



Venezuelan microworkers in the shadows of production and the public sphere

Juana Torres

Venezuelan society has experienced a profound social, economic and political crisis in the past decade. Yet some indicators for 2023 offer glimmers of hope. For example, according to the Observatorio Venezolano de Finanzas, inflation reduced from 305.7% in 2022 to 286%. Meanwhile, Encovi data¹ show, for the period 2021 to 2022, a slight poverty reduction (from 90,9% to 81,5%), an increase in formal employment (to 50%) and a drop in informality of 7.7 points (44%).

However, the situation in the country is far from normal, and Venezuelans are still struggling to cope with the effects of years of crisis, such as the reduction in population size, not only because more than five million people have emigrated but also because of declining birth and rising death rates ([Encovi](#), 2022). Another crucial factor is dollarisation and its impact on daily life. For instance, according to the Centro de Documentación y Análisis Social de la Federación Venezolana de Maestros (Cendas-FVM), by 2023, the minimum wage was less than \$4 while the basic food basket cost \$493.53, and a family of five needs a minimum wage of \$140.3 monthly to afford it.

In this situation, Venezuelans have sought alternative forms of survival, including the platform economy. Drawing inspiration from a study conducted by the Digital Labour Platform (Diplab.eu) named 'The Labour of Artificial Intelligence: Ethics and Governance of Automation', (TRIA in France), this column shows how Venezuelans have engaged in microwork, showcasing their agency despite complex circumstances imposed by this form of work. These observations come predominantly from fieldwork around a platform in the United States, fictitiously named TaskSphere here.

What is microwork?

Understanding microwork starts with distinguishing two types of platforms. On the one hand, the ILO identifies location-based platforms where the client and worker share the same geographical space. Some well-known examples in Latin America are Uber (taxi) and Rappi (delivery). On the other hand, the ILO recognises online-web platforms where workers perform assignments remotely. As a result, workers and service requesters do not share a physical space. The best-known example worldwide is Amazon Mechanical Turk.

So far, public policies in Latin America and relevant actors (trade unions, policy makers, NGOs, and academics) have focused on

location-based platforms. This concern is more than justified, considering the Covid-19 crisis, which uncovered the situation of these workers, as well as their dramatic increase. However, a vast, shadowy workforce also provides services on remote working platforms. Although one of the problems with these platforms is their opacity in terms of statistics, the TRIA study and other research show that microwork is a growing phenomenon in Venezuela.

The concept of microwork fits into the framework of artificial intelligence and the functioning of algorithms. Because AI cannot discern or learn as human beings do, it needs people to teach, train, and verify its results (Tubaro et al., 2020). This process, known as machine learning, implies the processing of thousands and thousands of data points. At this point, online-web platforms appear. They fragment the data needed to feed AI into small tasks and distribute them across workers worldwide (Casilli, 2021). The tasks consist, among others, of document translation, image recognition, liking on social networks, content moderation, and promoting products by writing reviews. Web-based platforms bring together workers – willing to do small tasks – and clients who seek to develop artificial intelligence solutions in their companies (Casilli, 2021).

Like location-based work platforms, microworkers do not have a formal contract with the platforms. They work as self-employed, meaning they lack all social protection and access to labour rights (Casilli, 2021). Moreover, clients pay just a few cents on the dollar for these small tasks without considering unpaid work time while workers wait for tasks to appear. Standby times are especially alarming in situations such as Venezuela's, where a significant proportion of workers are engaged in this work full-time. Indeed, there are Venezuelans who work more than 12 to 15 hours a day, including early morning hours, waiting for jobs to come out, for seven days a week. Furthermore, platforms specify in their terms of use – which the worker usually accepts without reading – that clients can unilaterally refuse tasks. These unilateral conditions do not provide feedback mechanisms for workers. The consequences for them are dire: losing money for a job done, cancelling their accounts on the platform and reduced scores in the evaluation system.

What is going on in Venezuela?

In recent years, several Latin American cities have seen the rise

¹ Encovi is a national survey of living conditions in Venezuela, based at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, which was created to statistically measure the reality of Venezuela, due to the lack of governmental indicators. The most recent Encovi survey is 2022.

of location-based platform work, which has become a significant source of informal labour in the region (including for immigrants). This phenomenon does not exist in Venezuela as such. Large companies such as Uber or Rappi do not exist in the country. The only platform of this kind in the country is Yummy, which is a minor phenomenon in the informal market. The absence of location-based work platforms probably partly explains why Venezuelans have turned to online work en masse.

If one types 'ways to earn money from home' into the internet search engine, it brings up a series of tutorials and blogs designed by Venezuelans. So, what explains the arrival of Venezuelans in the work of remote platforms? The answer is not unique, but some elements shed light on the phenomenon.

According to the TRIA study, Venezuelans indicated that their primary motivation for working on these platforms was to survive the critical situation in the country. Furthermore, the Covid pandemic increased their incentive to enter such jobs. Many felt it was a safe way to work without becoming infected and endangering their loved ones. In addition, Venezuelans explained that in the face of the devaluation of their local currency, the bolivar, the web-based work platform allowed them to earn wages in dollars.

It is worth mentioning that Venezuelans found out about the platform by searching on the internet or someone they knew told them about it. This last aspect is interesting because, in recent years, Venezuela has seen a surge in websites teaching micro-work platform usage (blogs, tutorials, YouTube videos), distinguishing it as a notable societal issue within the region. Moreover, it illustrates that web-based work is a topic of conversation among Venezuelans, as the platform workers indicated that someone from their close circle (family, friends, colleagues) told them about it. According to the TRIA study, only 18% of individuals in Latin America were introduced to this form of work by acquaintances, whereas in Venezuela, the figure stands at 41%. Finally, it demonstrates the relevance of social ties in survival modes, especially in Latin American countries, where people rely on their closest circle in the absence of the state (Paugam, 2009).

Spaces of agency in the case of venezuelan microworkers

In recent years, delivery and taxi workers have launched important demonstrations in Latin American countries. As a result, some groups have managed to organise into trade unions. However, for Venezuelan microworkers, developing spaces of agency is different. Unlike those on location-based platforms, Venezuelan microworkers do their tasks in isolation without seeing their colleagues. Microwork is characterised by

its invisibilisation, because it is hidden from our eyes, behind online exchanges. Because every worker is behind a computer or a smartphone, often at home, it is difficult for them to find spaces for socialisation and, therefore, resistance.

Despite the difficulties they face, Venezuelan microworkers have found ways to organise. In 2019, they created a Facebook group called Microworkers Venezuela, which, by 2023, had gathered 3632 people, as well as two communication spaces through Telegram. These provide the space for interaction that the platform denies them. Through these groups, Venezuelans learn how to do the tasks, thanks to explanatory guides and tutorials. In addition, they find ways of socialising since they talk about their personal lives and other topics while waiting for work to come out. A key element that is the driving force behind these groups is solidarity. As one of the group's creators points out, participation is motivated by the need and desire to help each other.

However, one must ask whether this form of organisation represents a space of counter-hegemony. The efforts of the microworkers are remarkable, given the conditions in which they work. Nevertheless, the participants do not discuss their working conditions, nor do they envisage the idea of organising into a union. In this context, the role of trade unions, academics, and NGOs is vital in supporting these workers. Countries in the region have discussed how to regulate location-based platform work in their parliaments but have not addressed remote works². Therefore, it is up to the collective effort of relevant actors to make Venezuelan microworkers visible and to promote spaces of counter-hegemony.

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² So far, only Chile has passed a law to regulate platform work. However, this law does not provide for the regulation of microworkers.