

Snappers wary of digital platforms: Research

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As IR practitioners continue to grapple with the challenges and opportunities posed by digital disruption, an academic has told this year's AIRAANZ conference of the limitations faced by online work platforms that are seeking to gain a foothold in creative industries.

Drawing on her research into the photographic industry, Queensland University of Technology professor of work and organisation Paula McDonald today told [the conference](#) in Adelaide that understanding the motivation of workers and their experience of "gig" work is critical in developing effective policy responses.

In a paper co-authored with QUT academics Dr Penny Williams and Dr Robyn Mayes, McDonald uses the Australian photographic industry as a jumping-off point to discover the nature of engagement and why some occupations say "no" to the gig economy.

She says there has been a recent proliferation of digital platforms in the industry – with sites including [Oneflare](#), [ImageBrief](#), [Snappr](#) and [Kodakit](#) joining established platforms such as [iStock Photo](#) and [Austockphoto](#) – and the "highly fragmented" work lends itself well to platform services.

With most photographers working on a self-employed or freelance basis, it would also seem that they are "highly likely to engage with the new opportunities for income generation that are offered by digital platforms", McDonald says.

However, drawing on 51 interviews with Australian photographers, McDonald suggests it is unlikely that many of those working in the industry will move towards these forms of income generation in the near future, "at least willingly".

According to her research, most photographers in fact actively resist platform work "citing either or both pragmatic or ideological reasons for doing so", with many believing that they are "damaging to the sustainability of the profession".

In the case of McDonald's research sample, 28 deliberately avoided platforms, 13 were currently listed on platforms, and 10 were past users of platforms, seven of whom had not received any work through them.

Of the four main types of digital platforms – providing stock image, bidding, booking and directory services – she said photographers were more accepting of directory platforms as they found some successfully generated business and facilitated networks.

The main reason for avoiding stock image platforms, according to the research, was that they competed purely on price and gave photographers no control over the payment structure.

Their opposition to stock image platforms was also ideological, with photographers feeling that they had a "propensity to destabilise, commodify and harm the photographic industry" and "undermine the creativity of photographers".

However, although stock platforms exerted high influence over the worker-client relationship, she said the photographers more frequently used them because posting their existing catalogue of images required little effort, as opposed to shooting specifically for stock.

Booking and bidding platforms, meanwhile, were considered an unsustainable business model and the most problematic, offering an insufficient income relative to the time and resources required to engage, poor communication processes with clients, and attracting "bottom trawlers".

In the case of the photographic industry, McDonald says the crucial feature determining participation is the extent to which a platform "influences a fundamental dynamic for all photographers – relationships with clients".

"Although the business models adopted by digital platforms vary, what is important to creative workers is their functions; how they support or constrain the worker's ability to set prices, manage relationships and ensure the quality of their product and service," she says.

As the dynamics relevant to creative, freelance workers may be different to other workers, such as drivers and delivery workers who typically engage in short term and transactional worker-client relationships, McDonald says the findings suggest that occupational and professional factors "are critical when considering how the gig economy is reorganising work".

McDonald says it "may be that we are in the early stages of upward trends in the prevalence of platform work".

"If predictions about the displacement of jobs and workers by technology and automation come to pass, more workers across a variety of industries may choose to, or need to, access work via digital platforms," she adds.

However, for the time being, "it seems that even in industries such as photography where there has been a proliferation of platforms, many workers resist for ideological and/or pragmatic reasons".

Platform work in the photographic industry: A snapshot of the gig economy, paper presented to the 2018 AIRAANZ conference by QUT's Paula McDonald, Penny Williams and Robyn Mayes, Adelaide, February 7, 2018

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