



## S. Societal Impact

Social Responsibility and Tomorrow's Society

# Covid-19: The collective visibility of couriers or the beginnings of a new social contract

ESCP Impact Paper No. 2020-66-EN

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## **Covid-19: The collective visibility of couriers or the beginnings of a new social contract**

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### **Abstract**

This impact paper discusses possible effects of the Coronavirus health crisis on the future of delivery platform couriers. Usually invisible individually to the eyes of society, these workers are gaining in collective visibility in the context of the current health crisis. The continuity of their activity, at a time when only essential services for the life of the Nation are being maintained, highlights their key role as the last link in these platforms' value chain. In today's exceptional conditions, this spotlight provides an opportunity to draw the lines of a new social contract for these independent workers.

Keywords: gig economy, social visibility, social utility, labor relations, responsibility

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## **Covid-19: The Collective Visibility of Couriers or the beginnings of a New Social Contract**

Paris, Milan and Madrid, the images are all the same, showing empty and quiet streets; a silence broken at times by the noise of platform couriers' bicycles and mopeds. Deliveroo, Uber Eats, Glovo, Stuart, Foodora, to name a few, continue their activities during the lockdown. Usually forgotten and disregarded, these couriers have suddenly become much more visible and risen to the level of indispensable workers. Given this physical and social visibility, this contribution focuses on the effects of the health crisis on the way couriers are organizing. In General, hyper-individualized in their relationship with the platform, this crisis could, in our opinion, shape the beginnings of a collective identity for couriers, key to the development of a new "social contract" for this largely ignored population.

This paper is part of a doctoral project on solidarity practices and common identity building processes among platform workers (Kriem, 2020). In terms of methodology, several data sources have been used: (i) couriers' stories and statements to better understand their experiences and expectations; (ii) platforms' external communication materials to learn about their strategies in managing the crisis; (iii) press articles to assess the changes in the context; (iv) unions' press releases and publications to evaluate their role in the couriers' organization process; (v) couriers' interactions on social networks to explore emerging solidarity practices; and (vi) video excerpts and pictures of collective events happening during this crisis, which are available online, to study the forms of collective action taken by couriers. The data scope covers the last two months (from March to early May), to collect information shared throughout the lockdown period. The data gathered also covers several countries in order to ensure a comprehensive overview: France, Spain, Italy and Canada, which offer some interesting examples of organization among couriers.

### **The coronavirus health crisis and the increase in social visibility of couriers**

#### *The maintained activity of food delivery platforms*

While the functioning of many Societies is reduced to the essential components of their survival, namely care, protection and feeding, food delivery platforms have kept on working, in line with government guidelines. By promoting health practices, diversifying the scope of their activities and offering free delivery services, these platforms are trying to minimize the risks of restaurants closing and to seize the opportunities arising from the population being confined at home. By building partnerships with supermarkets and running their own grocery stores, they stand as an alternative to store line-ups and saturated drive-thru services. Examples of Glovo Market in Barcelona and Milan, L'Epicerie de Deliveroo in Paris and the partnership between Uber Eats and Carrefour confirm the aim of multiple sources of income in times of crisis.

Keeping this delivery business going and attracting clients relies on the implementation of health and safety measures and the promise of contactless delivery. By creating meal recovery areas in restaurants, respecting social distancing and placing orders at the client's door, the platforms want to reassure them that there is no physical contact between couriers, restaurant staff and clients.

## *A spotlight on the courier's job*

By putting a number of sectors out of business and keeping food delivery platforms running, the current health crisis has turned the spotlight on the couriers' job and raised their physical, media and institutional visibility. Always highly recognizable thanks to their work equipment, they ride through empty streets to meet clients' demands. With colorful jackets, bags with corporate logos, bicycles and mopeds as transportation means, the physical markers of this job are many and enable the public to identify these workers and the couriers to recognize each other. Invading the public space, they also invite themselves into homes in times of confinement. In front of their screens, the confined people discover the interviews conducted with couriers on their daily life in times of crisis. Reports, television news and press articles give the floor to these workers and show the current interest of the audiovisual and digital media for this category of workers. At the institutional level, the involvement of unions and members of parliament regarding the issues faced by couriers in this health context underlines a greater political visibility and a growing place in political speeches and programs, albeit still limited.

## *The social utility of couriers and the first signs of symbolic recognition*

These unusual circumstances highlight the specificities of this job and bring out the first elements of social visibility. After dealing with forms of invisibility, defined as a set of processes leading to a feeling of non-recognition and social disregard (Beaud, Confavreux, Lindgaard, 2008; Clifford, 1963), the current crisis highlights the social utility of couriers and their role in the survival of food businesses that have been forced to close their doors. This enhanced status and first form of symbolic recognition can be seen, for instance, in the giving of more attractive tips, as a sign of gratitude and of clients' awareness of the risks taken.

By no longer blending in with the crowd and by contributing to the sustainability of local businesses, couriers gain physical and social visibility in the current context. These passive forms of visibility are in fact combined with an active and collective visibility. By conducting joint actions, couriers are now more visible as a collective.

## **Emerging signs of a collective identity**

### *Physical and space markers related to the coronavirus crisis*

By playing a part in making the physical and spatial isolation of couriers and their competition stronger, the present health context may seem at first glance untimely for the development of solidarity practices and collective actions. The recent health provisions seem more likely to underscore the hyper-individualized nature of the courier's relationship with the platform. If anything, the traditional barriers to the organization of couriers are intensified: territorial spread, irregular working schedules, competition between couriers and challenges to the right of association. Beyond these obstacles, which are parts of the platforms' operating scheme and which have been widely documented, the consequences of the coronavirus crisis and the methods to manage it clearly hinder the couriers' possibilities to meet and mobilize. Gatherings are prohibited, social distancing is mandatory, infected couriers are placed in quarantine while others have decided to temporarily stop their activity.

A retrospective look is therefore crucial to better understand the effects of these changes on the couriers' organization. The mobilization and solidarity moments that took place before the start of the health crisis showed the importance of having access to physical or virtual spaces, free from the surveillance and control of the platforms, thanks to the digitization of the managerial position (Tassinari & Macarrone, 2020; Gandini, 2019). The street, as a workspace for couriers, has been a tool for socialization and organization. As a place of exchange between workers during waiting times, on central squares, in parks or outside restaurants, the street has been the place of day-to-day acts of mutual sharing and support (jokes, advices on bicycle maintenance, organization of sport events, etc.) (Cant, 2019). Building on this embryonic solidarity, the street became the space of emergence of the first forms of active solidarity (Atzeni, 2010), through distribution of tracts, pasting of posters and protest marches.

The street, to use the slogan of French guilds, is the "factory" of platform workers. At a time when access to the street, the hotbed of couriers' labor unrest, is limited and controlled (mandatory certificate for leaving home, police checkpoints, limited public transport traffic, etc.), it is legitimate to question their ability to go beyond the individualized nature of the job. In fact, the coronavirus crisis is participating in the emergence of new physical and spatial markers. In this context, the territorial visibility of couriers is materialized through gatherings in front of restaurants, despite security measures, demonstrations respecting the rule of social distancing and the establishment of meeting points to distribute individual protective equipment (masks, disposable gloves, etc.) collected by groups of couriers.

Space management is thus at the heart of the response to this crisis. This context brings to light the material and geographic needs of couriers, mainly providing them with water points to wash their hands, creating storage areas for uncontaminated work tools and implementing distribution units of protection equipment in strategic areas, accessible to all of them.

### *Social markers linked to the coronavirus crisis*

In the framework of this crisis, the collective identity-building process of couriers is grounded in various social interactions, both within the group and in its relationship with the rest of the society. Despite the obstacles, several forms of collective action have emerged in Europe and the rest of the world, with the aim of: (i) providing couriers with individual protection tools, (ii) raising funds and advocating for access to public aids, and (iii) calling for an improvement of working conditions.

Given the couriers' level of exposure to the risk of contamination, collectives have organized themselves to gather and distribute safety equipment. In Valencia, the Riders x Derechos group has distributed masks and disposable gloves in the streets, given by the city hall and the local police.

Calls for solidarity and advocacy actions towards governments were meant to reduce the financial burden of the health crisis, by appealing to people's generosity and calling for the generalization of governmental financial aid to all couriers. In Canada, these organizational efforts were illustrated by the distribution of meal baskets for couriers and the launch of the "Foodsters United Hardship Fund", an online fundraising.

Finally, holding protest marches in Spain and Canada has given the couriers a more theatrical visibility. In April, the spontaneous protest tour of several dozen couriers in the streets of Madrid, on bicycles or mopeds, to protest against the fare cut by the Glovo platform, took on a scenic dimension. The noise of engines and horns, the uniformity of the couriers' clothing and the omnipresence of the platforms' color codes are evidence of the staging of the courier's job. In Toronto, the symbolic date of May 1<sup>st</sup> was an opportunity for Foodora's couriers to contest the platform's decision to leave the country and stop its activities there on May 11. Dozens of couriers protested on the way to the company's headquarters. Holding up signs and repeating slogans, their professional identity was emphasized by the visibility of their work equipment during the demonstration.

### *Community-based markers related to the coronavirus crisis*

Studying the emerging signs of a collective identity implies analyzing the means by which a sense of community and a common vision can be built. Social networks, the main communication tools for couriers today, allow us to learn about the nature of interactions between them. They help assess the sense of belonging to the group, its influence, the fulfilment of their needs and their shared emotions, all of which are characteristic of a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). For example, the exchanges observed on Facebook groups focused on:

- Raising awareness of health risks and sharing good practices: refusing to enter buildings during deliveries, ways to get protection equipment, etc.
- Sharing technical knowledge: terms and conditions of access to financial aid, etc.
- Experience sharing regarding the job during the crisis: frequency and content of orders, amount of tips, clients' behavior, etc.
- Expression of emotional support: sharing jokes, using a fellowship glossary, etc.

### **The beginnings of a new "social contract", based on a co-responsibility principle**

This increase in the visibility of couriers represents an opportunity to draw the boundaries of a new social contract for independent workers. Understood as a set of unwritten norms and laws governing the professional relationship, this pact could combine co-responsibility and value co-creation.

### *The courier, a key player for value creation in the platform model*

The ongoing health situation has thus fostered the emergence of new forms of solidarity and organization among platform workers. While the future evolution of this segment remains uncertain and drawing conclusions from this crisis is hasty, the emphasis on the courier's job, in the unusual conditions we are experiencing today, has revealed the key contribution of the courier to the value creation of the platform ecosystem (Coeurderoy et al., 2019). Thus, this multi-sided model (Cusumano, Gawer & Yoffie, 2019), which brings together several groups of users (restaurants, clients and couriers), requires all the components of the chain to be taken into account in the platform value creation process.

## *Structuring a principle of co-responsibility*

The coronavirus crisis has been an opportunity to reflect on the accountability of all stakeholders. The requests made to the platforms have included, for instance, the implementation of control mechanisms to ensure compliance with security measures and the creation of multilingual training to respond to the diverse socio-cultural profiles of couriers. The key role of clients in the ethical use of platforms has also been pointed out. Orders of convenience (sweets, alcoholic beverages, etc.) rather than necessity have been strongly criticized, for example. Similarly, clients have been encouraged by courier groups to adopt safety measures (picking up the order at the entrance of the building, washing their hands before and after receipt, etc.), to give tips and support the collective efforts of couriers. Thirdly, the responsibility of restaurants has also been referred to, recalling the usual lack of hygiene awareness and precautions in the fast food industry. Couriers' stories in the context of health crises reflect the poor compliance with safety measures by restaurant staff when rushing to prepare orders. Finally, the responsibility of couriers has also been discussed in regard to renting professional accounts to undocumented migrants, in exchange of payment and exploiting their precarious situation.

## *The creation of the first mechanisms of collective visibility*

The establishment of a new social contract could therefore draw on the efforts made before the coronavirus crisis. At the end of 2019, the Deliveroo platform had indeed announced the future creation of the first Courier Forum in France. The purpose of this consultative body is to bring together the management of Deliveroo and the representatives elected by the couriers once a quarter to discuss strategic issues. The conclusions of the meetings would be shared with all workers. The conditions considered for the candidates' eligibility are based on a minimum number of weeks of seniority and a minimum number of orders placed over the past few months.

## **Conclusion**

Through the angle of the health crisis, the job of courier has gained collective visibility. More than a sum of individuals, couriers, through their solidarity practices and new forms of organization, are gradually emerging as a community. If at this stage, this embryonic process does not make it possible to reject the hypothesis of a return to the previous world in the coming weeks or months, it may also herald new modes of cooperation and shed light on the emergence of a new social contract, based on co-responsibility and co-creation of value.

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