this has not generally fed into the broader discussion of the status and characteristics of platform work. Thus, there is still a gap in our understanding of the extent to which content creation on social media platforms is similar to or differs from other forms of platform-mediated work.

An exploration of (video)blogging is warranted by the growing popularity of social media platforms and the extent to which they are becoming an established element in everyday media usage (Eurostat, 2018; see, for example, for Germany, Beisch and Schäfer, 2020). For teenagers and young adults, these platforms are increasingly the main channel for entertainment, communication and information. In addition, they also play a significant economic role as advertising platforms attracting revenues in the billions (Cornwell and Katz, 2021). Platforms operated by Google,
Meta Platforms (Facebook) and Amazon – including social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitch – now account for over 60 percent of the global online and around 25 per cent of the overall advertising market (WARC, 2019). Moreover, estimates exist that there are more than two million professional creators who earn their entire living from publishing content on those platforms. This is complemented by approximately more than 40 million creators on YouTube, Instagram, Twitch and other social media platforms monetising their content at least to some degree (Signalfire, 2020). In addition, YouTube itself reports that its creator ecosystem creates a total of 142,000 full-time equivalent jobs in the EU (YouTube, 2021). Content creation on social media platforms has thus turned into a field for income generation and constitutes new opportunities for digital self-employment.

Against this backdrop, we explore the characteristics of (video)blogging as platform work and analyse what it shares with and how it differs from the other types of platform-mediated work already familiar from previous research. This has two dimensions. First, we analyse the conditions for and main sources of income generation on the part of (video)bloggers and investigate how (video)bloggers use social media platforms to generate income. And second, we examine individuals’ reported motives for taking up professional (video)blogging and analyse how (video)bloggers deal with platform rules and algorithms. We argue that professional (video)blogging is characterised by a tension between autonomy and dependence that is specific to this form of work. While professional content creation on social media platforms offers a great deal of independence from managerial control and is associated with a high degree of autonomy, for instance on working time and the immediate conditions under which work is performed, working on social media platforms is subject to the rules and standards set by the leading tech corporations – including Google, Meta Platforms (Facebook), Amazon – that operate them (Dolata, 2019). Together with the demands posed by the online community, this gives rise to a range of novel digitally mediated dependencies.

The article is structured as follows. The following section outlines the basic characteristics of platform-mediated work and reviews the main findings of previous research. The third section sets out the methodological approach used to underpin our data collection. In the fourth section, we present our empirical findings by analysing the market and technical-organisational conditions under which (video)blogging is performed and investigating the preferences and strategies of (video)bloggers. The final section summarises our findings and concludes with some reflections on what issues might be addressed by future research.

Setting the scene: existing perspectives on platform work

Platform-mediated work has been a topic of growing interest within the social sciences in recent years. Most of this research has concentrated on labour platforms that serve as intermediaries linking clients and workers engaged in the performance of paid tasks. Current research has also pointed out the great heterogeneity of platform-mediated work (Koutsimpogiorgos et al, 2020): this ranges from the provision of design services, IT services and food delivery to simple micro-tasks, such as checking database entries. This heterogeneity is also reflected in the different terms and typologies adopted (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kärebom, 2019; Vallas and Schor, 2020). Quite often a distinction is made between services that are mediated via online platforms...
but performed offline (also referred to as ‘gig work’) and those tasks that are carried out entirely online (also referred to as ‘crowdwork’) (Schmidt, 2017).

Platform-mediated work is often discussed in relation to how it diverges from the standard employment model (see, for example, Huws et al, 2018), with an emphasis on the extent to which platform work erodes contractually-regulated, dependent employment by transforming it into the far less regulated area of self-employment. Much of this debate turns on whether platform-mediated work promotes the further spread of atypical and precarious employment. In this regard, platform-mediated work is seen as a critical factor in promoting work flexibility and creating forms of employment that offer reduced social protection and income security (Crouch, 2019; Schüßler et al, 2021). This is linked to the much-discussed issue of the employment status of platform workers and, specifically, whether platform workers can be categorised as independent contractors or whether platform-mediated work constitutes a form of bogus self-employment (Thelen, 2018). One further issue raised in the literature is whether these negative developments might be offset by the greater autonomy and control over conditions of work available to platform workers. The findings are, however, contradictory. While some studies have concluded that platform workers benefit from flexible scheduling and that this is one of the main reasons for the adoption of platform-mediated work (Berg, 2016; Pesole et al, 2018), others have highlighted the limited control over working conditions and scheduling exercised in practice (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Shapiro, 2018).

From a sociological perspective, platforms are indisputably much more than mere intermediaries. Rather, with their digital infrastructures and automated decision-making processes via algorithms, they significantly structure work processes by allocating tasks to workers and controlling their completion via digital monitoring and control (for example, evaluation and ranking systems or even screen recordings). The fact that such control is partly automated has led to it being dubbed as ‘algorithmic management’ (Rosenblat and Stark 2016; Rani and Furrer, 2020; Krzywdzinski and Gerber, 2021). Research has devoted considerable attention to how platform algorithms structure work (Krzywdzinski and Gerber, 2021). As yet, research has mainly focused on microtask crowdwork and some forms of gig work, especially food delivery and ride-hailing services and their task allocation algorithms (see Gerber and Krzywdzinski, 2019 for an additional analysis of macrotasks). For microtasks and many gig work jobs, comparatively ‘simple’ algorithms are assumed. What has remained largely unexplored, however, is how this is accomplished in the case of more complex tasks and algorithms that go beyond simple task allocation.

This is briefly outlined by referring to the example of the video platform YouTube, whose business model relies mainly on generating advertising revenues. In order to be attractive to advertisers and benefit from network effects, the platform tries to reach as many viewers as possible. Attracting viewers requires a constant supply of fresh videos, and hence constant pressure on those who produce videos to add new content to the platform (Covington et al, 2016). Video contributions are then suggested to potential consumers in a personalised way: not only the popularity (how often a video has already been viewed), but also channel subscriptions or interaction frequencies (for example, how often viewers have commented) are taken into account (Rieder et al, 2018). In addition, the platform deploys self-learning algorithms or neural networks: these are subject to constant change, leading to a high degree of opacity. This raises the question as to how content creators deal with this volatility and
how algorithms and assumptions about their functionalities structure the conditions under which they work.

Overall, previous research has generated a wide range of valuable insights into the forms and functions of platform-mediated work. At the same time, however, a number of important questions and developments have remained unexplored. Two basic business models in the platform economy exist (see also Drahokoupil, 2021): (1) platforms that generate revenue from targeted advertisements and (2) platforms that generate revenues from fees for offering intermediation services. While much attention has been devoted to the latter, including labour platforms, much less attention has been paid to the question of work arrangements in the first type. Against this backdrop, Bearson et al (2021) have developed a taxonomy intended to account for the different categories of worker in the platform economy, ranging from direct and temporary employees of platform firms to platform-dependent vendors, platform-dependent in-person/remote service providers, as well as platform-dependent content creators (see also Kenney and Zysman, 2019). While Bearson et al (2021) have provided some helpful initial insights into the general functionalities of different platform-dependent businesses and Cutolo and Kenney (2021) have investigated power imbalances, more empirical studies, addressing the attitudes and experiences of such workers, are needed to better understand their characteristics as well as what they share with and how they differ from other types of platform-mediated work.

Our aim in this article is to contribute to this discussion by exploring the characteristics of (video)blogging on and around social media platforms. One additional benefit of such a broadening of the research perspective might be a better understanding of the structuring effects of algorithms. In the case of labour platforms, research has highlighted how algorithmic management is used by platforms to control the labour process (see for example Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Rani and Furrer, 2020). While some authors have pointed to different types of labour control in platform work (Krzywdzinski and Gerber, 2021), the implications of this for more complex tasks and creative labour in the platform economy remain unclear, however.

**Methods**

This article is based on a qualitative and exploratory methodology using 18 in-depth interviews with professional German (video)bloggers. We refer to professional (video)bloggers as the creators of various forms of online content and who derive an income from it. Content can include, for example, texts, videos, photos or podcasts and is made available to the public either via blogs or social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram or Facebook.

In order to narrow down potential interviewees, we used a systematic review of more than 200 (video)blog posts in which (video)blogging as professional work had been addressed. This included posts in which individuals described how and for what reasons they had become professional (video)bloggers, outlined their task and responsibilities as content creators, and elaborated on their working experiences and conditions. A text corpus was then created – video posts were converted into text form using automatically generated subtitles – which was analysed using word frequencies and content analysis to gain initial insights into the research field. Based on this analysis, 18 interviewees using different social media platforms and from different thematic areas were selected in order to construct a diverse sample (see Table 1).
### Table 1: Overview study sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Mainly used platforms</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Extent</th>
<th>Prior status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M01</td>
<td>YouTube, Facebook, Instagram (+ own homepage/online shop)</td>
<td>DIY</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M02</td>
<td>YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Steady</td>
<td>Gaming</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>No university degree (not completed)</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Solo self-employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M03</td>
<td>YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Patreon, Pinterest (+ own homepage/online shop)</td>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>No vocational training/ no university degree</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Solo self-employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M04</td>
<td>YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Spotify (+ own homepage/online shop)</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Vocational training + university degree</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Solo self-employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W01</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube (+ own blog)</td>
<td>Fashion + Beauty + Lifestyle</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W02</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest (+ own blog)</td>
<td>Fashion + Beauty</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W03</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube (+ own blog)</td>
<td>Family + Lifestyle</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>Supplementary income (in combination with solo-self-employment)</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W04</td>
<td>YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest (+ own homepage/online shop)</td>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W05</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest (+ own blog)</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Self-employment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
The determining selection criterion was that individuals had to derive an income from (video)blogging, either entirely or partially. Our sample cannot be considered as statistically representative, however; rather, the aim is to gain exploratory insights into digital content creation on and around social media platforms and, based on our methodology, to compare insights gained from interviews with those resulting from the analysis of video and blog posts.

### Table 1: Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Mainly used platforms</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Extent</th>
<th>Prior status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W06</td>
<td>YouTube, Instagram, Patreon, Twitch (+ own blog)</td>
<td>Lifestyle + Gaming</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>No university degree (not completed)</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W07</td>
<td>Instagram (+ own blog)</td>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>(discontinued)</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W08</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest (+ own blog)</td>
<td>DIY</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W09</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest (+ own blog)</td>
<td>Lifestyle + Fashion</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>Supplementary income (in combination with solo-self-employment)</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W10</td>
<td>Instagram, Pinterest, Steady, YouTube (+ own blog)</td>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W11</td>
<td>YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest (+ own blog/ online shop)</td>
<td>DIY</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>Supplementary income (in combination with another employment)</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W12</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Steady (+ own blog/ online shop)</td>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W13</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Steady, YouTube (+ own blog/ online shop)</td>
<td>DIY + Family</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>Main income</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W14</td>
<td>Instagram (+ own blog)</td>
<td>Fashion + Beauty</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>University degree (ongoing)</td>
<td>Main income¹</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own compilation
¹ Only source of income besides ongoing university studies.
Interviews were conducted between November 2019 and May 2020 and took place either in locations of the participant’s choice (n=7) or – due to the COVID-19 pandemic – online (n=10) or by telephone (n=1). The interviews lasted an average of 75 minutes and revolved around motivations, entry paths and work experiences. Although interviews followed a semi-structured guideline, interviewees were encouraged to express themselves as freely as possible. Even where interviews were conducted online, the goal was to create as open an atmosphere as possible. One advantage was that all interviewees were familiar with digital means of communication. All interviews were audio recorded with participants’ permission, fully transcribed, and analysed using the method of thematic coding (Schmidt, 2013).

Our sample consisted of 14 women and four men aged between 24 and 43 years. All had had several years of experience in professional (video)blogging, in some cases for more than ten years. In this regard, our sample might be biased since it included only those (video)bloggers who had managed to be successful over a sustained period. Most of the respondents (n=14) obtained their entire income from their activities as professional (video)bloggers. In three cases, income generated from (video)blogging was a supplement to other sources, either in combination with another employment or self-employment. One person had made the decision to stop working as a professional (video)blogger shortly before the interview was conducted. This only became apparent during the interview, however. Before starting as a professional (video)blogger, ten individuals in the sample were in a standard employment relationship, four were self-employed and four others were studying. In terms of educational status, 14 sample members had either completed vocational training (n=7) or had a university degree (n=7). The remaining four were either still studying, had dropped out of university, or had started their own business directly after finishing school. All interviewees pursued their activity in the form of self-employment. The majority ran their business alone without employing other people, and hence were deemed to be solo self-employed. Three interviewees employed staff, however (M02, W05, W13); several interviewees mentioned regular collaboration with other freelancers (for example, for community management, photos, web design and so on).

(Video)bloggers can potentially reach millions of people with the content they create and circulate via social media platforms. For instance, the 10 most frequently subscribed YouTube channels in Germany have between 10 and 20 million subscribers (Socialblade, 2021). Compared to these figures, our interviewees had a much smaller number of subscribers or followers. Sample members with YouTube channels had between 32,000 and 157,000 subscribers, with the number of Instagram followers ranging from a few hundred to around 100,000 at the time of our study. Overall, our sample illustrates the viability of individuals generating their entire income through professional (video)blogging even where they might not number among the most subscribed channels.

Findings: (video-)blogging as platform work

Motives for becoming a professional (video)blogger

Our study underlines that (video)bloggers create content on very different topics. This ranges from diary-like reports about one’s own family life or fashion and beauty tips to cooking tutorials or reviewing sports content. This is mostly done by using
social media platforms, which offer a ready-to-use technical infrastructure and allow access to a wide audience (see Table 1).

By doing this, (video)bloggers perform a whole range of different tasks including the planning and production of content (taking and editing photos, recording and editing videos, writing posts), the planning and handling of sponsorships (payment and contractual terms, approval of content, tracking and reporting), and they also interact, for instance by answering questions and comments, with their audience. Overall, this variety of tasks was regarded as attractive, and the work content was seen as highly interesting. A common view among our interviewees was that a single posting of a video or photo usually requires a lot of effort. In this regard, concerns were expressed that the actual workload and effort is largely invisible to the audience.

Our empirical results strongly indicate that working as a (video)blogger is not only pursued because of the positively perceived work content but also because it offers a high degree of autonomy, extensive scope for creativity, and the opportunity to determine one’s own working conditions. Working time flexibility is one of the most frequently mentioned benefits of working as a (video)blogger, both in our interviews and in the analysed blog and video posts. Another central motive cited is the ability to be ‘one’s own boss’, demonstrating a keen entrepreneurial orientation. Overall, our interviews indicated a strong preference for the status of self-employment, with its concomitant benefits of independence from managerial control and a high degree of autonomy.

This is also apparent when considering the main drivers for becoming a self-employed (video)blogger. The key factors were not a general lack of employment opportunities, but rather dissatisfaction and negative experiences with previous working and employment conditions, such as long working hours.

Low earnings and a lack of career opportunities also played an important role, as illustrated in the following example of a fashion blogger who had previously worked as an editor for a fashion magazine:

‘As a young editor, I realized because of the situation in print journalism that there is no way forward here. There were no career opportunities, people were being laid off, there were no salary increases. […] And I mean this hierarchical structure, I felt very constricted and at some point, I thought: “No, that is not what I want.” It was never that I thought I have to become a blogger because I’m so important or have something very special to share with the world, but I actually wanted to do the same job I was doing and the new media enabled me to do that. So, that was suddenly an opportunity, I just took advantage of it and said: “Well, I’m doing this now.”’ (W02_191121)

For this sample member, as with others, becoming a self-employed (video)blogger was pursued as a strategy to overcome the career obstacles and limitations that were experienced in regular employment. In this respect, social media platforms have served as enablers for such entrepreneurial opportunities. For instance, for a fashion journalist reaching an audience traditionally required working for a fashion magazine: a digital platform enables an online community to be reached through digital self-publishing of the same content. Platforms thus provide an easy-to-use digital infrastructure for disseminating content and offer access to a wide audience and market.
There are a range of routes into professional (video)blogging. While some sample members started with (video)blogging as a leisure activity, which then developed through different stages from an unpaid activity into a professional one generating an income, others set out to become a self-employed professional (video)blogger from the outset. Since barriers to entry are low – requiring only a small capital outlay and limited formal requirements in terms of vocational or other qualifications – (video) blogging is perceived as an easy way for individuals to start their own business. This is especially so when contrasting online work with some self-employed trades, access to which can be highly regulated. In Germany, for example, it is only possible to run a business in some market segments and professions if a person has a so-called master craftsman’s certificate, which is quite costly and usually takes several years to obtain. In the case of our sample, for example, M01 and W04 can work as self-employed (video)bloggers for handicraft and baking tutorials, but are not able to run a business as a painter or confectioner because they lack the relevant qualifications.

**Generating income as a (video)blogger**

The functionalities of social media platforms used by (video)bloggers differ in a number of respects from those of online labour platforms (see also Schmidt, 2017). One central difference is that content creation on social media platforms is not based on an ex-ante defined task that is then allocated to a worker through the intermediation of platforms set up to match the supply of and demand for paid work. Rather, content creation precedes and then builds on the monetisation of the visibility and attention gained on social media platforms. Our findings reveal that (video)bloggers use quite different monetisation methods and combine multiple streams for generating income.

One initial option builds on monetisation via advertisements. This ties in directly with the advertising-financed business model of the platform economy. (Video) bloggers thus become part of the platform operators’ business strategy, which is based on selling target group-specific advertising space (Burgess, 2012). There are strong network effects: the more users a platform has, the more attractive it is for advertisers. At the same time, the price of advertising space increases with the number of users, in turn benefiting the platform operators as it increases their revenues (Dolata, 2019). By constantly making fresh content available free of charge, (video)bloggers are vital in ensuring that platforms remain popular, and hence valuable, for their operators.

For their part, content creators also rely on platforms to gain access to a wide audience, an indispensable prerequisite for monetising their online presence. A large number of users on a particular platform raises its attractiveness for (video)bloggers, as the value of their content is measured by the attention it generates (Rieder et al, 2018). And by using those platforms, (video)bloggers form the hinge that connects users interested in the produced content with advertisers who want to promote their products or services to potential customers. This is a market mechanism already familiar from other advertising-financed media markets (Anderson and Gabszewicz, 2006), but in the case of digital platforms is now combined with the technical infrastructure provided by the leading tech corporations.

The placement of advertisements is also a key element in monetisation. In the case of blogs, for example, this is done by including advertising banners or, in the case of YouTube, by showing advertising clips and banners before and during videos. Another
possibility includes the integration of so-called affiliate links, through which the (video)bloggers receive a commission when people make purchases at the associated online stores. Advertisements of these kinds are not self-organised by (video)bloggers but rely on advertisement services that are controlled by the providers of those services. Usually, the specific terms and conditions of those advertising services are non-negotiable for individual (video)bloggers. The placement of advertising banners on blogs is typically organised through the advertising service Google AdSense. As a subsidiary of Google, YouTube is also integrated into the Google AdSense program. This means that YouTube videos can only be monetised if the channel is affiliated to the YouTube partner program, which means that the channel must adhere to the YouTube guidelines. Similar guidelines exist for affiliate programs such as the Amazon partner program, one of the world’s largest affiliate marketing programs.

Our findings indicate, however, that although income generation through the placement of advertisements is frequently used, its unpredictability means that it is not sufficient on its own to provide a living.

‘I think that’s the case with almost all YouTubers that the pure advertising money via YouTube through the advertising clips before the video is relatively small. You would need an insane, insane amount of views to be able to make a living from it. So, you would need to get over a million views each month to be able to pay the rent. Which of course isn’t a good business model because your views always fluctuate due to the algorithm. You can’t predict how many views you get next month because a lot of factors go into it, and also the price for those advertisements fluctuates as well.’ (M03_191210)

(Video)bloggers mainly deal with this situation by combining different income sources. Our respondents reported that paid sponsorships, in which advertisement for products or services are integrated into the content of blog, video and Instagram posts in return for a contractually agreed compensation, are by far the most important source of income. In contrast to the use of Google AdSense services or affiliate marketing programs, terms and conditions of sponsorships are negotiable. It is quite striking that all the (video)bloggers in our sample do not actively seek sponsorships. Rather they are contacted by companies or agencies offering paid sponsorships:

‘I in my entire time as a blogger – I’ve been doing this for seven and a half years now – I’ve never done any acquisitions. I’ve always been contacted by firms or agencies.’ (W10_200327)

‘So far, I haven’t written to any companies for sponsorships. They sending me all requests, fortunately. I haven’t even thought about it yet. So, as I said, they always come and ask “Are you interested?”’ (M01_191205)

This also demonstrates how (video)bloggers are able to exercise choice about whom they accept as sponsors. All of our respondents emphasised that they did not accept every request and, on average, were still able to obtain higher earnings than in their previous jobs. One of the main tasks for the (video)bloggers is then to select those sponsors that fit best into their portfolios. Nonetheless, revenues from sponsorships can also fluctuate considerably throughout the year.
‘It is not possible for me, for example, to say that I earn 2,000 euros every month. It fluctuates greatly. In some months there is nothing and in the next month I earn five times as much as usual. So classic commercial times are actually the Christmas season and often also around Valentine’s Day. But, for example, in January I usually don’t earn much money.’ (W14_200414)

Overall, the income of (video)bloggers depends to a great extent on advertising revenues. Our results indicate, however, that (video)bloggers do not define themselves as ‘advertisers’ or ‘influencers’; rather, they see themselves as ‘creative professionals’. Advertising revenues, which nevertheless make up the primary source of income, are subject to large fluctuations, either because they are based on click numbers, which are influenced by constantly changing algorithms, or are dependent on sponsors’ advertising expenditures, which also vary. In order to make themselves less dependent on such volatile revenues, (video)bloggers have come up with a range of strategies. Some (video)bloggers are experimenting with other, non-advertising financed sources of income. This includes, for example, the use of crowdfunding platforms such as Patreon, which specialise in donation-based support for content creators. Here, users can donate a monthly amount of money and, in return, are mentioned by name in blog or video posts, are invited to meetings or granted access to exclusive content.

‘I’m a huge fan of this concept, that you as a viewer can support your creator, so creators can really do what they’re passionate about. […] It’s one of many sources of income. If I will have at some point so many supporters that I could finance the whole channel from that, that would be a dream scenario.’ (M03_191210)

Since social media platforms have a vital interest in binding successful content creators to their platforms in order to attract as many users as possible, they seek to prevent other platforms being used for content circulation. As a consequence, major social media platforms try to maintain control by establishing corresponding payment models intended to tie down both viewers and content providers. In 2019, YouTube introduced a so-called channel membership that grants viewers exclusive member benefits by making a monthly payment that is shared between YouTube and the content creators. Some (video)bloggers in our sample are already experimenting with such payment models; compared to advertising revenues, they still play only a rather subordinate role for income generation, however.

Other (video)bloggers have even expanded the scope of their self-employment beyond content creation on social media platforms in order to lessen their dependence on revenue from advertising and the influence of sponsors. Some have established their own online stores and sell merchandising products. For instance, food (video) bloggers might sell cookbooks and cooking utensils and DIY (video)bloggers will offer (online) courses on craft skills.

Some (video)bloggers also offer social media consulting services to companies or other content creators. Overall, one notable characteristic of (video)bloggers is that they have adopted a portfolio strategy by developing and combining many different income sources. The constant search for and experimentation with new income sources therefore plays a central role.
Despite this effort to develop a variety of income streams, social media platforms still retain a central role for income generation for most (video)bloggers, given that the scope for monetising content depends on the gateways to audiences controlled by the platforms. In addition, the value of content is measured by the amount of attention they generate, measured in terms of views, likes, pins or comments. Moreover, sponsors expect content creators to use platforms such as Instagram, YouTube or Pinterest in order to benefit from existing network effects. The prevailing perception among the (video)bloggers we interviewed was that they had to be present on the leading social media platforms in order to be visible. These platforms also offer a unique technical infrastructure for disseminating digital content, further compounding the dependence of content creators due to the lack of realistic alternatives.

‘You can think what you want about Google but they’re the only ones giving us YouTubers this platform, nobody else does it. There are no alternatives like that. Maybe there will be someday and that would be good, then you could pick and choose and stuff like that, but currently no alternatives exist.’ (M02_191210)

Thus, closer scrutiny reveals that, despite the aforementioned autonomy and independence of managerial control, (video)blogging is also subject to a range of dependencies.

Platform dependence, algorithmic control and the role of the audience

Central to the dependence of (video)bloggers is the fact that their work is structured by the social media platforms via the technical infrastructure they own and the content ‘curation’ they exercise (Dolata, 2019). Their terms and conditions not only determine who has access (and who can be excluded) and what content can be uploaded, but through their algorithms also structure the interaction between content providers and audiences by deciding what content is displayed and to whom. Algorithms hence play a significant role in shaping audience attention on social media platforms, and by extension the basis for how (video)bloggers generate their income, leading to a distinctive form of indirect ‘algorithmic control’.

Although (video)bloggers have access to a great deal of data about their audiences (for example, the age of followers, usage time and so on), neither they nor the users have precise information about how platform algorithms work in practice. On the one hand, they are well aware of the use of ranking and reputation algorithms, on the other hand they can only speculate and rely on experiences about which actions are rewarded. For example, (video)bloggers quite often draw inferences about how the algorithms work from their daily experiences:

‘I know, for example, that the whole issue of replying to comments is most important. And I’ve learned that it works best for me when the video is freshly posted. Then you should actually be as active as possible for the first hour, so that YouTube just notices that there’s a lot of traffic and pushes it. That means my priority after I have posted a video is to comment a lot and just be interactive.’ (W04_200205)
Moreover, anticipating how the algorithms work also influences when content is posted. Most of our respondents concentrated their postings on certain times of the day or certain days of the week, based on a belief that these are recognised and rewarded by the algorithm, leading to greater visibility on the platforms. For instance, the YouTubers in our sample used fixed upload days and aligned their entire planning and work scheduling accordingly. Similar considerations applied to the content of posts. The (video)bloggers in our sample focused on producing content that seemed to be the most popular and therefore most likely to boost their metrics. This shows how those reputation and ranking algorithms generate incentives to perform certain activities. However, the algorithms are not only opaque but also in constant flux. This means that if platform operators make changes to the algorithms, something that is usually not communicated, content providers’ skills can easily become outdated.

‘Of course, after a while you already know what works well and what does not. But, sometimes things that have always worked very well suddenly don’t work anymore because the algorithm has changed. […] I don’t think they do it to annoy us. Instagram is a company […], it’s not a government that is there to make sure you’re treated fairly, it’s a company. They do what’s economically best for them.’ (W02_191121)

This also highlights the fact that (video)bloggers are well aware of the fact that social media platforms do not provide a neutral infrastructure, but operate in their own economic interests. The dependence of content providers, in fact, goes much deeper than even the question as to what content is displayed and to whom, since the whole economic existence of (video)bloggers is tied to the very existence of the social media platforms and their functionalities. This is especially true for YouTubers, who rely on the specific functionalities of YouTube for uploading and disseminating videos:

‘I’m dependent on Google, unfortunately, that’s true. If Google says overnight, we will shut down YouTube, then I have a problem, quite clearly. But that’s the only dependency I have.’ (M02_191210)

As in other areas of the platform economy, social media platforms try to centralise as many activities as possible on their own platform in order to benefit from network effects (Meijerink et al, 2021). Since platform providers cannot rely on establishing a competitive advantage through technical innovation alone, they must constantly expand, supplement and transform their service portfolio (Dolata, 2019). (Video)bloggers must accordingly also adapt to this constantly changing platform environment and experiment with new functions in order not to jeopardise their visibility on their chosen platforms. Our findings show that (video)bloggers try to interpret those algorithms and optimise their strategies in line with these to enhance their visibility. At the same time, (video)bloggers must always keep an eye on which platform is currently addressing which target groups, and what the next trend is, to ensure that they do not miss an opportunity to attract audience attention.

In Germany the described dependence from platforms and their rules has led to the foundation of the so-called ‘YouTubers Union’ (Niebler, 2020), which is campaigning for fairness and transparency for YouTube creators. Since mid-2019, the initiative has been supported by the German trade union IG Metall (called ‘FairTube’
campaign) thus expanding its previous activities on the regulation of crowdwork. However, the (video)bloggers in our sample were neither aware nor actively involved in these activities. Rather than employing collective action, the (video)bloggers have developed a range of individual strategies for mitigating their dependencies on social media platforms. For instance, some will host their own blogs and lure users to their own websites in order to retain a certain degree of independence.

‘Well, I’d say my main basis is my blog, and I’m the ruler of it. If I say “Okay, I’ll delete it tomorrow”, it’s gone. With Instagram it is different, if Mark Zuckerberg says “Okay, Instagram will be shut down” then everyone and everything is gone. And then some people are probably facing the ruin of their existence. And then I can say, wait a minute, I still have my blog, so then it just continues there. But you need Instagram to be seen.’ (W01_191112)

‘So the most important thing for us is always the blog, because that’s our blog and we can decide what happens there. As soon as Instagram, Facebook and Pinterest are dead or change the algorithm, we just don’t want to be dependent on that, so our focus is always on the blog and on our own platform.’ (W12_200407)

Another strategy is to be active on multiple social media platforms at the same time. Thus, a portfolio strategy is not only applied to the issue of income generation but also the platforms used. Although some (video)bloggers mainly concentrate their activities on a specific platform, many are active on several platforms simultaneously (see also O’Meara, 2019). While this diversification strategy is mainly pursued to increase overall visibility, it also serves to hedge against the risk that any individual platform might lose popularity.

These platform dependencies are supplemented by a constant demand for engagement with the online community. Even where the users of social media platforms do not directly pay for content, maintaining a constant engagement with the audience is immensely important since monetisation is based on the attention and reputation granted by users. And while the reputation system on social media platforms is built on audience perception, in turn this is influenced by the social media algorithms that structure what is offered to audiences, and hence govern the visibility of (video)bloggers’ content. In contrast to labour platforms, this does not refer to ratings of ex-ante defined tasks or serve to regulate access to new tasks but rates the online appearance of content creators. This means that (video)bloggers have to be constantly available for their community and need to build and maintain a high level of intimacy – for example, by answering questions or reacting to comments – in order to prevent any kind of negative feedback that could lead to a decline in views and followers. This is a task that is sometimes perceived as a burden. The avoidance of such negative feedback from the audience is also relevant when choosing sponsors. As mentioned earlier, (video)bloggers are in principle free to choose their sponsors and can exercise discrimination over whom they will accept. At the same time, they have to be constantly on their guard to ensure that they will not jeopardise their reputation and authenticity by accepting too much advertising or carrying advertisements for companies that are not approved of by their audience. This reveals the dual challenge confronting (video)bloggers: remaining attractive to sponsors, as their capacity to generate an income relies to a large extent on these revenues, while
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staying authentic in order to maintain audience loyalty. Responding to questions and comments from the community in the early morning before getting up or late in the evening in front of the TV is therefore quite common. This also reveals a blurring of the boundaries between work and non-work.

‘Is this working time or not? I am on social media all the time, actually, I’m permanently on my cell phone. Is that working time or not? Well, it’s totally blurred and then you play with the kids for a minute, then I’m back on it answering emails and comments, it’s totally blurred.’ (W11_200403)

Moreover, the requirement for constant interaction with the community seems to be reinforced by the algorithms used by the social media platforms. Both Instagram and YouTube appear to reward activity and interaction with others on their platforms by giving preference to posts from more active content creators.

Discussion and conclusions

This article has focused on the characteristics of (video)blogging as platform work. On the one hand, we examined to what extent the work of (video)bloggers is influenced by platform infrastructures and their rules and algorithms. On the other, we analysed the motives of professional (video)bloggers and investigated how they deal with platform rules and algorithms. Our findings show that the conditions created by social media platforms play a central role in the activities of professional (video)bloggers. What is important is that this is not solely a matter of imposing limits on their autonomy, but also includes the provision of opportunities and technical infrastructure to enable the adoption of ‘digital self-employment’.

As mentioned earlier, platform work has been a topic of growing interest within the social sciences in recent years, albeit with a concentration on platforms that match the supply of and demand for paid work tasks and services. By contrast, our findings highlight that work in the platform economy is much more diverse and goes beyond the execution of paid tasks on online labour platforms. In this respect, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of work in the platform economy: while platform-mediated work in the narrow sense refers to paid work tasks performed via the intermediation role played by platforms, there are also wider forms of online work in which platforms play a role, but not as labour market intermediaries. In this sense, (video)blogging should be considered as a genuine form of digital work in the platform economy (see also Bearson et al, 2021), and moreover one that is tightly linked to the business models of the big tech corporations such as Google, Meta Platforms (Facebook) and Amazon. We have highlighted that professional (video)blogging is performed as it offers extensive independence from managerial control and is associated with a high degree of autonomy. Moreover, we found that working as a professional (video)blogger could enable individuals to earn their entire income from this activity. In this respect, professional (video)blogging seems to differ markedly from other forms of platform-mediated work, especially work on microtask platforms where earning possibilities are limited and where research has shown that platform work often serves as a supplement to other sources of income (Huws et al, 2018; Vallas and Schor, 2020). It is important to note that (video)blogging is not based solely on advertising revenue from platform operators since this is too volatile and
unpredictable to serve as a solid basis for a business. Instead, (video)bloggers combine multiple streams for generating income.

Compared to other forms of platform-mediated work, (video)blogging can be categorised as a form of ‘digital self-employment’ that is notable both for the significantly higher degree of scope for entrepreneurial decision-making it offers and the rather complex set of tasks it entails. The example of (video)blogging also highlights how the platform economy opens up new entrepreneurial opportunities. Being self-employed is a central motive for becoming a professional (video)blogger and is firmly anchored in the self-image of those engaged in it. In this regard, professional (video)blogging clearly exhibits some similarities to other forms of self-employment (Bögenhold and Fachinger, 2013; Taylor, 2015; Almeida and Teixeira, 2017). Self-employed (video) blogging reveals developments that can also be observed in the flexibilisation of the labour market and of new and modified forms of self-employment in recent decades.

Nevertheless, our results also suggest that the role of social media platforms means that (video)blogging differs fundamentally from other forms of self-employment. First, social media platforms serve as enablers for this kind of digital self-employment. (Video)bloggers are heavily dependent on platforms in order to have access to a wide audience, one of the prerequisites for monetising their online presence. And second, the work of (video)bloggers is profoundly shaped by the rules and algorithms set by the social media platforms that determine how platforms can be used and income generated. (Video)bloggers have to accept these rules if they want to utilise platforms for income generation. Since the attention gained on those platforms constitutes the central mechanism through which (video)bloggers generate income, they are obliged to adapt to these algorithms. In this regard, (video)blogging has clear similarities with other forms of platform-mediated work.

(Video)blogging as platform work is, however, shaped by specific ranking and reputation algorithms that differ from other automatic control practices. As shown, complex algorithms play a significant role in shaping audience attention on social media platforms, which build the basis for income generation of (video)bloggers. These rely to a great extent on self-initiative and self-responsibility rather than on direct control. Moreover, this type of algorithmic control is not pointed towards work rules but rather structures content curation, which in turn, nonetheless, shape the working conditions of (video)bloggers. In this regard, (video)blogging clearly differs from other forms of platform-mediated work like ride hailing, delivery services or microtask crowdwork that are much more characterised by direct and automated control, decomposition and standardisation as well as surveillance, sometimes coined as ‘digital Taylorism’ (Altenried, 2020). Overall, this supports the argument put forward by Krzywdzinski and Gerber (2021) that a variety of different control regimes within the platform economy exists.

Since self-employed (video)bloggers depend on the technical infrastructures provided by large tech corporations, we can speak of digitally mediated dependencies. These dependencies go beyond the regular market requirements that the self-employed are normally confronted by in two key respects: (1) (video)bloggers rely on the attention of their audience, which requires ensuring that they are constantly visible and obtain feedback on the content they produce; and (2) they have to adapt to the social media platforms’ algorithms in order to increase their visibility, despite not knowing how these actually work. On the one hand, a high degree of dependence exists since content creation on social media platforms constitutes the primary income source. Lock-in effects based on network effects exist and the lack of platform alternatives for circulating content – especially in the case of YouTube –
also point to existing dependencies. However, not all revenues are stemming from advertisement services that are provided and controlled by those platforms. More significant are paid sponsorships, which are based on contractual arrangements that are, in contrast to labour platforms, not directly mediated by those platforms. In this regard, (video)bloggers have some scope in shaping contractual relationships with their sponsors and are able to select their business partners. Nonetheless, platforms still retain a central role since they are the main gateway to the audience. In this regard, (video)blogging seems to share features with other platform-dependent forms of self-employment like platform-dependent vendors on platforms such as Etsy or Ebay (Cutolo and Kenney, 2021). This might point towards specific characteristics of digital self-employment. On the other hand, our findings suggest that (video)bloggers develop their own individual strategies and routines to deal with this situation and mitigate the dependencies to which they are subject. This includes not only making use of a range of platforms and channels, but also combining several sources of income and constantly re-evaluating and adapting their business strategies.

Our findings have a number of limitations, however. The first concerns the scope of our study. Although (video)blogging constitutes a truly international phenomenon, we have focused on German (video)bloggers in order to gain some initial insights into this new phenomenon (hence also the rather descriptive nature of this article). Moreover, by employing a qualitative approach we cannot provide empirical evidence on the scale of this form of platform work. Another limitation relates to the fact that our sample includes only successful (video)bloggers who have managed to work professionally in this capacity over a number of years. We cannot draw any conclusions about those who have exited this field and were not able to build a successful business. As such, we might not have been able to fully capture the risks of self-employment experienced by all participants in the platform economy. Exploration of this and other aspects of digital self-employment in the platform economy will require further studies and analysis.

Notes
1 The article is based on the joint project ‘Blurring the boundaries of work: blogging and vlogging as new forms of digital work’, funded by the Mercator Research Center Ruhr. The names of the authors appear in alphabetical order.
2 In the European Union, this is reflected in the discussion about stronger regulation of the platform economy. The European Commission has recently published a proposal for a Directive on improving working conditions in platform work (European Commission, 2021).

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References


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