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The Amazonification of Royal Mail and postal worker identity

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Abstract

Postal work has undergone significant transformations with the advent of platformisation that follows on from broader structural changes in the consumption and delivery of communication infrastructure. In this context, an important question is how worker identity is affected, both in terms of sense of self and in terms of 'who we are' collectively as an organisation, especially within a sector like postal work that has a history of public service. We investigate this through a case study of Royal Mail based on in-depth interviews with postal workers in the UK. We argue that the organisational features by which postal workers understand and define their identity at Royal Mail are being displaced by features of Amazonification – the mimicking and adoption of Amazon's technologies and organisational culture and practices – which is contributing to a redefinition of postal worker identity and gives rise to new forms of identity struggle. The identity struggle we are pointing to is not purely embedded in processes of privatisation but in the emerging gig economy template and its accompanying algorithmic management techniques. As such, we see a transformation of the features of postal work into those of platform work, and the loss of protection and social purpose that this represents to postal workers. This focus, we contend, is a very significant but largely neglected aspect in current debates on platformisation and the future of work.

Keywords

algorithmic management, worker identity, Amazon, postal work, platformisation

Introduction

Postal services across the globe have gone through radical transformations in recent decades, continuously confronted with technological innovation that undermines, shifts and extends the nature and function of postal work. In the UK, the national postal service, Royal Mail, has frequently been at the centre of contentious political debates that in many ways encapsulate broader changes at the intersection of public services, information and communication technologies and the future of work. Much of this contention emerges from decades-long restructuring of postal services in the UK and beyond and needs to be understood in the context of dramatic shifts in communication infrastructure that has put the scope and operations of postal work under intense scrutiny. The advent of the internet and the subsequent turn to platformisation has radically transformed consumer habits and how people exchange information – from e-mails to online shopping – with significant implications for the nature of postal work. At the same time, the growing reliance on digital technologies and algorithmic processes in how work and workers are directed, evaluated and disciplined (Kellogg et al., 2020) is instrumental in current debates on the future of work and working conditions, also for postal workers. This includes concerns not just about the extent of job losses due to automation but perhaps more significantly, the quality and social purpose of work and the terms under which such work is carried out.

Against this backdrop, an important question is how worker identity is affected, both in terms of sense of self and in terms of 'who we are' collectively as an organisation. Specifically, in this paper, we explore how processes of

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platformisation are experienced by postal workers and how these interact with and shape workers' understandings of identity based on a case study of Royal Mail that draws on in-depth interviews with thirteen postal workers in the UK. Royal Mail presents an important case study in this regard as it moves us beyond the rise of new forms of platform labour and the gig economy that has dominated much research and explores platformisation and worker identity in relation to a sector that has a 500-year history in the UK. Moreover, using Royal Mail as a case study, we are able to assess the implications of platformisation for postal worker identity in relation to its roots as a public service that brings to light worker identity as a site of struggle as these values become threatened by processes of liberalisation, privatisation and now platformisation.

We start by outlining some of the contextual background to platformisation within Royal Mail, before outlining what we refer to as the growing Amazonification of postal work that refers not only to the migration of specific technologies that are now used in postal work but the adoption of broader organisational and cultural practices that draw on the influence of particular dominant platforms across sectors. We then go on to discuss how these shifts in working practices relate to debates on worker identity, and the different ways this notion is understood, before outlining the findings from our interviews. We argue that the Amazonfication of Royal Mail has implications beyond the quality of work, as a prominent focus in discussions on the future of work, and substantially shapes experiences of worker identity, including the prominence of new identity struggles that both extend and shift previous organisational transitions. We see this as a significant, but largely under-researched, component of debates on the platformisation and future of work.

Transformations of Royal Mail

The national postal service in the UK, Royal Mail, has long been subject to major structural transformations. The British state has been instrumental in the advancement of automation in postal work with its promotion of technologically driven modernisation since the 1980s, encouraging rationalisation, cost-cutting and efficiency in postal services through mechanising and automating sorting processes (Beirne, 2013). The influential Hooper reports of the postal services, commissioned by Labour and Conservative governments in 2008 and 2010, respectively, recommended harnessing new technologies and installing 'private sector disciplines' to accelerate the pace of modernisation (ibid: 118).

After 500 years of public ownership and attempted privatisations in 1994 and 2009, the 2011 Postal Services Act not only introduced plans to offer Royal Mail shares for sale but also broke up the Post Office and Royal Mail into completely separate companies (Hough and Booth, 2013). This legislation also enshrined in law a universal service obligation (USO) which commits Royal Mail to the 'one price goes anywhere' principle of affordable postal services to all UK addresses (Buchanan and Booth, 2023). The USO thus sets out minimum standards for service delivery by requiring Royal Mail to deliver letters to every address in the UK, six days a week, at a uniform price, and parcels five days a week. The actual privatisation of Royal Mail took place in three stages during 2013 and 2015 intended to boost Royal Mail's ability to compete more effectively in a growing parcels market as a result of changes in consumer behaviour associated with digital technologies.

Indeed, the expansion of the internet into everyday life has changed communication and consumption practices in ways that have significantly impacted postal work. Firstly, the proliferation of email provided cheaper and quicker communication that contributed to a reduction in the demand for letters (Beirne, 2013; Zatouroff and Robinson, 2019: 4) while, secondly, the growth in e-commerce and online shopping established parcel delivery as a nascent and lucrative market compared with the declining letters market (Hermann, 2013; WIK-Consult and ITA Consulting, 2016). This is particularly pertinent for the UK as Britain became the biggest online shopping market in Europe (Financial Times, 2014). Together, these two factors have shaped the reorientation of the scope and purpose of postal work and have contributed to the prioritising of parcel delivery as more profitable.

More recently, as Moore and Newsome (2018: 477) point out, the rise of digital tracking technologies such as the now ubiquitous Postal Digital Assistant device (PDA), which was launched in 2007, is seen as a response to the requirement for 'more exacting, demanding and time critical levels of delivery results in an increasingly competitive market'. The increasing success of competitors such as Dynamic Parcel Distribution (DPD) was attributed to its delivery technology described as 'a nationwide seven-day service that uses GPS technology to give customers a one-hour delivery window and lets the company track the driver en route' (ibid: 477). It is suggested that the implementation of such technologies has reconfigured the parcel delivery chain to become more customer-led, as parcel carriers adopted a 'more individual approach instead of a standardised supply chain for delivery of each and every parcel' (WIK-Consult and ITA Consulting, 2016: 3).

However, according to many, Royal Mail is now witnessing a full-scale crisis with a bleak financial outlook (Clark, 2023). While the cost of delivery is rising, the number of letters sent and received has declined 46% over the last decade and is predicted to shrink even further as people and businesses move to digital alternatives (Clinton, 2024; Pratley, 2024). Further, it is suggested that these long-term trends now render the USO outdated and out of step with the reality of Royal Mail's financial predicament, such that the USO has become unsustainable in the eyes of its

executives and some commentators (e.g., Lawson, 2024). Royal Mail has requested that it be allowed to stop delivering post on Saturdays and in September 2023 Ofcom began examining options to alter the USO in order to save money (Clinton, 2024). Alongside this, there has been a significant increase in work stress and sick leave amongst Royal Mail employees – reported to be triple the average and 50% higher than before the pandemic – and recent years have seen the further straining of labour relations with industrial action taken in the face of large shareholder pay-outs (Clark, 2023). Additionally, Royal Mail has now lost its 360-year-old monopoly on delivering parcels from Post Office branches, after concerns about poor quality of service persuaded the postal service to sign deals with rivals Evri and DPD (Davies, 2023).

Situating worker identity in platformisation debates

This backdrop is important for understanding what we refer to as the Amazonification of Royal Mail and the role of worker identity. We see these aspects as central to understanding the nature and implications of platformisation, but are rarely brought together in debates on platformisation and the future of work. To illustrate their significance, and by way of outlining our analytical framing, we start by defining and showcasing Amazonification as a particular iteration of platformisation before unpacking relevant conceptualisations of worker identity, and how they apply to our empirical study of postal workers at Royal Mail.

'Amazonification' as an iteration of platformisation

In line with Poell et al. (2019: 1), we approach platformisation as 'the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms'. As such, to make sense of how platformisation is being manifested within Royal Mail, it is important to recognise that the scope of platformisation reaches beyond technological functionalities and relates also to infrastructural properties that some consider to be 'modern-day equivalents' of the railroad, telephone and electric utility monopolies of the late 19th and the 20th centuries (Poell et al., 2019: 4). Similarly, Helmond et al. (2019) draw our attention to the interplay between processes of platformisation and infrastructuralisation, such that the programmability of platforms is what enables both the expansion of their boundaries and, at the same time, their embedding into other markets (2019). In terms of Royal Mail, we can see this, for instance, with how the PDA device was initially deployed to 'scan barcodes and capture customer signatures' but since 2017 has, by generating a range data, exceeded this initial functionality and 'gained infrastructural properties over time' (Helmond et al., 2019). Indeed, the PDA is regarded by senior management as not just a technology but as infrastructure that provides 'valuable insight into operational route certainty and the consistency of service provision to customers' as well as 'a platform to ensure that all outdoor activity can be planned more efficiently' (UK Parliament, 2023).

Furthermore, for Poell et al., absent from platformisation debates is an understanding of 'how platforms transform cultural practices, and vice versa', as well as 'how institutional changes and shifting cultural practices mutually articulate each other' (2019: 5). This is an important aspect of platformisation that invokes analysis of how social practices and imaginations are organised around platforms and the way institutional changes and shifts in cultural practices relate to each other. In light of the transformations at Royal Mail, particularly pertinent is the way that institutional changes and shifts in cultural practices are seen to be bound up with dominant platforms that not only disrupt and alter markets but also hold symbolic power in terms of disseminating particular organisational values and managerial techniques that manifest in a novel 'gig economy courier' identity within postal work.

We refer to this iteration of platformisation as 'Amazonification' that invokes concerns with the way dominant platforms come to dictate the terms of labour markets in multiple sectors *beyond* the platform economy (Del Rey, 2022). Kassem (2024), for example, suggests that a company like Amazon wields significant influence not just by its sheer size and market share but by acting as a 'trendsetter' across industries. In part, this is down to the prospect of a company like Amazon to manifest a presence in most markets, threatening competitors by being able to use its expertise in data analytics to move into almost any sector (Solon and Wong, 2018). Indeed, as Haiven et al. (2022) point out Amazon has become the world's largest provider of web services and data management with its servers hosting 'the back-end of a huge proportion of the internet'.

As other businesses try to keep up and compete with Amazon there is a wide-scale adoption and implementation of its business practices, workplace culture and labour standards within many national economies (Del Rey, 2022). A recent report from the Institute for the Future of Work (IFOW) describes the 'Amazonian Era' as one in which 'the ethos, practices and business models that emerged within the platform economy have been packaged up and made available for download to the furthest corners of our essential services' (Gilbert and Thomas, 2021: 3). They suggest this is constitutive of an emerging epoch: 'Just as the organisational design developed by Henry Ford came to characterise society more broadly, our research indicates that the ethos, practices and business models of the platform economy have spread far beyond gig work, resulting in

widespread 'gigification' of jobs and the restructuring of workplace behaviours and relationships.' (ibid). One impact of this is a closer matching of the supply of labour with the demand for tasks as defined by algorithmic systems, such that 'work becomes a variable input, like any other factor in the process of production, to respond to demand in the market' (p.36).

Amazonification has thus been used as a term to denote key transformations in the structuring of labour markets, such as the adoption of customer-centric supply chains or the increasing implementation of same-day delivery services, changing customer expectations and customer impatience (Vollero et al., 2021: 189). A key feature of Amazonification is the goal of increased productivity, incorporating techniques from the lean manufacturing methodology, which aims to maximise worker productivity while minimising unnecessary steps. Moreover, Amazonification not only entails work intensification but also positions workers against one another through internal competition, such as ensuring punishing work schedules for Amazon delivery drivers who are often forced to compete with one another to quicken their pace, at the expense of their own health, safety and well-being (Haiven et al., 2022). As we go on to outline below, this wider techno-cultural shift associated with Amazonification is an important aspect of current developments in Royal Mail and, in line with Poell et al. (2019), needs to form a larger part of platformisation research in order to account for institutional shifts and changes in cultural practices, including questions of worker identity.

Worker identity

A core sociological concept, worker identity is integral to how we understand the nature of work, particularly given that workers' processes of identification have significant influence on how they experience and behave at work, as well as sense-of-self and capacity for agency (Jaros, 2012). For Umney and Coderre-LaPalme, 'meaning of work conflicts' denotes situations where the sense of purpose workers assign to their jobs conflicts with imperatives imposed by management or economic circumstance (2017: 859). As Locke and Taylor (1991) have argued, worker identity is informed and shaped by workers' values and feelings about the social purpose and meaning of the work they carry out, and how different groups of workers experience this. Workers' sense of purpose can be threatened when changes in the goals or technology of an organisation undermine the nature of workers' contributions.

Relatedly, identity also foregrounds the notion of social value and that there is more to work than earning a wage with scholars emphasising 'the dehumanising implications of viewing work purely as a source of material remuneration, stressing work as a creative endeavour which counters social isolation, and generates "a feeling . . . of having a purpose in life"' (Umney and Coderre-LaPalme, 2017: 860–86). This extends to the implications of Amazonification for the social purpose of many kinds of work. As Gilbert and Thomas (2021) argue, Amazonification is 'reshaping the lives of millions of workers across Britain' particularly as 'these systems are being designed and deployed in ways that erode good work' such that 'work is being redefined in narrow terms that can be quantified and measured by an algorithm'.

In addition, there has been a renewed focus on the notion of recognition as a central aspect of worker identity within the context of the platformisation of work. Newlands (2022), for example, observes a recent 'recognition turn' in mainstream sociological and organisational literature, stemming from Honneth's (1996) theory of recognition, 'wherein intersubjective recognition forms the foundation of practical identity', though Bourdieu's (1993) understanding of recognition as 'the manner in which an individual is evaluated by others as legitimate or worthy' has also had influence (e.g., Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2023). Importantly for our purposes, recognition in both cases is understood as a site of struggle, 'in which various actors attempt to symbolically define the interpretations, classifications and understandings of the world that matter within a particular field' (Bourdieu quoted in Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2023: 1003). Such struggle arises 'when individuals and groups are either misrecognised or denied recognition altogether' (Newlands, 2022: 822).

In relation to platformisation, Wood and Lehdonvirta (2023) highlight the role of gig economy platforms in producing a novel form of reputational insecurity, creating entirely new categories of recognition, in which some workers are classified as particularly high quality or trustworthy through platforms' use of ratings and labels. This, in turn, impacts the extent of workers' visibility on the platform and future ability to make a living (pp.1005–1006). Further, in light of recognition theory's anthropocentric and immaterial assumptions, Newlands (2022) has examined how platform-based food delivery riders experience recognition, given that they have 'limited face-to-face engagement with supervisors and most communication is digitally mediated to a degree that riders are often uncertain whether they are communicating with a human or an automated system'. She found that technological devices can only provide 'pseudo-recognition', and that forms of recognition offered by platforms, 'in the form of automated messages or statistics, are viewed as impersonal and instrumentalising: a form of mechanistic dehumanisation' (p. 833).

Further, in engaging with postal workers and the particular case of Royal Mail, it is important to consider the significance of debates on organisational identity that Brown (2021) characterises as loosely based on five broad sets of assumptions relating to issues of: (i) reflexivity and agency; (ii) multiplicity, dynamism and coherence; (iii) relations of power; (iv) positivity and authenticity; and (v) processes of

organizing'. (pp.1205–1206). As such, Brown proposes that identities are regarded as 'imposed upon but not defined, shaped but not determined; continuously improvised and crafted by agile practitioners, they are accommodations negotiated within relations of power' (Brown, 2021: 1217). With regards to recognition, we can think of organisations as constituting 'sedimented patterns of recognition' (Honneth, 2010: 117), providing the institutional, social and technical framework for recognitive relationships (Newlands, 2022). On this note, Strangleman (2012) has shown how memory and nostalgia can play an important role in workers' perceptions of organisational identity and sense of recognition. Exploring accounts of working life given by older workers from the railway industry in the UK, Strangleman demonstrates that workers' nostalgia is not sentimental but in fact reflexive and illustrative of their present condition. This points to a more critical attempt to understand what is happening to their work, especially the erosion of recognition, values and norms which had previously helped to humanize work (pp.422–423).

In this context, public sector identity occupies a specific form of organisational identity. As Flecker et al. (2016) argue, public goods – such as the post – 'owe their special "dignity" to their universalist nature far removed from the self-interest and profit-orientation of private-sector economic activities' (p.774). At the same time, the orientation of public services, such as the postal service, to the 'public' or 'general' interest marks a 'specific ethical quality' that is reflected, 'more or less directly, in the work ethos and identity of public-service workers' (ibid). As such, Flecker et al. highlight that the EU-wide liberalisation of postal services during the late 1990s and early 2000s presented a significant challenge to the special features of public sector identity, such as 'the particular occupational socialization, job security, decent wages and stable and homogeneous employment relations' (2016: 769).

These public sector features remain important to the organisational identity of postal workers in the UK. For example, as privatisation looked more likely in 2008, the Communications Workers Union's (CWU) resistance invoked a particular understanding of organisational identity, namely that of Royal Mail as a public service. The union wrote in 2008 that 'fighting industrially and politically to defend postal workers jobs, pension and terms and conditions, goes hand in hand with the struggle to protect services to the UK public' (Radic, 2019: 26). Moreover, in the struggle to protect job security, public sector identity was integral to how CWU articulated developments: 'never before have we faced such a savage onslaught on our jobs, our pay, or our terms and conditions of work (…) reducing this once great public service into an empty lifeless shell' (The Voice, April 2008, quoted in Radic, 2019: 25). Such comments draw attention to postal workers' particular ethical disposition and understanding of the post as a 'common good' that needs to be protected, demonstrating awareness 'not just of their own interests and rights as workers' but also those of the communities they serve and their 'general entitlement' to postal services (Flecker et al., 2016: 774). It also illustrates that, in postal work, a public sector ethos is bound up with distributional justice, recognition or misrecognition and dignity at work.

As such, the threat of privatisation and liberalisation to this public sector ethos draws our attention to identity as a site of conflict. A particularly valuable study in this regard is Radic's longitudinal case study of Royal Mail privatisation that explores changing relations within the organisation triggered by 'categorical identity changes' (2019). As the authors note, managers promoted a new organisational identity of a profit-making business while workers held onto the 'legacy identity' of a public service (Clark, 2023; Radic, 2019). Privatisation, they argue, subjected the Royal Mail to a 'new set of rules and expectations from partly new audiences' and the study found an unresolved discursive struggle between postal workers and senior leadership over 'who we are' as an organisation. Long before Royal Mail was actually privatised its organisational identity evolved as features of 'the business firm' were adopted and replaced those of the public sector organisational identity, but Radic's findings suggest that over the years a dormant public sector 'legacy identity' has been intermittently invoked by postal workers to refute such change and resist conformity to the incoming vision of 'who we are'. As one worker who participated in their study commented, 'Royal Mail as a public service creates jobs. Reasonable jobs with reasonable pay and conditions… The future working for a privatised Royal Mail conjures up the complete opposite to me, a working contract devoid of any concessions, the bare minimum' (ibid).

We propose that by situating worker identity in platformisation debates and considering these two literatures in conjunction with one another, we can explore how the mediation of postal work by platform infrastructures and logics interacts with workers' understandings of organisational identity. In particular, we operationalise the concept of identity by foregrounding worker identity as a site of struggle, providing a lens through which we can analyse the extent to which Amazonification, understood as distinct from privatisation, liberalisation and marketisation, is legitimised amongst postal workers and how it is shaping their sense of self and social (mis)recognition, and 'who we are' collectively. With its extensive history and long-standing public sector tradition, Royal Mail provides a particularly illustrative case study for showcasing the significance of these transitions and their implications as part of debates on the future of work. Generally, the question of worker identity is under-researched in relation to the platformisation of work, particularly in terms of public sector identity. Where such questions have been raised, they tend to have been confined to health and care work, with transformations in GP and nursing practices, for example,

being highlighted (e.g., Dingelstad et al., 2025). As such, this paper directly addresses a significant gap in debates on platformisation.

Method

To get an understanding of how postal workers from Royal Mail experience Amazonification in their work, we carried out in-depth interviews with 13 Royal Mail postal workers during the period of January to September 2023 across South Wales and South West England. The postal workers we interviewed were a combination of agency workers and both recent (less than 2 years) and long-term (more than 30 years) permanent workers, including some union representatives. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min and were all conducted over the phone. Postal workers were recruited through a combination of targeted approaches such as approaching postal workers on their rounds, and through the CWU and using a snow-balling approach. The interviews were carried out in-person and focused on workers' uses of technology in their work, their perceptions of the impact of technologies, as well as questions about their understanding of the role and value of their work. To analyse the interviews, we used inductive thematic analysis, identifying common themes and letting our data structure our analysis. Informed by approaches in critical data studies, we were interested in how emerging technologies are situated and contextualised in relation to institutions and existing social practices (Kitchin and Lauriault, 2014). In particular, mindful of the modest sample, we sought to understand how postal workers experience processes of platformisation and what this means for their sense of the nature and scope of postal work. All interviewees have been anonymised and pseudonyms used for their names.

Findings

As we go on to detail below, our findings demonstrate that as Royal Mail adopts the technologies and practices of dominant platforms such as Amazon – the PDA scanner device and digital tracking, setting unrealistic productivity goals, parcel delivery optimisation, a customer-driven business model and data-driven performance management techniques – postal worker identity becomes fractured. As Amazonification processes are not unanimously accepted by our interviewees, this results in tensions between different perceptions of 'who we are', such as whether Royal Mail is primarily a letters or parcels business, whether it is a private company or a public service and to what extent postal workers remain members of the local community or are becoming gig economy couriers.

Mimicking Amazon

The need to and fear of becoming more like Amazon emerged as a prominent discursive frame which interviewees articulated as a way to understand, explain and sometimes challenge technological change at Royal Mail, while also shaping workers' understanding of 'who we are' as an organisation. A common perception among these interviewees was that Royal Mail needs to compete with the gig economy business model, particularly, that of Amazon but also other courier companies such as DPD and UPS. This was said to be because Royal Mail 'lags behind' these parcel competitors and therefore needs to preserve its market position. This was articulated as an explanation and justification for Royal Mail adopting the same technologies and practices as Amazon, as the below comments demonstrate:

> 'Amazon have that technology and we are fast tracking to try and get to that level of technology. It just gives you a competitive edge in the market.' (Luke)

> '[The PDA scanner] is a time consuming piece of technology but necessary for where we are in the parcel market at the moment…Royal Mail are always a year or two behind everybody else, so like Amazon and everybody has been using [the PDA device] for quite a while' (Eric).

This justification also extended to data collection and processing, for example, Isaac naturalised increased data collection through his perception that 'it's not a problem specific to Royal Mail, it's everywhere and it's not like DPD are not doing it. It's not like DHL are not collecting data on their drivers or Amazon or any of the other delivery companies'. Further, the need to mimic Amazon also explained why Royal Mail abandoned particular practices, if Amazon did not have them, for instance, Jeff observed 'But then Royal Mail look at that and they say, Amazon haven't got that, why should we have it?' For some, 'falling in line with Amazon and everyone else' was described as a justifiable survival strategy because 'we might have to do it to survive, to be honest with you, for Royal Mail to survive…We're just losing to the other competition because they can do it at a better price and a lot cheaper' (Keith). As another postal worker noted, the current position of Royal Mail and the challenges facing postal workers are imbued with a certain irony: 'years ago they wouldn't have had any competition at all…[now] everyone is a courier…Amazon is probably their biggest competitor, which is ironic because we deliver Amazon items' (Paul).

At the same time, mimicking Amazon was not justifiable or necessary for some postal workers. For example, Shane was concerned about how far Amazon practices could encroach upon postal work, saying 'you see things from Amazon where they work in warehouses and they're walking around and the PDA is buzzing because they've stopped. Will we get to a point with our PDAs out on delivery where they actually vibrate or the performance tile actually flashes up and says keep moving?' Further, for both

agency interviewees, the idea of becoming like Amazon was a possibility rather than a reality, but one to be avoided rather than accepted. For Becky, there was a sense that Royal Mail was not a gig economy business yet but was heading in that direction. For example, she said 'I could see that easily happening, like it does with Amazon delivery drivers' which she described as 'if your pay starts getting cut or you start having to work extra hours to make up for it'. Becky emphasised the precarity of this possibility, saying 'it's not a choice to work in a zero hours, gig economy'. In addition, although Paul disputed that Royal Mail and postal work was becoming more like Amazon, he also conceded that this was a possibility, though one to be avoided, and emphasised work intensity: 'If it gets to an Amazon point where they are suddenly expecting everyone to be on the move constantly and things like that, yes, absolutely disgusting. I heard how Amazon treat their staff and I could see how this could move towards that. So in that respect, yes, I think it's bad if it continues in that direction'. The need to mimic Amazon, or avoid becoming like Amazon, has thus become embedded in and shapes workers' understandings of 'who we are'.

Prioritising parcels

Workers were very conscious of a shift in prioritising digitally tracked parcels over letters and this had significant implications for both the experience of postal work as well as their perceptions of organisational identity. Some workers understood this shift in terms of broad technological change, such as Paul, who observed 'it's changed 100% from when I started. So pretty much back when I started, the internet wasn't as big as it is now for online shopping. So you'd have a lot less parcels'. Others saw a direct correlation between parcels and profit-making: 'since it's gone privatised, it's all about profit…it's not about your customer getting a daily delivery letter, it's all about parcels, the profit side of it. Tracked parcels are where they can make the quickest profit margin' (Max). For Tim, it is specifically the prioritisation of Amazon parcels that meant postal work 'has changed since it's been privatised', explaining that 'they want you to take everything every day and so we were getting all their parcels, Amazon parcels, we have to prioritise Amazon parcels ahead of Royal Mail parcels and letters'.

Such change also includes the drive to downgrade the USO, and thus the quality of the postal service provided by Royal Mail, as explained by one postal worker: '[Royal Mail have] been trying to do it for a few years now – it's trying to downgrade that to say four or five days per week', the goal of which is to create 'more time for companies to concentrate on their biggest earnings, where they've got time to concentrate on their biggest revenue, which is the parcel work'. (Paul) The same postal worker pointed out that downgrading the USO 'doesn't help the general public because I'd rather deliver someone's doctor's letter than someone's eBay purchase'. In this respect, there is an element of pride attached to letter delivery that is absent in workers' perceptions and self-narratives of Royal Mail as a primary parcels business.

The prioritisation of parcels also prompted fundamental questions amongst postal workers as to whether it is primarily a parcels or a letters business. This tension was captured by one postal worker who argued: 'there was a need for change over the years to keep up with the competition… [but]…they've tried making us into couriers, which we're not…couriers don't have a sack full of letters to go to every household as well' (Paul). The same postal worker added: 'I just think Royal Mail forget that they're a letters business as well and primarily a letters business' (Paul). However this view directly contrasted with others who did accept that Royal Mail had shifted from letters to a parcels business in order to compete with gig economy companies: 'they want a workforce like any gig economy, like Amazon, who just work parcels. That's it, we're a parcel company, not letters anymore' (Joe). Similarly, another postal worker said: 'the letter business is going down the pan, so it's subsidised by parcels. […] So they need to compete with the other companies. So I think it's progress' (Keith). Joe also commented on how he experienced parcel prioritisation as a loss of social value in his work, and dehumanising: 'that's where the company's going. They just want to be, someone rocks up, put your parcel somewhere or your neighbour or you and you move on, and you don't interact with the public'.

Unrealistic productivity goals

As has been widely documented, a central feature of automation is the way digital technologies are used to intensify the labour process in different ways. In our interviews with postal workers, this process of work intensification was a prominent theme in how workers experience the impact of the growing use of digital technologies in their work. This experience of intensification was articulated as the setting of unrealistic productivity goals and targets. For instance, there is an expectation of non-stop productivity as highlighted by Shane 'we don't stop at all, we're expected to perform the same every day'. Similarly, another postal worker noted that 'you can't stand still' because 'there's so much work to do' (Luke). One postal worker considered the level of intensification had made postal rounds 'unachievable' (Paul). Much of this was seen to be directly driven by the introduction of new technologies and the mimicking of delivery services elsewhere: 'it's a big drive towards [further privatisation], like the gig economy stuff, where they want us to just keep performing and getting more productive all the time' (Shane). A significant feature is the reliance on the PDA device that postal workers regarded as a way for management to push towards

unrealistic levels of productivity: 'It's to get as much out of you as they can' and 'it is out there to get the extra ten seconds out of every post person, right down to the last second'. (Max).

In addition, this theme also highlights how workers have internalised the disciplinary logics of digital devices. This was evident in how workers spoke about postal routes increasingly being determined by the speed of workers, with roads being distributed according to productivity metrics: 'if I'm walking quite fast' then the PDA device and data will show 'the time it takes to do my round, he's quite fast, it's possible he could do more work' (Joe). However, often this has arbitrary and unfair outcomes: 'So all the roads that I done and the other rounds which got taken out, they just got added on to other rounds which were nearby, which just makes the other rounds then huge' (Paul). The distances that postal workers then walk are substantially increased, regarded as 'unrealistic' and physically exhaustive compared to previously: 'We generally walk between 16/17 miles a day on our deliveries, that's how big they are now. When I started, I walked two miles, that was it' (Luke). Similarly, another postal worker noted: 'to do more than a five hour delivery outside, the physical elements of that are too great. I should imagine the average postman is doing around 20,000 steps a day' (Shane).

Intensification of work through the use of new technologies is therefore regarded as having disciplinary effects on workers. For instance, the metrics generated by the uses of digital tracking devices are seen to create a culture that targets older and/or slower workers as 'no longer fit for purpose'. As one postal worker said: 'not everyone walks at the same speed, not everyone has got as much energy as, say someone 20 or someone 50 doing the job, your energy is going to be different' (Paul). Further, as another postal worker explained, if workers do not deliver all of their mail 'on a consistent basis' then managers can use 'the information behind that' to say 'you're too slow on that, you're too slow on that' (Shane). In connection with this, postal workers spoke of change in their sense of self; specifically in a decline in the pride of postal work and a recapitulation from an interactive, social job to less satisfying, disciplined work:

> 'years ago, it was a job that was done with pride, the uniform […] you were taught to interact with your customers. Now if you're stood chatting with customers, they want to know why' (Max).

This aspect of intensification is thus encapsulated in the shift in identity from postal worker to automated courier as articulated below by Shane and Paul:

> 'You're very conscious of stopping. Years gone by, I've got customers on some of the routes that are disabled and so if I have a packet for, say, Mrs Jones and she's bedridden, […] I ring the doorbell and it's like, good morning Neil, can you fetch it in for me? And you're thinking now, if I stop now I'm generating yellow dots'. (Shane)

> 'It will be 'morning Paul', or something, and then they stop for two minutes and have a little chat. Royal Mail don't want that anymore, they want you just to bang out a parcel and on to the next address and so on. Pretty much like a white van driver, where a driver will just go along and leave the parcel on the doorstep and drive on, and no communication with the customer or nothing. I think they call it like a gig economy or something, is what they're trying to drive it towards'. (Paul)

Customer-driven

Another perception of change in the scope of postal work was a shift towards more customer-oriented supply chains and becoming a 'customer-driven' organisation. This also constituted an underlying rationale for the continued implementation of new technologies. This was something several postal workers were largely sympathetic to: 'obviously we've got to move with the times and technology is supposed to be there to help the customer' (Joshua). Largely this entails more focus on the experiences of the customers: 'most of the products now that Royal Mail are pushing, you take a photo as well. So I get it, it's good for the customer and it's better than just having it delivered and [wondering] where's your parcel' (Joe). As another postal worker similarly rationalised about the increased use of new technologies: 'in the beginning they always got it to say that they're tracking the customers parcels and packets. That is the big driving force, to be visible for the customer' (Shane).

On the other hand, the optimisation of the customer's experience jarred with articulations of the loss of social connection with that customer and the local community expressed amongst postal workers. While the rationalisation of digital tracking technologies and justification for their use was often attributed to customer benefits, some interviewees suggested this was superficial as customers do not necessarily implicitly value digital tracking. One postal worker noted: 'it's consumer led, although I think it's more for the supplier than the consumer because I think a lot of people just want to get their parcel and not a photograph at their door' (Eric). Another one similarly reflected: 'do they actually use [digital tracking] for the customer?… not really, no' because 'managers track us more than [customers'] packets. So tracking is there for one purpose but used for another' (Shane). This has created a paradoxical situation where the turn to a customer-oriented business model coincides with and contradicts the relationship postal workers can have with those customers.

In this respect, becoming more customer-driven is experienced as a shift in the purpose of postal work from serving communities to serving consumers. The sentiment

expressed by some postal workers was one in which Royal Mail was regarded as being about 'more than just delivering mail…We're part of the community and when we go on rounds and we stay on them for a couple of years, you get to know a lot of people' (Shane). Yet the constant pressure to be productive and fast-paced, rationalised as helping the customer-consumer, has in reality meant that workers are often less inclined to interact with the residents on their postal rounds. As one postal worker said about the PDA scanner: it adds a 'just do everything by the book' imperative to postal to work 'even if it's to the detriment of the customer who you know would be fine with [a package] on the front door and they'd be annoyed if you took it back because you've known them for 20 years and that's changed because they can't just risk it' (Richard). This was echoed by Joe, who emphasised the sudden and drastic change this represented for him: 'I've been on my round for a long time so I know my customers, I know their families, etc. They don't want that. So I guess it's quite worrying when you're used to that and then all of a sudden you'll be like, Royal Mail just wants you to deliver basically until you drop dead'.

Data-centric performance management techniques

Finally, our interviews point to a rupturing of group identification processes as the adoption of data-driven performance management techniques were said to produce differences amongst workers in experiences of precarity. For instance, precarity is experienced by older workers through new performance management techniques, largely driven by new technologies used to 'performance manage out' older workers who are on better contracts: 'they'll want to performance manage the top end of our age group out because we're on full pay for six months and then six months on half pay on the sick. That doesn't exist now' (Luke). The same postal worker further reflected: 'if you're not performing…you're just not fit for purpose and then they'll be able to bring someone else in on a lesser contract' (Luke). Another postal worker echoed a similar sentiment, seeing a drive to replace existing staff with workers on less secure contracts, in which digital tracking plays a crucial role: 'zero hours contract, that's what it's all about. This is why they've targeted the long term seniority people, why they've taken their routes off of them, why they were asking them questions with the PDA actuals' (Max). Another interviewee explained that the PDA device was originally introduced 'on the agreement that it was never to be used to conduct people' and yet 'Royal Mail want to be able to use it now to conduct people and they want to introduce a high performance culture' (Jason).

According to one postal worker, this combination of using automation to intensify and optimise work as a way to undermine secure working conditions is now endemic to the culture of Royal Mail:

> 'They've told me they'll just replace me with somebody who can do the job. And that's the style that we've got in Royal Mail at the moment because it's driven from the top that we're just expendable. They just want a revolving door. If you're too old, chuck them out, get another job. It doesn't matter if you've been there 20, 30 or 40 years. There's no value on anybody'. (Eric)

This level of precarity is implicating identity formation by encroaching upon the dignity and social value workers attach to postal work. This perception was shared amongst younger and agency workers, such as Richard, who implied that older workers' jobs are under threat: 'What's changed for older posties is they're in a position where they have to do everything by the book now because their jobs are at risk'. Importantly, experiences of precarity across the workforce are seen to create divisions amongst workers, undermining collective undertakings that have otherwise marked the organisational culture of Royal Mail. Postal workers implied that these differences in conditions combined with feelings of insecurity result in a two-tier workforce that weakens solidarity because it causes senior workers to question 'Do you stand up for these new starters?' whose worse contracts replace their own. Indeed, divisions and feelings of precarity within the workforce have been amplified during periods of industrial action with the Royal Mail actively encouraging a sense that postal workers are ultimately replaceable or disposable. One postal worker said that a 'gold command' issued by senior executives during the period of industrial action stipulated 'sack as many or get as many as you can to leave' (Max).

Concluding discussion: Amazonification of postal work and implications for worker identity

Our findings suggest that the Amazonification of postal work is emerging as Royal Mail imitates and adopts the technologies and business practices of Amazon, not only to compete with it but to become more like it in terms of culture, practices and orientation. This is experienced by many of the postal workers we interviewed as a series of technological, organisational and discursive shifts that reconfigure and devalue the meaning, scope and function of postal work. In particular, our findings highlight a number of specific technological and organisational changes which encompass a prioritisation of parcels over letters, a customer-driven model that paradoxically removes time for interacting with those customers, a rise in unrealistic productivity targets, the internalisation of the disciplinary logics of digital tracking, and a rise in data-driven performance management techniques that introduce uneven experiences of precarity. Though these changes are sometimes seen as enabled by or a continuation of privatisation, the

prevalence of platforms like Amazon is clear in workers' experiences and perceptions. Secondly, our findings illustrate that Amazonification is a discursive frame that workers construct and employ to understand changes to their role and to postal work, especially how and why they are becoming more like gig economy couriers. We suggest that this discursive frame becomes an ideational resource that is shaping the cultural repertoire of actions available to postal workers. For some postal workers, Royal Mail both aspires and needs to become more like Amazon, requiring acceptance or producing resignation, and yet for other postal workers this is something to be avoided, challenged or resisted. Further, and importantly, our findings illustrate that the influence of Amazon is engendering novel, distinctive kinds of identity struggles that depart from preceding identity struggles.

While identity struggles have been ongoing throughout and following processes of privatisation, the adoption of algorithmic managerial techniques and an emphasis on parcel delivery as the main function of postal work has furthered a sense of shift in purpose amongst postal workers, fracturing workers' understandings of 'who we are' as an organisation. While some workers accept or are resigned to the need to be technologically innovative and prioritise parcels, for other workers organisational identity is rooted in delivering letters and the pride and social value associated with this. Not only is there a sense that they are no longer valued as key figures in the community but that they are now operating predominantly on competitive, profit-seeking terms. At the same time, Amazonification entails an advancement of insecurity and precarity, evidenced by the use of data-driven performance management techniques to introduce contracts with worse terms and conditions, replacing previous contracts that have a stronger footing in workers' rights. Not only does this point to the replacement of public sector protections and conditions with gig economy style contracts but it also undermines the solidarity and sense of shared positionality between newer hires and senior workers. This demonstrates a fracturing of postal worker identity as conflicts over the meaning and purpose of postal work occur not just between management and rank-and-file workers but between these workers themselves.

For della Porta et al. (2022), to build collective identity through collective action, workers make use of organisational and ideational resources such as pre-existing social networks and institutions of solidarity. At the same time, self-narratives 'define motivations and provide the cultural repertoires for collective actions' (p. 91). In this sense, and following the Italian sociologist Allesandro Pizzorno, della Porta et al. suggest worker identity matters because preliminary processes of group identification among workers are necessary for struggles for recognition to occur. Invoking Pizzorno's argument that identification allows members of a community to recognise themselves as such 'with ensuing possibility to mobilise solidarities and collective action' (Pizzorno, 1983: 175, as cited in della Porta et al., 2022: 91), della Porta et al. understand recognition struggles as 'the struggle of emerging groups to have their existence as a collective actor recognized'. As such, in the context of platformisation, it matters if workers experience the introduction of new technologies as a shift in perceptions of 'who we are' as a collective. Such a shift would, following della Porta et al. and Pizzorno, have a significant purchase on the ability of workers to collectively mobilise and to negotiate, or resist, aspects of automation and platformisation that they experience as harmful or unjust. In this sense, the contested meaning of postal work, especially whether it is primarily a letters or parcels organisation, constitutes an identity struggle that has significant implications for how and the extent to which postal workers are able to mobilise a collective identity and build solidarity for collective action. As postal worker identity is pulled in different directions by the competing narratives of letter delivery and parcel prioritisation, collective identity is harder to form and is so far weakening, rather than strengthening or solidifying, through identity struggles brought about by Amazonification.

Our interviews also suggest that processes of Amazonification are changing workers' sense of self and of each other. Digital tracking devices like the PDA now mediate how postal workers deliver letters and parcels in a way that undermines their agency and capacity to carry out this work on their own terms. The way that workers are tracked and evaluated through such devices and data-driven processes impacts how workers in turn see themselves as they internalise, to varying degrees, the disciplinary logics of digital tracking. Moore and Robinson (2016) have discussed the significance of work-based technologies in terms of the creation of a 'quantified self at work' that accompanies the rise of wearable and other self-tracking devices in workplaces. A key point for Moore and Robinson is that the 'psychological changes arising from precarity contribute to the formation of anxious selves who have internalised the imperative to perform, a two-part subjectification of workers as observing, entrepreneurial subject and observed, objectified labouring bodies' (p.2276). One example of the psychological impact of digital tracking and wearable devices in postal work is workers' heightened awareness of their walking speeds and the PDA scanner's 'yellow dots'. This represents an internal identity shift, the emergence of which resembles and intensifies longer-standing identity struggles generated by privatisation (Radic, 2019).

Furthermore, the experiences of such technologies articulated by postal workers highlight the insipid ways Amazonification creates new struggles for recognition by invoking different forms of technology-driven insecurity. While the role of reputation has been highlighted in discussions on platform work, the case of Royal Mail showcases how ontological (in)security (Giddens, 1991) that relies

upon people's ability to give meaning to their lives is bound up with a range of features derived from algorithmic management, that require constant negotiation and navigation while also being out of workers' control. Indeed, postal worker identity is being shaped by the type of employee data-driven logics of evaluation and categorisation conferred upon individual workers. For example, our interviews suggest that the ability to track postal workers and generate data about their work is enabling distinctive divisions to emerge between workers that restructure the workforce according to the profitability of types of worker. In particular, the combined deployment of digital tracking devices and performance management techniques for the pursuit of a lean and efficient workforce has valorised a division of the workforce into what is presented as slow and fast workers, or productive and unproductive parts of the workforce. As the interviews demonstrate, data is already affecting life chances as it can be used to 'performance manage out' inefficient postal workers deemed not fit for purpose by their data, substantiating feelings of insecurity and injustice amongst different workers and posing a substantive threat to postal workers' understanding of 'who we are'.

In conclusion, the organisational features by which postal workers understand and define their identity, we argue, are therefore being displaced by features of Amazonification – the mimicking and adoption of dominant platform technologies and organisational cultures and practices – which is contributing to a redefinition of postal worker identity. For example, delivering letters and community ties and membership have both been understood by workers as defining and distinguishing features of the purpose and function of postal work. As these features are challenged or replaced by the dominance of Amazon's management practices and organisational culture, understandings of postal worker identity are refracted through this and become highly contested. Moreover, while the political project of privatisation created a new organisational form that reoriented and contested postal worker identity by challenging the public sector foundations of it, Amazonification requires us to rethink the terms upon which current struggles over worker identity play out. The identity struggle we are pointing to is not purely embedded in the private sector organisational form but in the emerging gig economy template and its accompanying data-driven evaluation processes. For some workers at least, this emerging gig economy identity is not only problematic but constitutive of misrecognition, especially with regards to the public service that workers feel they provide and the important social role they perceive they have within the local communities that they serve. As such, we can see a transformation of the features of postal work into those of gig economy work, and the loss of protection and social purpose that this represents to postal workers. This focus, we contend, is a very significant but largely neglected aspect in current debates on platformisation and the future of work.

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