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## **Contrasting discourses: Digital precariat or flexible entrepreneurship? A corpus-assisted discourse analysis of platform work in German and Finnish business newspapers**

### **Highlights**

- Platform work requires linguistic analysis to broaden the understanding of this complex phenomenon.
- Representations of platform work in German and Finnish business newspapers are versatile and contrasting.
- The media hold the power to frame platform work homogeneously in challenges or possibilities.

## Abstract

Platform work as a new form of work is a globally discussed research topic in various research fields, such as social sciences, economics and labour law. Previous research identifies the significant impact platforms have on work, labour market and society. This article brings a linguistic approach to the topic, analyzing and comparing the discussion on platform work in German and Finnish business newspapers in 2017–2021. The corpus-assisted discourse analysis shows that platform work is discussed in both media partly in same contexts, such as in platform work's effect on labour market and society, the unclear employment status and the need for stronger regulation. However, the analysis is able to tease out aspects and distinctions of platform work in the media not shown previously. Findings show that the German *Handelsblatt* represents platform work as a challenge to society with strong regulation requests, whereas the Finnish *Kauppalehti* highlights the possibilities platform work provides to entrepreneurship and labour market.

**Keywords:** platform work, corpus-assisted discourse research, critical discourse analysis, media discourse

**Asiasanat:** alustatyö, korpusavusteinen diskurssintutkimus, kriittinen diskurssianalyysi, mediadiskurssi

## 1 Introduction

Platform work has become one of the key dimensions of the platform economy, and its importance is growing in the European Union's (EU) labour market, social debate, decision-making and legislation. Despite sparking extensive scholarly and public debate due to its rapid expansion, the portrayal of this phenomenon in newspaper media remains largely unexplored. This article analyses texts addressing platform work in German and Finnish business newspapers in 2017–2021 and thus widens the platform research into field of linguistics.

The media, particularly newspapers, play a crucial role in shaping public understanding and ongoing discussions regarding the impact of platform work on various aspects of society, including working life and the labour market. Scholars in the fields of discourse and media studies have highlighted the influential role of media discourse in shaping perceptions of complex phenomena (e.g. van Dijk 1988; Fairclough 1995a; Conboy 2007; Wodak & Meyer 2009). Given the global proliferation of platform work, analysing media discussions on this topic becomes imperative to understanding the type of information regarding platform work that newspapers disseminate.

The corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) approach is the methodological ground of this article. The combination of quantitative corpus study methods and qualitative discourse analysis allows the analysis of both large-scale tendencies and detailed expressions and nuances of how platform work is discussed. Discourse analysis is particularly suitable as a method for research designs in which the key is to obtain information about the social or cultural understanding of a phenomenon,

thing or practice and the role of language in them as a producer of understanding (Fairclough 1995b: 208–209; Pälli & Lillqvist 2020: 376). Discourses can be identified through the critical interpretation of texts, which have interactional and broader social contexts (Fowler et al. 2018: 195–196). The data is analysed using the critical discourse research approach and applying Fairclough's (1992, 1995b) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis.

The goal of this study is to analyse the discussion of platform work in business newspapers in Germany and Finland. To specify this goal, answers to the following research questions are sought: 1) How platform work is discussed in German-language and Finnish-language business newspapers in 2017–2021? 2) What kind of categorizations emerge in the textual material on platform work? 3) What types of differences can be found between German and Finnish textual material on platform work? Within this research framework, it is possible to bring a novel perspective to previous research on platform work by revealing its representation in German and Finnish online newspaper media.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Background

Platform work is a current global multidisciplinary research topic. The term platform work is used for a wide range of work, employment and work tasks related to platforms, such as work performed in the global digital economy (e.g. expert work via Upwork) and locally, such as work in food delivery companies, care and transport (Poutanen et al. 2020; Kenney et al. 2020). What these different forms of work and platforms have in common is that they have created a new way of coordinating the labour supply through emerging technologies. The recent research has shown that digital platforms are changing the supply of work by increasing opportunities to seek short-term work but at the same time offering the opportunity to evade regulation, such as taxation and social security, thereby undermining the quality of employment (Urzi Brancati et al. 2020; Drahokoupil 2021). Research has also provided a positive assessment by flagging that platform work has the potential to contribute to economic growth and overcome mismatches in supply and demand for labour across regions (Graham et al. 2017). At the same time, the literature has discussed discrimination through ratings and the potential of labour market segmentation due to limited mobility within and beyond platform work (Leimeister et al. 2016).

## 2.2 Towards textual research on platform work

Of the multitude of studies on platform work, only a few have focused on the discursive representations of this new form of labour in media and public discourse. Pangrazio et al. (2023) examined the portrayal of the gig economy in Australian newspaper media from 2014 to 2019. They critically analysed the discourse surrounding the gig economy and addressed challenges in regulating gig economy platforms and the narrative of inevitability regarding changes brought about by digitalisation. In comparable manner, Hassanli et al. (2022) explored the representations of Airbnb in local Sydney newspapers. While Airbnb is typically seen as an online marketplace and part of the sharing economy, it can also be likened to platform work because it often provides additional income to those renting out their apartments. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), their study examined 123 newspaper articles and revealed prominent themes, such as the benefits and costs of Airbnb, regulatory policies (or lack thereof) and the rights and responsibilities of the stakeholders involved.

In the European context, de Groen et al. (2018) have studied public and policy debate on platform work in EU member states. They noted that platform work has become a focal point in public discourse across some EU member states, primarily spurred by trade unions and media expressing concerns about workers' employment and conditions. In Germany, the discussion encompasses employment status, working conditions, social protection, competition, taxation and representation. Similarly, in Finland, the prevalent topics include employment status, working conditions, social protection, competition, taxation and entrepreneurship. Notably, the study reveals that the public debate in these states tends to emphasise the adverse effects of platform work on the labour market. By contrast, business representatives, while less vocal, often highlight the potential for increased flexibility, innovation and competitive advantage in the economy driven by platforms. The data for the study has been collected from the database of the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC). (de Groen et al. 2018.)

## 3 Theoretical and methodological framework

### 3.1 Platform work in media discourses

Platform work is changing work and the economy, which is why it has also emerged in media and public debate. The power of newspaper media is specifically linguistic and discursive, and by examining the forms of everyday language use, it is possible to reveal how the relationships and structures of power are embedded in these forms (Fairclough 1997: 10; Deacon et al. 2007: 154). Media studies assert that language is

a primary tool for analysing societal beliefs and structures at any given time. It helps unveil patterns that illustrate the dynamics between dominant and subordinate groups, as well as strategies that render certain representations 'normal' to the public. (Conboy 2007: 24.)

The concept of discourse has several meanings in different research fields, but in this study, it refers to recognisable ways of using language to construct social phenomena from certain perspectives. Discourse analysis studies how language is used to (attempt to) influence the beliefs and behaviours of other people (Partington et al. 2013: 5). The media have the power to choose which themes are represented and how the themes are discussed. Media research is about evaluating and comparing representations, weighing what is included in them and excluded from them, what is set as primary and secondary, where they come from and what factors and interests influence their formulation and presentation. (Fairclough 1997: 66–67.) In this context, discourse also refers to how language in the media expresses systems of knowledge and power. Discourse analysis enables the exploration of how media language constructs social knowledge, thus allowing audiences to position themselves socially, politically and culturally. It aids critical readers in understanding the explicit relationships between public and private representations and in mapping connections between different social groups. (Conboy 2007: 118.)

The analysis in the present study applies the above-mentioned approaches in an attempt to examine platform work with a multidisciplinary approach and participate in previous research debates from the fields of linguistics and media studies, (critical) discourse studies and corpus studies. The aim is also to bring corpus-assisted discourse analysis and CDA closer together, although these are not usually combined (Partington et al. 2013).

### **3.2 Corpus-assisted discourse studies CADS and critical discourse analysis CDA**

Discourse research is traditionally seen to focus more on the content of texts and the analysis of their relationships with surrounding society, whereas corpus research traditionally focuses on the structure and vocabulary of the language itself. However, especially in textual discourse research language, words and structures (micro level) are examined, although the aim is to obtain information on the surrounding society and culture (macro level) (Jantunen 2018: 22). The CADS approach aims to reveal the discourse types in the data, or as Partington et al. (2013: 11) describe it, the non-obvious meanings. Combining the quantitative corpus-assisted approach and the qualitative discourse analysis, the CADS approach allows the analysis of both large-scale tendencies and detailed expressions and nuances of how a certain societal phenomenon, such as

platform work, is discussed. In the analysis of new economic and societal phenomena, such as platforms and platform work, CADS as a methodology is highly appropriate.

Partington et al. (2013: 5–7) define corpus linguistics as a set of studies analysing the form or function of language using computerised corpora. The analysis of corpora can make different social, political or ideological emphases visible in texts. Corpus linguistics may be treated more as a set of methodological tools and practices for language analysis. Larger datasets and the appropriate application of corpus methods help in finding regularities in the data and demonstrating them. (Pälli & Lillqvist 2020: 387.) Alongside the quantitative feature of corpus studies, it can also be referred to as statistical methodology, which aims to search for recurring patterns in the data. If something appears frequently in a language, it can be seen as significant. (Partington et al. 2013: 8–9.)

CDA focuses on examining the use of language as social interaction (Fairclough 2015: 139–141; Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 20–23). In CDA, the use of language is considered social action that reconstructs reality. Language has power, and it is important to examine the ways in which language is used and the consequences of language use (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 14). How platform work is described in newspaper articles constructs the meaning and position of platform work in society. In other words, the way platform work is represented in newspaper media has broader social and societal meanings. The media have the power to affect knowledge, beliefs, values, social relations and social identities. It can give a certain meaning to a theme or phenomenon through how it is represented.

The critical analysis of media discourse analyses the interrelationships between three different aspects of the situation: text, discourse practice and sociocultural practice. A three-dimensional framework developed by Fairclough (1992, 1995b) is applied as a discourse research approach for analysing the data. This three-dimensional framework of CDA consists of three dimensions: description (as text), interpretation (as discourse practice) and explanation (as sociocultural practice). In this study, the first dimension, description, focuses on analysis at the word level and points out that certain words in these data represent platform work. The second dimension, interpretation, is about discursive practice, which happens at the text level. In this study, this refers to the contexts in which platform work is discussed in the data. The third dimension, explanation, is about analysis at the norm level. In this study, this means that the language used and how platform work is represented in the data are linked to wider societal debate. (Fairclough 1995b: 2.) The basic concepts and methods of CDA, such as designation, categorisation and representation, are also used in the analysis of the data (Fairclough 2015: 90).

One key aspect of CDA is representation, which refers to specific types of presentations and linguistic choices that include certain points of view, political choices or depictions that produce reality. By identifying different representations, it is possible to recognise which representations are dominant and which are left out. In this study,

this means that instead of examining single words that refer to platform work, the data are examined as whole texts in which the contents are more meaningful than individual words. By studying representations, it is possible to identify discourses. (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 78–80.)

## 4 Data

The data were collected from newspapers *Handelsblatt* in Germany and *Kauppalehti* in Finland during the 2017–2021 period. The period chosen in this study was based on the rise of the platform work phenomenon and its appearance in media outlets, followed by articles, commentaries and debates in the economic media, such as *Handelsblatt* and *Kauppalehti*. The rise of the catch words ‘platforms’, ‘platform work’ and ‘platform economy’ occurred in 2017. The five-year period was considered to be substantially long enough in terms of variety to appear. According to the European Council (2022), revenues from digital platform work increased from 3.4 billion to 14 billion in the 2016–2020 period. These numbers show that the EU’s platform economy grew quickly during those particular years and continues to do so. This change is also likely to be seen in the societal debate.

Both *Handelsblatt* and *Kauppalehti* are thematically identified as economic and financial magazines. *Handelsblatt* is the largest business and financial newspaper in the German language, and it aims to provide information on the economy and the changes faced by society, businesses and individuals. Published by Handelsblatt Media Group from Monday to Friday, it reached over 500,000 readers in 2023. (Statista 2023; Handelsblatt Media Group 2024.) *Kauppalehti* focuses on economic phenomena and the money market in the digital era. It is published by Alma-Media Group from Monday to Friday. According to Alma Media’s statistics, the online version of *Kauppalehti* reaches approximately 173,000 readers weekly. (Alma Media 2023.)

The research data, collected in 2022 from online news archives, followed the qualitative approach. A broad range of articles was gathered to gauge the scope of public discourse using nine search terms related to platform work and 15 platform company names (Appendix 1). These terms were chosen based on their prevalence in the literature and in public discussions. To account for the various types of platform work, multiple terms were included in the search process. The platform company names were sourced from listings of companies operating in Germany and Finland (Fairwork 2020; Finnish Institute of Organizational Health 2021).

The search process yielded a dataset of 219 articles in total: 124 articles from *Handelsblatt* and 95 articles from *Kauppalehti*. This shows that platform work is represented in public discussions in both newspapers. The text genres of the articles were not a relevant factor when the data were collected, as the goal was to collect

many different outcomes related to platform work. The online articles were converted into two self-compiled corpora by copying the textual contents of the articles into two separate text documents, one in each language. The German corpus was 77.740 words, and the Finnish corpus was 56.957 words in size.

## 5 Data analysis

The data analysis adopted mixed qualitative and quantitative approaches (Partington et al. 2013; Fairclough 1992, 1995b). Quantitatively, the analysis explored the variety of representations of platform work; qualitatively, it examined how these representations were constructed. A contrastive analysis of language use in *Handelsblatt* and *Kauppalehti* uncovered nuances that could be overlooked in individual language analyses. This approach not only highlighted the differences between languages or cultures but also revealed unique language characteristics. Contrastive analysis offers deeper insights into individual languages or cultures (Tiittula 1997: 153–155, 163).

To produce thematic categories and codes, searches in the corpora were conducted using the NVivo system, and 10 keywords (Appendix 2) were obtained. The keywords were similar to those used in the search for newspaper articles in this study. In addition, the terms *Plattformökonomie*, *alustatalous* (platform economy) were included in the keywords. This decision was based on the notions made during the skimming of the entire dataset: when the platform economy was discussed, it was often related to platform work and vice versa. The platform company names used in the data search were excluded from the keyword search process. This decision was based on this study's aim of focusing on discussions about platform work, not on certain platform companies. This part of the analysis process represented the first dimension, description, of Fairclough's 3D-model described in the previous chapter.

Upon closer examination of the keywords, the three most frequently occurring terms in the German data were *Crowdwork* (47%, n=68), *Gig economy* (16%, n=24) and *Klickarbeit* (12%, n=18), collectively accounting for 75% of all key terms used in the search process. Conversely, in *Kauppalehti*, discussions on platform work were characterised by a more concentrated use of fewer terms. The most prevalent Finnish key terms were *alustatalous* (44%, n=141) and *alustatyö* (32%, n=101), which accounted for 76% of the total key term hits. To address the study's research questions, the three most frequently occurring key terms in the German data and the two most prevalent Finnish key terms mentioned above were selected for further analysis, with a focus on the contexts in which they were represented in the data.

The categories for the analysis were produced by listing the themes that represent the contexts in which the keywords (*Crowdwork*, *Gig economy*, *Klickarbeit*; *alustatalous*; *alustatyö*) appeared. This approach required multiple reviews of the data to identify



the context surrounding the keywords in both corpora. The criteria for choosing the category for a text excerpt stemmed from contextualising the interpretations of the text excerpts and analysing the context in which the keyword appeared in that particular excerpt. The themes for the categories emerged as a result of the analysis, and they represented the recurring features in the data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). This part of the analysis process represented the second dimension, interpretation, of Fairclough's 3D-model described in previous chapter. The top categories and the criteria for them are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Top categories and the criteria for coding within the categories

<b>Category</b>	<b>Criteria for the coding within the category</b>
Effect on working life, labour market, society	Discussion on a.) the relevance of gig economy in Europe, in Germany or in Finland now or in the future, b.) parallel digital labour market and its positive and/or negative effects on labour market, social security and welfare state.
Employee or self-employed	Discussion on a.) the role of the platform company as an intermediate or employer, b.) national and international differences in the definition on employee and entrepreneur status, c.) the effect on employment status on platform workers, platform companies and labour market.
Employee rights, social security, legal status	Discussion on a.) labour law status of the platform workers, b.) job and social security of the platform workers, c.) precarious working conditions of the platform workers.
Entrepreneurs, freelancers, self-employed	Discussion on a.) platform workers within platform economy are self-employed or freelancers, b.) the positive and negative sides of such entrepreneurship.
Flexibility, low entry, satisfaction	Discussion on a.) the freedom and flexibility of platform work.
Income	Discussion on a.) different earning systems between the types of platform work, b.) the level of income within platform work, c.) the role of income for platform workers.
Legal cases	Discussion on a.) relevant legal cases related to platform work.
Legislation, regulation	Discussion on a.) legislation and regulation needs for platform work in the EU, in Germany and/or in Finland, b.) the positive and negative effects on stronger regulation.
Politics	Discussion on a.) the need for political actions to change legislation within platform economy, b.) the expressed key points and concerns on platform work from decision makers and political parties.
Power relations	Discussion on a.) the power of the platform companies, b.) the uneven power relations between the platform company and the worker.
Rules, frames	Discussion on a.) general rules and frames within platform economy in the EU.
Trade union movement, unionism	Discussion on a.) current trade unions and their status in the digital platform economy, b.) the needs for trade unions to advocate the unclear situation for platform workers.

Qualitative analysis reveals that the contents in the coded text excerpts usually overlap; thus, the same text excerpts can be coded into more than one category. All of the text excerpts that were essential for the analysis of the research questions were coded in NVivo. To answer the research questions and obtain a proper text excerpt for the qualitative analysis, the entire text paragraph surrounding the keyword was included in the coding. The top categories and text excerpts coded into them were examined through a more in-depth qualitative analysis. The contexts of the excerpts were analysed to explain what the coded text says about platform work in a certain context and whether it mirrors something from the surrounding society. This part of the analysis process represented the third dimension, explanation, of Fairclough's 3D-model described in the previous chapter.

## 6 Findings

### 6.1 How is platform work discussed in German-language and Finnish-language business newspapers in 2017–2021?

The findings of this study show that the language used differs when platform work is discussed in German-language and Finnish-language business newspapers in 2017–2021. Based on the analysis of this study, *Handelsblatt* (later also referred as HB) has a more critical stance towards platform work, whereas the language when platform work is discussed in *Kauppalehti* (later also referred as KL) is more neutral. Interestingly, the categorizations linked to platform work are mostly similar when these corpora are compared, but there is discrepancy when the contents or perspectives within the categories are compared.

The analysis of the German corpus shows 145 codings in 16 categories, while that of the Finnish corpus results in 258 codings in 22 categories. Due to limited space, this article focuses on the top 10 categories in both corpora, resulting altogether 12 categories (see Table 1) when the differences between the corpora has been identified. However, it should be noted that when comparing the total number of codings, there is a notable difference between the German and Finnish datasets, despite the German dataset containing more newspaper articles. This variance may stem from the differences in the structural textual styles observed in *Handelsblatt* and *Kauppalehti*. Specifically, their paragraph lengths differ significantly: paragraphs in *Handelsblatt* typically span 4–10 lines, while those in *Kauppalehti* are much shorter, spanning 2–6 lines.

Most of the top categories emerged in both German and Finnish textual material but showed some variation in their frequency when the number of codings and the percentage of each category are compared with all codings (German corpus N=145; Finnish corpus N=258). The following categories were more frequent in *Handelsblatt*

than in *Kauppalehti*, emphasizing the precariat role of platform work in Germany: debate on the employee rights, social security and legal status of platform workers (HB 17 %, n=24; KL 12%, n=32), the discussion on whether platform workers are employees rather than self-employed (HB 12%, n=17; KL 9%, n=23), the discourse on platform workers' income (HB 12%, n=18; KL 6%, n=15) and the trade union movement and unionism concerning platform work (HB 8%, n=11; KL 4%, n=11). Discussions on platform workers as entrepreneurs, freelancers or self-employed (HB 6%, n=8; KL 5%, n=14) and those on power relations between the platform company and the worker (HB 6%, n=8; KL 5%, n=14) were present both in *Handelsblatt* and in *Kauppalehti*, however *Kauppalehti* presenting more positive stance towards platform work emphasizing the flexibility and possibilities platform work offers.

## 6.2 What kind of categorizations emerge in the textual material on platform work?

The top 10 categories in both corpora are presented in Table 2. The categories are presented in alphabetical order and with running numbers (C1, C2, C3...) as the text examples in each category are presented and referred to later in this chapter. In addition, the table includes original text excerpts from the data. These particular text excerpts were chosen as examples of each category because they best reflected and illustrated the contents. The text excerpts were coded with the prefix HB for *Handelsblatt* or KL for *Kauppalehti* and with running numbers. The English translations for each text excerpt conducted by the author are presented in Appendix 3.

TABLE 2. Top 10 categories in both corpora and original text excerpts from *Handelsblatt* and *Kauppalehti*

	<i>Handelsblatt</i>	<i>Kauppalehti</i>
<b>Category</b>	<b>C1 Effect on working life, labour market, society</b>	
Original excerpts from the data	(HB1) <i>Der Sozialstaat muss darauf Antworten finden, dass jemand heute als Angestellter arbeitet, nächstes Jahr vielleicht als Soloselbstständiger und dann einen Zeitvertrag bekommt.</i>	(KL1) <i>'Alustatalous ja siihen liittyvä ammatinharjoittaminen on uusi, kasvava trendi yhteiskunnassamme. Tulemme jatkossa näkemään varmasti muitakin esimerkkejä alustatalouden yleistymisestä ja sen kautta perinteisten palkkatyösuhteiden vähenemisestä.'</i>
<b>Category</b>	<b>C2 Employee or self-employed</b>	
Original excerpts from the data	(HB2) <i>Dabei betrifft das Risiko der Scheinselbstständigkeit nicht nur die Plattform als Arbeitsvermittler, sondern auch den Auftraggeber, wenn dieser Freelancer über eine Plattform beschäftigt. Das Risiko einer Scheinselbstständigkeit steigt in dem Maße, in dem die Plattform oder der Auftraggeber umfangreiche und detaillierte Anforderungen an die Crowdworker stellen.</i>	(KL2) <i>Alustatalous on yksi 2000-luvun työelämän merkittävistä trendeistä, jonka yhteydessä huomio on kiinnittynyt työnteon muotoon. Suomessakin selvitetään alustatyöläisten asemaa ja sitä, ovatko he yrittäjiä vai työntekijöitä.</i>

Handelsblatt

Kaupalehti

Category	C3 Employee rights, social security, legal status	
Original excerpts from the data	(HB3) <i>Die Gig Economy ist so etwas wie das Tagelöhner-tum der Internetwirtschaft. Es etabliert sich kein Verhältnis, keine Abhängigkeit, keine Sicherheit. Es ist eigentlich das neue Prekariat. Arbeitnehmerrechte wurden einst mit viel Mühe erkämpft, mit Streiks und allem. Wie wollen das die Arbeiter der Gig Economy machen? Massenhaft offline gehen?</i>	(KL3) <i>'Pidän vaarallisena suuntausta, jossa puhetta työn murroksesta käytetään tekosyynä työsuhdeturvan heikentämiselle. Vaikka työntekijän alisteisuuden muoto suhteessa työnantajaan on saattanut teknologian ja alustatalouden myötä muuttua, itse alisteisuus on mitä suurimmassa määrin vielä todellisuutta. Juuri tämä alisteisuus on ollut lähtökohtana työntekijän oikeuksien turvaamiselle lainsäädännössä.'</i>
Category	C4 Entrepreneurs, freelancers, self-employed	
Original excerpts from the data	(HB4) <i>Die Mitarbeiter der sogenannten Gig Economy gelten als besonders gefährdet. Sie arbeiten als Selbständige, ohne Krankenversicherung.</i> (HB5) <i>Arbeits- und Sozialgesetze sind dabei nicht das größte Problem, weil die Minutenlöhner als Selbständige gelten. Bei Steuergesetzen sieht es jedoch anders aus, wenn die Klickarbeiter ihre Einnahmen dem Finanzamt verschweigen.</i>	(KL4) <i>Tutkimuksen mukaan alustatyötä tehneet ovat myös varsin yrittäjähenkisiä. He pitivät yleensä yrittäjyyttä parempana vaihtoehtona kuin palkkatyötä.</i> (KL5) <i>Ammattiliitot ja osa läheteistä ovat olleet huolissaan, että alustatalouden nimissä huononnetaan työehtoja ja palkkoja ja että alalla työskentelevät toimivat yrittäjinä pakon edessä vailla yrittäjän vapautta.</i>
Category	C5 Flexibility, low entry, satisfaction	
Original excerpts from the data		(KL6) <i>On myös selvää, että ongelmista huolimatta alustatalous tarjoaa monelle joustavan, matalan kynnyksen työn, jota ilman moni jäisi yhteiskunnan tukiverkkojen puolella. Vaikka monet alustaryitykset ovat hyödyntäneet porsaanreikiä länsimaisessa työ- ja elinkeinolainsäädännössä, on myös hyvä huomioida, että lainsäädäntö on hitaasti päivittynyt uudenlaisten työnteon muotojen edessä. Moni tutkimus myös osoittaa, että alustatyöntekijät itse ovat yleensä verrattain tyytyväisiä omaan asemaansa ja työhön.</i>
Category	C6 Income	
Original excerpts from the data	(HB6) <i>So könnten Versicherungsformulare für ein Sechstel der bisherigen Kosten digitalisiert werden, oder ein kleines, spezialisiertes Programm für fünf Dollar von einem Klickarbeiter eingekauft werden, statt für 2000 Dollar von einem mittelständigen Zulieferer. Die Plattformen ermöglichen es Unternehmen, weltweit Leute zu finden, die dringend genug Geld brauchen, dass sie Arbeiten zu fast jedem Lohn erledigen.</i>	(KL7) <i>Harva asiantuntija ansaitsee elantonsa keikkatöillä, mutta alustatalous tarjoaa yhä useammalle mahdollisuuden hankkia lisäansioita keikkatyöllä.</i>
Category	C7 Legal cases	
Original excerpts from the data	(HB7) <i>Den Fall dürften alle Dienste aufmerksam verfolgen, die ihre 'Helfer' als Selbständige organisieren. Denn hier steht die Gig Economy, bei der kleine Aufträge kurzfristig an eine Vielzahl von Freiberuflern vergeben werden, vor Gericht.</i>	

Handelsblatt

Kauppalehti

Category	C8 Legislation, regulation	
Original excerpts from the data	(HB8) <i>Es bleibt zu hoffen, dass der europäische und der deutsche Gesetzgeber auf das unzweifelhaft bestehende Bedürfnis der sozialen Absicherung bestimmter Gruppen von Selbstständigen, insbesondere in der Gig-Economy, reagieren.</i>	(KL8) <i>Alustatyön tekijät ovat liian usein kasvottomien ja syrjivien algoritmien armoilla – EU haluaa tiukentaa sääntelyä, mutta riskinä on, että kasvuyritykset karttavat Eurooppaa.</i>
Category	C9 Politics	
Original excerpts from the data	(HB9) <i>In einem Gutachten für das Bundesarbeitsministeriums für Arbeit und Soziales (BMAS)- ebenfalls aus dem Jahr 2018 - wird die „rechtliche Kategorisierung ‘des’ Crowdworkings ‘als’ außerordentlich schwer ‘beschrieben’. Der Grund sei ein ‘Dreiecksverhältnis zwischen Crowdsourcer, Plattform und Crowdworker’.</i>	
Category	C10 Power relations	
Original excerpts from the data	(HB10) <i>Auch in Sachen grundlegende Arbeitnehmerrechte sind die Klickarbeits-Plattformen ein Rückfall in längst überwundene Zustände. Der Anteil nicht bezahlter Arbeit ist hoch, war ein weiteres Ergebnis der Befragung. Der Patron entscheidet völlig frei. Ist er nicht zufrieden, bezahlt er nicht. Eine Begründung sei nicht erforderlich. Oft könne er sogar das Arbeitsergebnis behalten.</i>	(KL9) <i>Alustayhtiö kontrolloi työsuoritusta tai mahdollistaa sen asiakkaalle. Työ tapahtuu keikkaluonteisesti ilman työsuhdetta.</i>
Category	C11 Rules, frames	
Original excerpts from the data		(KL10) <i>‘Suomen vahvuuksia ovat järjestäytyneet yhteiskunta ja sosiaaliturva. Jos nämäkin työskentelytavat saadaan yhteisten pelisääntöjen piiriin, alustataloudesta voi varmasti olla yhteiskunnassa hyötyä kaikille.’</i>
Category	C12 Trade union movement, unionism	
Original excerpts from the data	(HB11) <i>Etablierte Gewerkschaften fremdeln mit der Gig Economy, dabei ist der Schutz vor Ausbeutung wichtiger denn je – die Chance für neue Bewegungen.</i>	(KL11) <i>Työntekijäjärjestöt pääosin tukivat ajatusta EU:n laajuisesta, sitovasta lainsäädännöstä. Ay-liike ajaa varsinkin työntekijäaseman olettamisen käyttöön ottamista ja vaatii, että todistustaakka siirtyy alustatyötä tekevältä alustan tarjoavalle yritykselle.</i>

Based on the categories in Table 2, certain generalisations can be made regarding the differences between German and Finnish textual material on platform work. Notably, some top categories appeared exclusively in *Handelsblatt* or in *Kauppalehti*. For example, political discussions concerning platform work (category C9) were found in *Handelsblatt* (7%, n=10) but not in the Finnish data. This possibly reflects each newspaper's editorial stance or political affiliation. *Handelsblatt* also covered various legal cases related to platform work (category C7; 10%, n=15), a topic less visible in *Kauppalehti*. Conversely, categories such as platform work's effect on working life,

society and the labour market (category C1; HB 8%, n=12; KL 14%, n=37), the flexibility of platform work, the lower entry possibilities to the labour market, the satisfaction of platform workers (category C5; KL 6%, n=15) and the legislation and regulation of platform work (category C8; HB 8%, n=11; KL 14%, n=37) were more prevalent in *Kauppalehti* than in *Handelsblatt*. In addition, *Kauppalehti* uniquely highlighted the need for rules and frames for platform work (category C11; KL 5%, n=14).

### 6.3 What types of differences can be found between German and Finnish textual material on platform work?

The discourse on platform work in *Handelsblatt* highlighted the self-employment status of platform workers as an automatic undermining factor for platform workers (HB4 in C4; HB5 in C4). The call for platform companies to act as employers was emphasised, as some companies avoided the legal obligation of categorising workers as employees. The term *Scheinselbstständigkeit* (bogus self-employment) (HB2 in C2) suggests that self-employment in platform work is not widely accepted in German society. Platform workers have fewer rights or independence in their work, as the platforms control their work. Platform workers were depicted as having limited rights and independence, with platforms exerting significant control (HB10 in C10). The workers were referred to as *das neue Prekariat* (new precariat), and *Tagelöhnertum* (day labourers) (HB3 in C3). They were portrayed as a unified group facing demanding conditions. These references also represented platform workers as one collective group of this type of work in Germany, neglecting other perspectives on platform work.

In *Kauppalehti*, this topic was approached more broadly, as the right of platform workers to unionism and collective bargaining was emphasised but in a more neutral manner than in *Handelsblatt*. Finnish trade unions expressed their concerns about working conditions and wages in the platform economy, but this was framed as an issue in entrepreneurship in which 'entrepreneurs work under duress without entrepreneurial freedom' (KL5 in C4). The platform economy was depicted as a 'significant trend of working life in 2000s' (KL2 in C2), and platform work was seen as part of a larger entity of self-employment. The platform's power over platform workers (KL9 in C10) and the subordinate status of platform workers were also recognised (KL3 in C3). On the other hand, platform workers were referred to as *yrittäjähenkilö* (with entrepreneurial spirit), who appreciate entrepreneurship over employment (KL4 in C4).

Income-related discussions in *Handelsblatt* highlighted its uncertainty and evoked conflicts between workers and platform companies. In some cases, platform workers were represented, especially in the global context, as those accepting to 'do work for almost any wage' (HB6 in C6), such as 'two dollars per hour'. Platform work was generally portrayed as 'notoriously underpaid' and challenging for workers to make a living. In *Kauppalehti*, platform work was represented as a source of extra income (KL7

in C6). There was an acknowledgment of the ‘elite of platform economy’, with high wages and job selection power, depicting platform work as something to aspire for. In the global context, platform workers have been shown to resist legislative changes affecting their employment status. In Finland, there were interesting discussions about the need for stronger regulations. The EU’s initiatives were also highlighted. Conversely, the fear of having stronger legislation crippling the positive sides of the platform economy was discussed (KL8 in C8).

One notable distinction emerged from the comparison of the context interpretations between the newspapers. *Handelsblatt* featured political discussions and legal cases related to platform work in its top categories, which were absent from the top Finnish categories. In *Handelsblatt*, there was a call for aligning Germany’s social system with evolving employment structures, such as platform work (HB1 in C1), emphasising the need for social security and improved working conditions for the self-employed in the gig economy (HB8 in C8). The political system in Germany was described as grappling with identifying platform work due to the complex relationship between crowdsourcer, platform and crowdworker (HB9 in C9), but the need for strengthening the labour law status of workers was recognised. Some political parties were mentioned in the discussion. Die Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) and Die Grünen (the Greens) participated in the discussion, pointing out the need and action for stricter regulations and better working conditions for platform workers. Legal cases related to platform work were highlighted in Germany and the United States, and issues such as minimum wage, abrupt dismissals by platform companies and disputes over the employment status of workers were covered. Excerpt HB7 in C7 mentions an ongoing trial that was expected to affect all platform companies treating their *Hilfer* (helpers) as self-employed.

In the context of trade unionism, German unions viewed platform workers as exerting competitive pressure on permanent workforces and potentially being used as strikebreakers. They advocated for *Sozialstaat 4.0.* (welfare state 4.0.) by focusing on enhancing the social security rights of platform workers rather than debating their employment status. Platform work is also represented as a possibility to trade unions to reform (HB11 in C12). Rather than pressuring Finnish trade unions for change, the discourse in *Kauppalehti* leaned towards the EU and collective legislative changes for platform work (KL11 in C12). The focus also extended to freelancers, highlighting their potentially unclear status related to social security, with the responsibility for resolution falling on trade unions. *Kauppalehti* viewed the platform economy as a potential threat to taxation revenues, affecting the welfare state. The decline in traditional paid employment was due to the platform economy (KL1 in C1), even though platform work was seen as a minor actor in the Finnish labour market. Conversely, the platform economy was seen as a source of new opportunities, offering easy access and flexibility in the labour market (KL6 in C5).

One unique linguistic nuance presented only in *Kauppalehti* is that platform work requires clearer 'rules' (KL10 in C11) or 'frames' or 'solutions' to solve problems in the platform economy. These mentions are a substitute for the discussion on the regulations of platform work and are considered an option for legislative changes that may stiffen the activity within the economy.

## 7 Discussion and conclusion

In terms of linguistics, platform work representations in the media have received relatively little attention, even though they have sparked debate in many other research fields. Thus, this study analysed platform work linguistically through media representations in German and Finnish online business newspapers in 2017–2021. The analysis concentrated on texts indicating how platform work is discussed, the different and similar representations platform work receives in these newspapers and how these different representations are linked to wider societal features.

Distinct perspectives emerged in the comparison of the representations of platform work between *Handelsblatt* and *Kauppalehti*. *Handelsblatt* focused on the challenges posed by platform work to German society and the labour market, framing platform work as something undisciplined that needs regulation. As the platforms had power, they were considered to shake the normative structures in the German labour market. In *Handelsblatt*, the represented contexts stood for a greater need to take part in the discussion on platform work and to examine it critically. *Kauppalehti* adopted a more permissive stance and emphasised the entrepreneurial spirit of platform work and its possibilities. Legislation needs, problems in social security and taxation issues were recognised, but the possibilities in platform work and in the platform economy were filtered from the interpretations of the contexts. These differences could have stemmed from variations in the German and Finnish economies, labour markets and societal attitudes towards disruptive phenomena and digitalisation. Germany's struggles with modernisation and digitalisation, as well as its complex labour market and trade union system (Eichhorst et al. 2017) may have contributed to the critical discourse. Finland, perceived as more open to change, especially regarding digitalisation, and to have a strong narrative on entrepreneurship (Jesnes & Rolandsson 2020), had a more favourable view. The results of this study partly confirm de Groen et al.'s (2018) overall view on the dominant topic emerging in the public debate in these countries. However, the linguistic approach and discourse analysis as a methodological framework addressed the different perspectives these two newspapers represented to the dominant categories.

Methodologically, the study used corpus-assisted CDA, which facilitated the analysis of a large dataset at the macro and micro levels. However, texts always convey



multiple meanings and interpretations (Hall 1997: 15). The way the audiences of *Handelsblatt* or *Kauppalehti* actually received and reflected on the information from these newspaper articles could vary. In addition, the newspapers' possible political agendas or links to other societal actors were not examined in this study, but it is important to acknowledge that these factors could have affected how platform work as a disruptive phenomenon of society was represented in the media.

This study revealed the dominant representations of platform work in German and Finnish online business newspaper media. The richness of the discussion on platform work in the media is clear and sets the pace for further research questions.

Examining the representations that were not included in this article due to space limitations but appeared in the collected data would be productive in future studies. One informative research topic is the polyphonic discussion this phenomenon seems to attract. The data from this study represent a wide range of voices, such as platform companies, platform workers, trade union representatives, scholars from various fields and legislators. By examining polyphony in the discussion, the agenda and network of various voices can be analysed to understand their motivations for shaping the discourse. Also, the ongoing debate on platform work's regulation and legislation changes in the EU area is most likely to have an effect on the media discourse as well. There is certainly a need for longitudinal research to define how and when and on which media forums the debate is proceeding, and by whom. Given the media's role in informing different stakeholders, such analyses can contribute to understanding the evolving role of platform work in society.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Search terms used in collecting data from *Handelsblatt* and *Kauppalehti*

German search terms	Finnish search terms	Established English terms for nouns
<b>Terms for platform work</b>		
Plattformarbeit	Alustatyö	platform work
Plattformvermittelte Arbeit	Alustavälitteinen työ	platform intermediated work
Klickarbeit	Klikkaustyö	click work
Gig-Arbeit	Keikkatyö	gig work
Cloudwork	Cloudwork	cloud work
Gig work	Gig work	gig work
Gig economy	Keikkatalous	gig economy
Crowdwork	Crowdwork	crowdwork
Crowdsourcing Arbeit	Joukkoistettu työ	crowdsourced work
<b>Platform company names</b>		
Clickworker	Clickworker	
Lieferando	Lieferando	
Foodora	Foodora	
Wolt	Wolt	
Uber	Uber	
Upwork	Upwork	
Helpling	Helpling	
Mechanical Turk	Mechanical Turk	
Streetspotr	Streetspotr	
Jovoto	Freska	
CleverShuttle	Yango	
Zenjob	Fiuge	
InStaff	Transfluent	
BerlKönig	Kjelp	
Careship	Solved	

## Appendix 2. Coverage of keywords in both corpora\*

German search terms	% (n)	Finnish search terms	% (n)	Established English terms
Plattformarbeit	5 % (7)	alustatyö	32 % (101)	platform work
Plattformökonomie	11 % (16)	alustatalous	44 % (141)	platform economy
Plattformvermittelte	0 % (0)	alustavälitteinen	4 % (12)	platform intermediated
Klickarbeit	12 % (18)	klikkaustyö	0 % (1)	click work
Gig-Arbeit	2 % (3)	keikkatyö	18 % (56)	gig work
Cloudwork	0 % (0)	cloudwork	0 % (0)	cloud work
Gig work	1 % (1)	gig work	0 % (0)	gig work
Gig economy	16 % (24)	keikkatalous	2 % (7)	gig economy
Crowdwork	47 % (68)	crowdwork	0 % (0)	crowdwork
Crowdsourcing	6 % (9)	joukkoistettu	0 % (1)	crowdsourcing
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100 % (146)</b>		<b>100 % (319)</b>	

The number of hits refers to how many times a specific keyword appears in the corpora.

\*The results also include stemmed and lemmatised versions of the search term (e.g. Plattformarbeit/er, alustatyö/ntekijä = platform worker in English) and hits in the articles' titles and subtitles.

### Appendix 3. Text excerpts from Table 2 translated into English by the author

HB1	The welfare state has to find answers to the fact that someone works as an employee today, maybe as a solo self-employed person next year and then gets a temporary contract.
HB2	The risk of bogus self-employment does not only affect the platform as an employment agency but also the client if the freelancer is employed via a platform. The risk of bogus self-employment increases to the extent that the platform or the client imposes extensive and detailed requirements on crowdworkers.
HB3	The gig economy is something like the day labourers of the Internet economy. There is no relationship, no dependency, and no security. It's actually the new precariat. Workers' rights were once fought for with a lot of effort, with strikes and everything. How do the workers of the gig economy want to do this? Going offline en masse?
HB4	Employees in the so-called gig economy are considered particularly vulnerable. You work as a self-employed person without health insurance.
HB5	Labour and social security laws are not the biggest problem because hour-earners are considered self-employed. In the case of tax laws, however, the situation is different if click workers conceal their income from the tax office.
HB6	For example, insurance forms could be digitised for one-sixth of the previous costs, or a small, specialised programme could be purchased for five dollars from a click worker instead of \$2,000 from a medium-sized supplier. The platforms allow companies worldwide to find people who desperately need money to do work for almost any wage.
HB7	The case is likely to be closely followed by all services that organise their 'helpers' as self-employed. This is where the gig economy, in which small jobs are awarded to a large number of freelancers on short notice, is on trial.
HB8	It is to be hoped that European and German legislators will respond to the undeniable need for social security for certain groups of self-employed people, especially in the gig economy.
HB9	In a report for the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS), also from 2018, the 'legal categorisation' of 'crowdworking' is described as 'extraordinarily difficult'. This is due to the 'triangular relationship between crowdsourcer, platform and crowdworker'.
HB10	When it comes to basic workers' rights, too, click work platforms relapse into conditions that have long since been overcome. The proportion of unpaid work being high is another result of the survey. The patron is completely free to decide. If he's not satisfied, he will not pay. There is no need to state the reasons. Often, he can even keep the results of his work.
HB11	Established trade unions are alienated from the gig economy, but protection from exploitation is now more important than ever; the opportunity for new movements.
KL1	'The platform economy and the related self-employment are a new, growing trend in our society. In the future, we will certainly see other examples of the platform economy becoming more common and, consequently, the decline of traditional paid employment'.
KL2	The platform economy is one of the significant trends in working life in the 2000s, when attention was focused on the form of work. In Finland, the positions of platform workers and whether they are entrepreneurs or employees are also being investigated.
KL3	'I consider it dangerous to talk about the transformation of work as an excuse to weaken job security. Although the form of subordination of employees vis-à-vis employers may have changed with technology and the platform economy, subordination itself is still very much a reality. It is this subordination that became the starting point for safeguarding workers' rights in legislation'.
KL4	According to the study, platform workers are also quite entrepreneurial. They generally prefer entrepreneurship to paid employment.

KL5	Trade unions and some couriers have been concerned that working conditions and wages will worsen in the name of the platform economy, and that those working in the sector will work as entrepreneurs under duress without entrepreneurial freedom.
KL6	It is also clear that, despite the problems, the platform economy offers many people flexible, low-threshold work, without which many would be left on the side of society's support networks. Although many platform companies have exploited the loopholes in Western employment and economic legislation, it is also good to note that legislation has slowly been updated in the face of new forms of work. Many studies have shown that platform workers themselves are generally relatively satisfied with their own positions and work.
KL7	Few experts earn a living from gig work, but the platform economy offers more and more people the opportunity to earn extra income through gig work.
KL8	Platform workers are too often at the mercy of faceless and discriminatory algorithms. The EU wants stricter regulations, but there is a risk that growth companies will avoid Europe.
KL9	The platform company controls the work performance or enables it for the customer. The work takes place on a gig basis without an employment relationship.
KL10	'Finland's strengths are being an organised society and social security. If these working methods can also be brought within the scope of common rules, the platform economy can certainly benefit everyone in society.'
KL11	Workers' organisations mainly supported the idea of an EU-wide, binding legislation. In particular, the trade union movement advocates for the introduction of the presumption of employee status and demands that the burden of proof be shifted from platform work to the company providing the platform.