

Post-print of Truck Drivers' Labor Practices from the Perspective of Mediatization

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Abstract

Objective: Intelligent media have enabled truck drivers in the “isolated island” of the cab to reconnect with the world, profoundly transforming their labor processes and labor relations. This paper aims to explore the changes in labor modalities and labor relations of truck drivers in a mediated society. **Method:** This study employs netnography and in-depth interviews to analyze, from three dimensions—media extension, media domestication, and media representation—the changes among the labor environment, labor behavior, and labor relations of truck drivers in a mediated society. **Results:** Media have profoundly influenced the entire labor process of truck drivers; drivers have leveraged media to substantially enhance their labor capacity. Through media, they have constructed a semi-organized virtual workplace, and the transformation of labor relations has, in turn, reshaped the entire labor process. **Conclusion:** The deep mediatization of truck drivers will evolve into a “mixed reality” that transcends the physical world while intertwining with it.

Full Text

Preamble

The Labor Practices of Truck Drivers from a Mediatization Perspective

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Abstract

Smart media has enabled truck drivers—once isolated in their cab “islands” —to reconnect with the world, fundamentally transforming their labor processes and labor relations. This study examines the evolving labor patterns and labor relations of truck drivers in a mediatized society. Using netnography and in-depth interviews, this paper analyzes the changing relationships between labor environments, labor behaviors, and labor relations from three dimensions: media extension, media domestication, and media presentation. The findings reveal that media profoundly influences the entire labor process of truck drivers, who leverage media to significantly enhance their labor capabilities; through media, they construct semi-organized virtual workplaces, and the transformation of labor relations in turn reshapes the entire labor process. The deep mediatization of truck drivers is becoming a “mixed reality” that transcends yet intertwines with the physical world.

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In the mobile internet era, media use is embedded in daily life, gradually merging media environments with living and labor scenes. Human labor capabilities are continuously extended through media, while individuals are simultaneously shaped by media. As the essence of humanity, labor has been significantly impacted by smart media. As the primary laborers in road freight transport, smart media and mobile internet have substantially extended truck drivers' capabilities and reshaped their daily labor. Their labor tools no longer consist solely of wheels and steering wheels; they use media to greatly enhance their driving, observation, and planning abilities. Through media, they construct semi-organized virtual workplaces, and media domestication influences the entire labor process under media logic, making their labor more convenient, efficient, and higher quality. Mobile truck drivers' labor processes have adaptively changed amid the wave of mediatization, and virtual labor groups have begun to connect. Through observation and interviews with truck drivers, this study finds that drivers have shifted from single, cramped cabs to multiple labor scenes constructed by media. Media has gradually entered truck drivers' labor and life processes, including information transmission and emotional exchange, while drivers domesticate the media they use during labor to improve work efficiency. The study reveals that media has been embedded throughout the entire labor practice of truck drivers, who are no longer lonely individuals but have become virtual groups intertwined with reality under media connections, continuously influencing their overall labor landscape.

Truck drivers' production and living scenes are relatively monotonous, with production and life highly integrated in their labor state. Their food, accommodation, and transportation almost entirely depend on their labor tool—the truck—which is inherently mobile, placing truck drivers in a constant state of flux. Consequently, their labor process rarely resonated with television media. Before new online media intervened in their work, truck drivers' information gathering capabilities were quite limited, with information search channels confined to truck-related fields. Their information integration capabilities remained stagnant in the broadcast media era compared to the times. Therefore, the transformation of mobile internet and smartphone-based smart media on truck drivers' labor practices has been disruptive compared to other labor groups.

The high-risk nature of road transport for truck drivers also brings relatively high returns. Their substantial income provides an economic foundation for accessing smart media. Thus, when smart media emerged, truck drivers smoothly entered the wave of mediatization, with their media practices essentially leaping directly from the broadcast era to the smart media era, making this group particularly illustrative for research.

This study selected 20 individuals for in-depth interviews. Among them, basic driving assistance equipment such as smartphones, dashcams, and cabin monitors achieved 100% coverage; full-vehicle monitoring coverage reached 40%; six trucks were equipped with fuel consumption sensors and similar devices like “Chezhiguan,” and one truck had a valuable smart vehicle-mounted central control system. Additionally, trucks contain “black box” data collection devices that may originate from government authorities, truck manufacturers, or logistics management platforms. The basic characteristics of interviewees are shown below.

1.2 Media Embedded in Truck Drivers' Labor Scenes

In their work, truck drivers' media usage scenarios can be broadly categorized into three types: First, assisting daily work, where smartphones deeply integrate with labor and life, allowing drivers to simultaneously complete related preparatory work such as advance cargo booking and route planning during phone use. Second, maintaining social relationships, where drivers use relevant social software installed on mobile phones to communicate emotionally with family, friends, and colleagues, achieving the maintenance and development of interpersonal relationships. Third, monitoring and detecting truck status, where drivers can perform maintenance work on their trucks through monitoring and detection media, reducing time and monetary costs of repeated visits to professional repair shops while also enhancing driving safety.

1.2.1 Labor Work Usage In truck drivers' labor scenes, mobile media is deeply embedded in their work and life. Two types of media scenes—map navigation and cargo matching—have greatly facilitated their daily labor. Truck drivers use map navigation as their primary reference for daily driving, planning

routes in advance for cargo transport while increasing their sense of security on unfamiliar roads. “I never dared to run places I didn’ t know before; there’ s truth in the saying that people feel lost in unfamiliar places. Now, you could ask me to drive from south to north, and it wouldn’ t be a problem. With navigation, I can go anywhere, even safely on highways,” reported Interviewee 07, indicating how navigation apps help them reach farther destinations.

Cargo-truck matching platform apps are another commonly used application on truck drivers’ phones, such as “Huochebang” and “Yunmanman.” Shippers with logistics needs post on the platform, and drivers use their phones to accept orders, communicating directly with shippers about cargo transport. “The probability of returning empty (empty return trips, a wasteful practice) used to be very high. Now, I just open my phone and check if there are suitable orders on the platform, so I don’ t return empty. At least the fuel isn’ t burned for nothing, which means earning more.” “Although the freight platform takes a cut, it saves us from having to build relationships with freight station staff, and wining and dining also costs a lot of money. Mainly, on the platform, you can see the transport volume and earnings clearly, so you don’ t work for others in confusion.” The emergence of cargo-truck matching platforms has eliminated the difficulty of finding cargo, solving the invisible labor that previously troubled truck drivers. Media plays an intermediary role in labor scenes, coordinating routes between drivers and destinations and providing transport solutions for both drivers and shippers.

1.2.2 Labor Relationship Maintenance Truck drivers are also individuals in society. Although their work nature concentrates their social activities in the truck, they need to communicate with the outside world, and media’ s remote information transmission characteristics precisely meet this need. Most truck drivers use social tools like WeChat and QQ for socializing, maintaining family relationships and other social connections. Some follow trucker forums like “Truckers’ Zone” and “Truck People,” where information about vehicle maintenance, transport policies, and peer mutual aid is shared. Through such software, truck drivers have established a semi-organized “trucker circle” that was impossible in the traditional media era. For instance, when encountering severe weather that typically closes highways, information from fellow truckers becomes particularly timely—asking in the group provides firsthand information ahead of others. “When you encounter problems on the road, mention it in the group or ask on the forum, and as long as there are brothers nearby, you’ ll basically get a response quickly.”

In addition to emotional communication and information transmission, media use also affects truck drivers’ family relationship characteristics. Interviewee 08 stated, “Before, making a call required finding a public phone booth, which was too inconvenient. Now, with video calls, family can see me and my truck, so they don’ t worry about me living poorly on the road. When children see my work scene, they understand I don’ t earn money easily, and arguments

have decreased.” As social beings, truck drivers in the enclosed labor space of their cab particularly need external intervention. Media transcends spatial and temporal distances within truck drivers’ labor spaces, making communication with the outside world possible and allowing labor relations to be maintained and developed in media scenes.

1.2.3 Labor Tool Monitoring Truck drivers also use media to monitor vehicle status and ensure driving safety, such as dashcams, various sensors for tire pressure/fuel consumption/speed, fatigue driving detectors, and safety warning devices. These “invisible” media accompany drivers throughout the labor process, playing the role of “safety officer” from the start to the end of driving, even replacing traditional co-drivers to safeguard the driving labor process. This significantly improves safety while reducing labor purchase expenditures. Most drivers in interviews and group chats expressed that smart media represented by various monitoring devices greatly reduces their workload and brings more peace of mind. Interviewee 15 (a “trucker’s wife,” meaning a truck driver’s spouse who travels with him) stated she previously had to accompany him because she was “too worried.” “Our family has only this one breadwinner, and driving is so dangerous. I was really afraid something would happen to him on the road, so I had no choice but to stay by his side and watch him. Now, with this complete set of monitoring tools that are smarter and more alert than me, I feel much more at ease.” Media acting as monitors also serves as another layer of safety protection in truck drivers’ work, making their work environment safer. Real-time dynamic monitoring through big data also makes transport labor more convenient.

2. Media Extension: Mediatized Labor of Truck Drivers

The concept of mediatization was first proposed by Stig Hjarvard to refer to an institutionalized practice—how social structures serve as resources for human activities and social interactions, and how human interactions in turn affect the reproduction of institutions and structures. Smart media born in the mobile internet era has integrated media logic into the social operation system, becoming the foundational architecture for establishing the entire social system. Media usage phenomena have gradually emerged in truck drivers’ labor processes, with media permeating the entire labor process of truck drivers.

2.1 Labor Information: Semi-organized Communication

When trucks hit the road, traffic and road condition information is crucial, determining whether the entire labor process can proceed smoothly. In the broadcast telephone era, truck drivers who used phones and walkie-talkies to transmit road information mostly had fixed routes or belonged to small fleet organizations. Most other truck drivers relied primarily on traffic radio, using car radios or other wireless broadcast methods to learn about road conditions

at their destinations in advance. This processed information obtained through multiple transmissions was fragmented, random, and unstable.

The popularization of smart media has made organized development possible for truck drivers. Those who share various types of information via smartphones and other smart devices can communicate conveniently, gradually shifting to “group” communication methods. Since 2014, with the emergence of trucker organizations like “Truckers’ Zone” and “Transfar Safe Station,” the truck driver group has moved from an unorganized stage to a “re-organization” stage.

Driven by urgent needs for target information, consistent group orientation, and preconditions for organization, truck drivers have built a “virtual workplace” through “re-organization” on online social platforms. This workplace exhibits obvious professional and group characteristics, integrating professional identity, emotional value, and practical value into a new self-employed labor alliance.

2.2 Utilization and Integration of Labor Information

After media extends and strengthens truck drivers’ labor capabilities, it gradually integrates into their daily labor. Smart media acts like an external brain for truck drivers, systematically integrating their fragmented and complex labor tasks: destination guidance, route planning, speed control, and full-process monitoring. The entire labor process of truck drivers is influenced by smart media, with each link connecting orderly and operating smoothly, guiding drivers to complete labor faster and more effortlessly. Truck drivers’ labor norms are gradually permeated by media, reflecting a pan-mediatisation logic. To some extent, media dominates truck drivers’ real-world actions.

Previously, truck drivers needed to obtain cargo information at “information departments” and plan routes—a time-consuming, labor-intensive, and highly random method. Freight platforms directly connect shippers and drivers, allowing drivers to accept orders in advance during rest breaks before reaching destinations, with platforms and map software directly planning itineraries for the coming days. During the journey, media continuously influences truck drivers’ labor rhythm. For example, map software automatically broadcasts information about scenic spots, culture, and history of each area when drivers arrive. During rest breaks, short-video apps push local specialties, snacks, and famous shops based on location. Through instant messaging software, truck drivers can meet many “virtual workmates,” some of whom connect offline using the convenience of traveling around. Media has changed the monotonous “origin-destination” progression into a forward-moving approach that constantly contacts and connects with surroundings along the route.

2.3 Labor Companionship: Multi-sensory Entertainment

For truck drivers, the cab is both a workspace and private space. Media changes the nature of the cab, transforming it from a traditional driver’ s compartment into a “parlor” where drivers can communicate with the outside world through

video chats, live interactive broadcasts, and radio audio reception on smart devices. This connection allows truck drivers to obtain a virtual sense of “others’ presence” in physical space, alleviating loneliness from long hours of solitary driving. Since truck drivers’ visual senses must remain absolutely focused during driving, “companionship through sound” integrates into their daily lives, aligning with McLuhan’s concept of the “auditory person.” When summarizing broadcast media in the electronic media era, McLuhan proposed that radio is a “powerful medium that can turn mind and society into a resonating chamber” and that sound media has the unique advantage of “full-scene accompaniment.” Smart media and mobile internet further digitize, mobilize, and liberate this “full-scene accompaniment,” giving truck drivers maximum freedom in content selection, listening time, and listening methods.

By combining smart media with cab audio systems, truck drivers can freely choose to enter a “multi-threaded” shifting work/entertainment state: using visual senses to observe road conditions; using tactile senses to drive; using auditory senses to listen to programs and navigation information; and even using voice assistants to arrange next-step work plans. As truck drivers drive across different cities, they also traverse different content scenarios through audio platforms, achieving “instant scene transitions” via “spatial montage.” Immersed in auditory scenes jointly constructed by sound media and audio content, truck drivers partially complete entertainment and leisure while reproducing a small portion of labor power during the labor process.

3. Media Domestication: Adjustment of Truck Drivers’ Labor Behaviors

In the context of media “embeddedness” in life, the shift of media usage space from public to private domains marks the establishment of a domestication relationship between humans and technology—technology begins to be “embedded” in people’s daily lives. Users can connect different functions and things through media usage strategies, thereby rationalizing daily life. For this study, objectification and integration manifest as adjustments in labor behaviors. Truck drivers incorporate media into their labor processes through different practical methods, while exhibiting a certain degree of resistance consciousness during labor.

3.1 Labor Tools: Trucks Becoming Drivers’ Extensions

Smart media makes truck drivers’ entire labor process digitally represented on various media platforms, making it “quantifiable” and “traceable.” Through satellite positioning technology, trucks’ driving speed, operating trajectories, routes, and stopping points are recorded in real time. In-vehicle smart sensors monitor driving actions and promptly remind drivers of potentially dangerous behaviors. Data analysis models built on fuel consumption, maintenance costs, and other data optimize cost control and provide valuable optimization suggestions for

drivers' operating vehicles. Based on these technologies, comprehensive vehicle solutions obtain daily driving data, which is analyzed and optimized through data technology and ultimately re-presented in media form to influence truck drivers. Trucks are no longer just drivers' labor tools but also the foundation of their survival and life, and a medium through which drivers can skillfully connect with other people and things.

“Media is the extension of man.” McLuhan examined media from the perspective of human senses, essentially viewing media as having substitutive value for certain human senses. Starting from human subjectivity, Paul Levinson proposed the theories of media humanization and compensation, suggesting that media technology continuously compensates for shortcomings of previous media during iteration and increasingly conforms to human needs. Truck driver groups neglected by media in the traditional media era have used smart media in the mobile internet era to connect labor tools and laborers, truly achieving the “virtual embodiment” of truck drivers—even in virtual spaces constructed by media, truck drivers can exist in an embodied form. During the domestication process, trucks become a part closely related to drivers, and drivers use media to increase their mastery of trucks, thereby achieving more efficient truck transport work.

3.2 Labor Monitoring: Evasion and Adaptation to Media

While regulatory departments use media to manage drivers, truck drivers also use media in reverse to “battle wits” with regulators. Various electronic eyes, speed detectors, and illegal photography cameras are external media devices that interact most frequently with truck drivers “on the road.” Comprehensive, three-dimensional monitoring equipment breaks the spatial barriers inside and outside the cab, constructing a “panopticon.” Smart monitoring and various sensor devices place truck drivers' entire labor process under surveillance, providing technical foundations for safeguarding driving safety and enabling full-process, automatic supervision by traffic regulatory departments.

However, truck drivers do not passively accept regulation and control from smart devices. Human agency enables them to use media in reverse to evade these monitoring devices and even leverage media logic to avoid potential risks. For example, truck drivers use map navigation and their own driving experience to reduce speed and drive safely at confirmed monitoring points in advance, avoiding being photographed for violations.

But the “intelligence” of smart media remains limited, and many unreasonable aspects arise in traffic review systems that require truck drivers to compensate through their own actions. During interviews, drivers repeatedly complained about being misunderstood by “foolish monitoring,” resulting in inexplicable traffic violations. For instance, systems cannot distinguish colors as well as the naked eye, misjudging drivers as not wearing seatbelts when wearing dark clothing; or identifying a dog passing by the roadside as a pedestrian, resulting in drivers being deemed as not yielding to “pedestrians.” These are inconveniences

brought to drivers by media logic.

Nevertheless, drivers are still willing to use this unintelligent-yet-smart media logic as a standard to change their behavior: placing toilet paper on their chest for seatbelt detection systems to recognize, holding two phones to evade health code and travel code checks, and specifically looking for camera-free areas when parking.

4. Media Presentation: Connected Laborers

Humans are the sum total of social relations. Truck drivers' daily lives involve driving alone on the road, creating an island-like existence with few opportunities for face-to-face communication. However, through mobile smart devices and the instant sharing characteristics of mobile internet information, truck drivers connect in cyberspace, forming a community atmosphere within small circles. The trucker community becomes the primary location for truck drivers' social relations, and colleague relationships—one of truck drivers' main social connections—become increasingly important under smart media. The “virtual workplace” is constructed within online communities maintained by the spirit of trucker solidarity, extending into a pragmatism-oriented industrial chain and virtual solidarity atmosphere related to group honor. In this process, truck driver groups have achieved semi-organization through media technology, with media becoming an important way for truck drivers to connect with and integrate into society.

4.1 Virtual Workplace: Semi-organized Truck Driver Groups

Truckers' “re-organization” on online social platforms has built a “virtual workplace” with obvious professional and group characteristics. Their unique “virtual workplace” integrates professional identity, emotional value, and practical value, forming a new self-employed labor alliance.

Through media, truck drivers can obtain a sense of virtual collegiality, giving them workmates similar to a workplace where they can share driving experiences and skill improvements. Online social media breaks temporal and spatial barriers, providing drivers with needed road information and emotional value to continue their profession. Real-time road condition information transmission within WeChat and QQ groups can build a virtual “road condition live broadcast room.” Even when alone in the cramped cab, drivers can discuss route planning, labor schemes, and other details with workmates, successfully completing truck transport work.

Truck drivers' spontaneous maintenance of their online communities reflects their virtual workplace honor. Through long-term observation of several road condition exchange groups, the author found virtually no idle chatter or any reward mechanisms. Groups contain only spontaneous reports of “location + road condition + event + time,” enabling drivers in the same area to quickly obtain high-quality surrounding road information. This type of road information

has three main characteristics: real-time updates, high randomness, and timely response and adjustment. Real-time, random information helps drivers who arrive later to efficiently understand road conditions and respond accordingly. During the pandemic, such WeChat groups provided enormous help for truck drivers' labor. On the surface, truck drivers' spontaneous "trace-leaving" behavior of posting and sharing information in groups appears altruistic. In the long run, this both constructs self-image and provides sharing incentives for other drivers—a pragmatism-oriented information sharing task. Under fixed virtual social spaces, drivers leave traces at network time progression nodes.

4.2 Pragmatism-oriented Virtual Solidarity

For truck drivers traveling alone on the road, the four most important mutual aid needs are bargaining, debt collection, rescue, and identity. These needs drive truck drivers to unite actively or passively in their individual "self-employed" market, forming an "organized" alliance with identity and action capability. This virtual "organized" alliance can play a significant role when facing external pressures (delayed payments, breakdowns, accidents, etc.), with truckers even prioritizing mutual aid over official road rescue agencies when rescue is needed.

This virtual "organized" alliance also influences offline reality. For truck drivers who live in their vehicles, most maintain mutually beneficial cooperative relationships with local repair shops and parts stores. When drivers travel to unfamiliar work locations with unfamiliar partners, trust is difficult to establish immediately. When needing to purchase parts or repair trucks in unfamiliar areas, truck drivers can find local truckers through trucker communities and use social relationships with fellow truckers to communicate directly with local auto parts stores. In this way, truckers can transform virtual relationships from online platforms into real-life "friend" relationships with truck drivers, further converting them into tangible benefits such as parts discounts, service bargaining, and road rescue—necessities for truck drivers.

Based on this, trucker organizations provide more types of mutual services, developing a complete industrial chain. Trucker communities combine the spirit of mutual aid, consolidating market economic logic and pragmatism on a foundation of mutual respect. Trucker organizations have both the service-providing aspect of industry organizations—building an industry community by creating a good community atmosphere—and the monetization capability of commercial organizations—establishing cooperative relationships with numerous auto parts suppliers to provide truckers with daily vehicle maintenance services including purchasing, repairs, insurance, and parts. Through media, trucker organizations connect virtual and reality, 打通全产业链, achieving win-win cooperation among truckers, shippers, service providers, and partners.

Media is the extension of man. As an extension of truck drivers, smart media not only strengthens their labor capabilities but also gradually integrates into their daily labor through permeation. Part of truck drivers' behavioral norms operate

under media logic—media is powerfully influencing truck drivers’ real-world labor behaviors. Through smart media devices, truck drivers are no longer confined to cab space and driving time but skillfully establish and maintain labor relations with others on virtual social platforms, feeding media labor relations back into real labor while balancing real labor and life.

The mediatized labor practices of truck drivers involve not only simple IoT between media but also the mutual integration of media logic and human behavioral logic, as well as the overall integration and collaborative development of human-media-society under mediatization. The further deep mediatization of truck drivers becomes a “mixed reality” that transcends yet intermingles with the real world, evolving into a new digital civilization form.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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