DEMOS

THE COSTS OF CREATION

WHAT IS A FAIR AND DESIRABLE FUTURE FOR MONETISED ONLINE WORK AND VOLUNTEERING?

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JULY 2022

This project was supported by Grant for the Web

Published by Demos July 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, this work would not have been possible without the support of Grant for the Web, who funded our research and offered a supportive community of fellow grantees. This report also owes a great debt to those who have generously taken time to share their expertise, and help shape our understanding of various areas in the background of this research: Luis Villa, Leonie Watson, John Chadfield and Matthew Cole.

At Demos, this work would not have been possible without the invaluable conversations, arguments and brainstorming sessions held with our colleagues, especially the team at CASM, past and present: Alex Krasodomski-Jones, Ellen Judson, Josh Smith, and Akshaya Satheesh. Thank you also to Kosta Juri for his keen-eyed design and to Polly Curtis for her comments on the report.

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July 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is easy to take for granted the work that goes into what appears, seemingly effortlessly, on our screens. The moderators keeping local Facebook groups in order, the Wikipedia editors filling in gaps in our knowledge, the writers and creators on Instagram, YouTube, Substack and elsewhere keeping us entertained and informed, the activists organising online campaigns. Underneath this, the volunteers creating and maintaining software and internet standards that keep the whole show on the road; those whose work is "the reason why you can connect to WiFi to check your email in any coffee shop, regardless of whether Samsung or Apple manufactured your mobile phone."[1]

Beyond this, there are the estimated 75 million workers in the global platform marketplace - from Uber drivers, to freelance translators on Upwork, to the many outsourced tasks such as labelling images handled on platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT).[2] This segment contains some of the most unfairly treated and exploited online workers. As Phil Jones writes, the model of the likes of AMT is to "match underemployed and jobless people" with data tasks "lasting a few seconds to a few minutes" which come with "few labour rights or secure hours."[3] This is one extreme of a common experience across all the work and volunteering described above: a situation in which many are rewarded unfairly or not at all.

As it stands, things are in need of improvement. Spotify, for example, has paid artists "as little as $.0033 per stream",[4] while a study found that "even in a country with high standard wage like the U.S., [AMT] workers earn significantly less compared to the minimum wage".[5] Emerging web monetisation technology (the processes of turning site visits into a revenue stream) could open up a fairer future here, but this must be developed in a way that supports those currently most marginalised from fair payment. This affects us all, moreover: how web monetisation develops will have knock-on effects, from how we pay for and access content and services online, to what is deemed online work in the first place.

Despite the scale of this potential change, web monetisation is currently not widely understood. To this end, Demos convened a group of those who engage in online work or volunteering for low or no pay to deliberate on what they think is a fair and desirable future for this technology. Despite subtle divisions, we found an overarching background of consensus among the participants. There is a broad, shared sense that the status quo is flawed: prevailing models of monetisation are unfair and need to be changed. To bring about a fairer future for web monetisation requires strengthening worker and volunteer collective power and improving their visibility.

1 Krasodomski-Jones, A. et al. *The Open Road: How to Build a Sustainable Open Infrastructure System*. Demos, January 2022. P.7. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-Open-Road.pdf [Accessed 5 July 2022].
2 Estimates that remain extremely difficult to pin down. See: Kässi O, Lehdonvirta, V., Stephany F. 'How many online workers are there in the world? A data-driven assessment [version 4; peer review: 4 approved]'. *Open Res Europe*, October 2021, 1:53. Available at: https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/articles/1-53 [Accessed 5 July 2022].
3 Jones, P. 'Big tech's push for automation hides the grim reality of 'microwork''. *The Guardian*, October 2021. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/27/big-techs-push-for-automation-hides-the-grim-reality-of-microwork [Accessed 5 July 2022].
4 Ennica, J. 'How much does Spotify pay per stream? What you'll earn per song, and how to get paid more for your music'. *Business Insider*, February 2021. Available at: https://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-does-spotify-pay-per-stream [Accessed 6 July 2022].
5 Hara, K. et al. 'Worker demographics and earnings on amazon mechanical turk: An exploratory analysis'. *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. CHI EA, May 2019. P.4. Available at: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/224786775.pdf [Accessed 6 July 2022].

There is also a shared sense that a desirable future isn't about straightforwardly accepting or rejecting web monetisation, but about having the appropriate monetisation in the appropriate settings, while ensuring certain content remains free for all. Bringing about a more desirable future for web monetisation requires rethinking the nature of online reward systems - financial and otherwise - in general, determining what we want to protect from monetisation, and determining which organisational forms best support worker and volunteer autonomy and voice.

Though we saw small shifts in opinion during the deliberations, the differences were slight and nuanced, with an underlying, persistent consensus. At the same time, it was clear that the views people held, particularly about imagining alternatives, were open to further change. Participants wanted this to be the start of the discussion, not the end. To make better decisions about the future of web monetisation requires optimal forms of dialogue, deliberation and decision-making with workers, volunteers and the wider public.

INTRODUCTION

What is the Web worth to you? This might seem an odd question. For the most part we're accustomed to an online world that feels free to use. Or, at least, it did.

More and more, the financial cost of our digital lives is creeping into view. There is growing awareness that each casual 'agree' we give to a pop-up about cookies represents, in essence, the paying of a fee. We know that the ads we block are making it tougher to keep some sites afloat. And as the wider social costs of our current digital economy become clear - from the exploitation of workers,[6] to the designing of platforms to swallow up users' attention[7] - the sustainability of the prevailing online business models is increasingly under scrutiny. All this makes the question of how the online world ought to be financed ever more pressing.

Answering this means wrestling with further complexities in turn: what would it mean to pay people fairly for their goods, services, creations or labours online? Are the current forms of funding, from advertising and gig work, to subscriptions and donations, to e-commerce and product placements, the best we can do, or are there better alternatives? And as the drive to "grind" and hustle in the digital world is ever more present, what shouldn't be paid for or considered work online anyway?[8]

This report gets to the heart of these questions by listening to those who currently engage in online work for low pay, to understand what they think a fair and desirable future for web monetisation would look like. Often what we don't pay for online is also thanks to the efforts of volunteers, from open-source developers, to Wikipedia editors, and many others. To understand the acceptable boundaries of online work, we also listened to those who offer up their time and energy voluntarily online in various ways.

Despite the pandemic leading many more of us to do our work remotely online, many already engaged in work that fitted this format by default. This report focuses on these experiences: those who seek out work through online platforms and do that work solely online, from social media creators to the likes of Amazon Mechanical Turkers, doing the 21st century's digital piecework described above.

In this research, we stayed local, speaking to those in the UK. These experiences are not necessarily distant from 'normal' working life in the UK, however: a 2021 estimate from the International Labour Organization ranked the UK as sixth in the world for contributing to the global online labour supply for major platforms, and with a contribution that increased between 2018 and 2020.[9] As new technology emerges that could make it easier for any of us to monetise our online lives, this could rise further; possibly even supporting an alternative, fairer model of online work and providing vital added support for volunteer-run resources online that we rely on day-to-day.

6 Online and off. See, for example: Jones, P. 'Refugees help power machine learning advances at Microsoft, Facebook, and Amazon'. Rest of World, 22 September 2021. Available at: https://restofworld.org/2021/refugees-machine-learning-big-tech/ [Accessed 1 July 2022]); Focus on Labour Exploitation. *The gig is up: Participatory research with couriers on the UK app-based delivery sector.* Participatory Research Working Paper 3. Focus on Labour Exploitation, 2021. Available at: https://labourexploitation.org/publications/participatory-research-couriers-uk-app-based-delivery-sector [Accessed 1 July 2022].

7 See, for example: Nielsen, A. *Tech Has an Attention Problem.* UC Berkeley Center for Long-Term Cybersecurity, September 2021. Available at: https://cltc.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CLTC_Techs_Attention_Problem.pdf [Accessed 1 July 2022].

8 'Grind' or 'hustle' culture refers to a social media trend which encourages overworking.

9 ILO. *World Employment and Social Outlook The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work.* ILO, 2021, p.53. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_771749.pdf [Accessed 3 July 2022].

However, it could just as easily be captured by Big Tech and used in its favour, and could intensify undesirable, commodified, transactional aspects of the online world. In this moment, it is essential therefore to listen to online workers and volunteers to understand what they think a fair and desirable future for web monetisation would be.

WORK AND VOLUNTEERING ON THE WEB

The world of online work is vast and varied, and no single report could cover it entirely in detail. Instead, the focus of our research was on 'cloudwork': work that (theoretically) can be carried out in any location as long as you are online, such as labelling data.[10] This is in contrast to geographically-tethered work, such as food delivery, where physical space is an essential feature of the work.[11] Within cloudwork, a further distinction is sometimes made between 'microtasking' (such as data labelling) and 'macrotasking' (such as graphic design), reflecting the length of time generally spent on different tasks.[12] We listened to both categories of cloudworker.

We also listened to a range of content creators, while recognising that the definitions here are far less agreed upon.[13] What we took as the distinguishing feature for a content creator in the scope of this research was that their content creation was carried out with a view to potentially earning an income from the activity. This is distinct from a social media user creating content purely for non-monetary reasons, such as to entertain their friends.

We spoke to creators and cloudworkers together because of an overlap in terms of financial expectations. Cloudworkers enter into agreed contracts for payment, and creators produce and distribute content online in spaces where there are established norms around monetisation; i.e. pursuing paid work in and through these spaces is not unusual (though a given creator may vary in their desire to pursue their activities as a line of work).

We also spoke to volunteers, from community moderators to open-source developers and much else, to explore the fairness of these communities and the desirability of monetising currently voluntary activities online. This group varied in their motivations and forms of online volunteering, and the degree to which they identified with the description of 'volunteer'. However, they were unified by the fact that they engaged in online spaces where monetisation or contracts for payment are not the norm, even if this does occur in a minority of such spaces (for example, there are public relations companies who are paid to edit Wikipedia pages as part of reputation management for clients).[14]

10 Fairwork. 'Cloudwork (Online Platform Work) Principles'. Fairwork. Available at: https://fair.work/en/fw/principles/cloudwork-principles/#continue [Accessed 3 July 2022].
11 Fairwork. 'Cloudwork (Online Platform Work) Principles'.
12 Fairwork. 'Cloudwork (Online Platform Work) Principles'.
13 See, for example: Jin, L. 'What is the definition of a "creator"? (as in, creator tools, creator economy, etc)'. Li Jin, 20 November 2019. Available at: https://li-jin.co/2019/11/20/what-is-the-definition-of-a-creator-as-in-creator-tools-creator-economy-etc/ [Accessed 3 July 2022].
14 A practice that is almost but not entirely forbidden. See: Wikipedia. 'Wikipedia:Paid-contribution disclosure'. Wikipedia, 2 June 2022. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Paid-contribution_disclosure [Accessed 3 July 2022].

WHAT IS WEB MONETISATION

Simply put, web monetisation refers to the process of turning web traffic (i.e. site visits, such as to a social media profile or a company's website) into a revenue stream. Online, we are surrounded by various models of web monetisation, from advertising, to subscription sign-ups, to the selling of the data collected about site visitors, to the sale of products and services, and much more.

The financing of things online can of course sit outside the realm of private enterprise too and as such be directed to different ends. For example, when you visit the Gov.uk site, you're doing so thanks to public funds, which help support site maintenance in contrast to a profit-seeking model in the case of a social media company. Furthermore, a site's financial support might come from donations given by visitors or philanthropic bodies, as is the case with Wikipedia. You also have the world of non-proprietary, open-source entities online which are typically run at their core by volunteers, like the social media site Mastodon. There is also a growing movement of cooperatively owned platforms, like the music streaming service Resonate.

A further model that, though not entirely new, is finding new experimenters, is the streaming of micropayments. In essence, this can works as follows:

1. You pay a monthly amount into a digital wallet (e.g. £5).
2. Sites allow payment via the wallet.
3. When you visit a site that allows such payment, you agree (or have agreed in advance) for tiny, continuous payments to be made from your wallet (e.g. £0.0001 per second).
4. This replaces alternative web monetisation on the site in question and may offer perks; for example, it could remove advertisements and allow you to access more content.

The model above comes from an organisation spearheading this experimentation, an independently managed fund called Grant for the Web (GftW), part of the Interledger Foundation. GftW are seeking to boost open, fair, and inclusive standards and innovation in web monetisation and believe the micropayment streaming model can achieve this, especially for those currently most disadvantaged by existing models.

However, GftW recognise the need to better understand the exact potentials and pitfalls of this model, and so have funded independent research into web monetisation such as this report. They are also funding experiments in specific uses of this model through the Web Monetization API (a web application for adding the above model to a site).[15]

Such technologies could offer a route to a digital economy in which people exercise more control over web monetisation, reducing the need to rely on external funding sources (such as advertisers) or direct user funding that is more disruptive (such as paywalls). However, it is possible this would encourage monetisation of things that ought to remain non-monetised, it could be adopted in ways that create or maintain financial

15 For further details on the API, see: Grant for the Web. 'FAQ'. Grant for the Web. Available at: https://www.grantfortheweb.org/faq [Accessed 4 July 2022].

exclusion online, and it could be co-opted by Big Tech companies largely to their gain.[16] Whether or not these challenges in fact emerge, and moreover whether it is this technology, another, or a set of monetisation tools that will become dominant, remains to be seen.

What is certain is that from micropayments to adverts, donations to subscriptions, all forms of web monetisation shape our online experiences, from introducing or reducing friction to our browsing, to deciding what it is we see. Likewise, all of these shape how people work online and what activities they can monetise in the first place. How we pay for our online world therefore has tremendous ramifications.

16 Rieger, S. *Three futures: Exploring the future of web monetization*. Stephanie Rieger, 2021, p.33. Available at: https://yiibu.github.io/web-monetization/Exploring_the_Future_of_Web_Monetization.epub [Accessed 3 July 2022].

METHODOLOGY

A DELIBERATIVE APPROACH

Unpicking what the future of web monetisation ought to look like requires digging into the views of online workers and volunteers. Our research sought to do this: exploring how those in the UK on low or no pay for their online work or volunteering thought about a fair and desirable future for web monetisation for their activities.

In so doing, we aimed to capture not just their views on web monetisation as they stand but also whether and how these opinions developed: both through being given impartial information about the topic and by listening to the perspectives and experiences of others. As such, this research was deliberative, seeking to understand people's considered views "which may (or may not) be different from their original view, and which has been arrived at through careful exploration of the issues at hand."[17]

This approach is useful because decisions about the future of web monetisation fit a number of criteria that deliberative research can address: generally policy makers lack knowledge about the topic; it requires public buy-in and input to address the knowledge gap, and; the topic itself is highly complex and controversial, including in its consideration of the consequences of different monetisation models.[18]

Though decision-makers in global internet governance forums will be more familiar with the topic, as Demos' own research has shown these bodies have a way to go in improving their public engagement, and so they too will benefit from deliberative input to their decisions around the future of web monetisation.[19]

The focus of our research was facilitating two videoconference deliberative workshops with online workers and volunteers, respectively. This was complemented by interviews with experts on digital labour, online volunteering, technology workers' rights, and the payment microstreaming technology supported by Grant for the Web. These interviews, in particular, helped guide our thinking in the framing of these topics to participants in the research.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in our discussions were broken down into two groups, detailed below:

WORKERS	VOLUNTEERS
A podcaster	A open-source developer[20]
A blogger and newsletter writer	A contributor to OpenStreetMap[21]
A TikTok content creator	A Facebook group moderator

17 Involve. 'Deliberative Public Engagement'. Involve. Available at: https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/what/deliberative-public-engagement [Accessed 3 July 2022].
18 Involve. 'Deliberative Public Engagement'.
19 Smith, J., Cummins, C., Krasodomski-Jones, A. *Good Foundations: Why democracies should care about the wiring of the internet.* Demos, March 2021, p.17. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Good-Foundations-Report-.pdf [Accessed 3 July 2022].
20 Open-source development refers to voluntary software development that is publicly modifiable and available.
21 OpenStreetMap is a voluntarily edited, publicly available world geographical database alternative to privately owned services like Google Maps.

WORKERS	VOLUNTEERS
A musician using Instagram for promotion	A subreddit moderator
A worker from Amazon Mechanical Turk[22]	A moderator of Twitch and Discord channels
A musician using Spotify	A Wikipedia editor
A research participant using a variety of micro and macrotasking platforms, including Prolific[23]	A Wikipedia editor
A freelance social media content creator on PeoplePerHour[24]	An administrator of an online tool for activists

To match best practice for deliberative discussions of this format, we chose to limit their size to eight participants each.[25] As such, we could not approach a demographic variety that would be representative of the wider UK public. However, we did seek to include participants from across a large range of online work and voluntary activities.

As we sought the experiences of workers and volunteers based in the UK, this will not necessarily be representative of the experiences of those elsewhere. For example, research has highlighted how the largest cloudwork labour force is to be found in the Global South.[26] However, we believe our research provides insight into perspectives on a developing area of technology where further research is needed.

POLIS

Our methodology built on Demos' experience using the online dialogue tool Polis for social research.[27] Polis mixes a traditional poll with the ability for participants to anonymously enter their own statements for others to then vote on, creating a conversation of sorts. It also visualises the groups that form based on people's overlapping and diverging voting patterns.

As is standard practice, this Polis had been populated with a set of 'seed' statements created by ourselves, to stimulate the discussion and ensure certain key points were voted upon.

We used Polis throughout each stage of engaging with the research participants to different ends. In the days prior to the deliberative workshops, participants were able to engage with a Polis on the theme of the research (for four and five days for the volunteers and workers, respectively, given the successive days on which the workshops were held). Though the two groups had separate discussions, they both were able to participate in the same Polis, so that we would have a quantifiable record of the degree of convergence and divergence in opinion across both groups.

This pre-discussion period of the Polis allowed participants to begin to reflect on the themes of the discussion and most importantly meant that they were able to considerably shape the agenda of the subsequent workshops. The final agendas were not set until the day of the discussions to allow people as much time as possible to input in advance.

During the discussions, participants were free to take part in the Polis throughout, and we also offered a span of quiet time during the discussions to allow them to concentrate on participating in it if they wished. Finally, in the close of the workshops and in the days following, we encouraged participants to continue to take part in the Polis if they wished, so as to have a record of any further opinion change or new ideas that had surfaced as a result of the deliberations. Both during and at the close of the workshops, we presented the Polis results so far to participants so that they were able to get a sense of where people (albeit anonymously) were

22 Amazon Mechanical Turk is Amazon's microtasking cloudwork site.
23 Prolific is a cloudwork site for research participants.
24 PeoplePerHour is a cloudwork site for freelancers.
25 Involve. 'Deliberative Workshop'. Involve. Available at: https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/deliberative-workshop#:~:text=Deliberative%20Workshops%20are%20a%20form,to%20reach%20an%20informed%20position [Accessed 3 July 2022].
26 ILO. *World Employment and Social Outlook The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work*. P.53.
27 See, for example: Smith, J. et al. *Polis and the Political Process*. Demos, August 2020. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Polis-the-Political-Process-NEW.pdf [Accessed 5 July 2022].

diverging and converging.

PURPOSE(S)	Agenda setting	Agenda setting	Agenda setting	Agenda setting	- Record of deliberation - Further reflection	- Record of deliberation - Further reflection - Effects of deliberation	- Effects of delieration
DAY	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
PARTICIPANTS	Workers Volunteers	Workers Volunteers	Workers Volunteers	Workers Volunteers	Workers Volunteers	Workers Volunteers	Workers Volunteers

Overall, the Polis included 15 seed statements and saw a further 30 statements submitted, 6 of which were rejected based on our moderation guidelines (these are detailed in the appendix). Two further statements received too few votes to offer insight and were excluded from the analysis. The full set of the Polis statements and their overarching votes can be found in the appendix.

Thematically, our initial Polis seed statements introduced a framing of thinking about fairness for online work and volunteering in relation to the varying models of monetisation. It also tabled ideas about how sites that people work through or volunteer for should be obligated to treat them. They also introduced a framing for thinking about the desirability of monetisation in relation to people's motivations for engaging in online work and volunteering, as well as the impacts of monetisation on the online world more generally (for example, through the statement 'Online news should always be free to access').

Across the groups 17 participants voted and 551 votes were cast, with an average of 32 votes per participant. 13 participants commented and 45 comments were submitted. Out of these, two groups emerged by the close of the Polis, group A (14 participants) and group B (3 participants).

ANALYSIS

To understand what the workers and volunteers in our deliberations thought was a fair and desirable future for web monetisation, we analysed both the transcripts of the discussions and the Polis itself to understand the themes and opinion groups that emerged. This had a number of advantages.

Firstly, it meant we were able to understand the perspectives of participants in a richer way than either method allows for, with qualitative depth from the transcripts adding to Polis' quantitative voting information. At the same time, given Polis' opportunity for dialogue and crowdsourcing of ideas, it too offered qualitative insight.

Secondly, given the (partial) simultaneity of the Polis and the workshops, and Polis' opportunity for anonymity, it also meant we could see whether and how participants differed in their views as they were expressed to others in the workshops in contrast to doing so privately via the Polis. This accounts for the risk, for example, that apparent agreement in a discussion reflects social psychological pressures to conform rather than actual agreement.[28]

Finally, analysing the workshop discussions and Polis in conjunction meant they could act as a check on the other: if the Polis suggested an interpretation of people's views at odds with the workshop discussions, this would give us reason to reflect and vice versa.

In our analysis we focused on three outputs: the degree of overarching consensus that emerged from the Polis and workshops, the details of the themes that emerged from across these, and the effects of the deliberations on participants' views. These are discussed in turn in the following sections.

28 Onwuegbuzie, A. et al. 'A Qualitative Framework for Collecting and Analyzing Data in Focus Group Research'. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, September 2009. Vol. 8:3: 1-21. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/160940690900800301 [Accessed 3 July 2022]

WHAT WE FOUND **OVERARCHING CONSENSUS**

DESPITE SUBTLE DIVISIONS, WE FOUND AN OVERARCHING BACKGROUND OF CONSENSUS AMONG THE PARTICIPANTS

While deliberations briefly created three Polis groups during the second of our two workshops, there was overall a consistent split between a large majority and a small minority. By the conclusion of the second workshop, this settled (and persisted in the days following) in a majority group A with 14 participants and a small minority group B with just 3 participants. Both contained a mixture of workers and volunteers: group B contained two volunteers (a Wikipedia editor and the OpenStreetMap contributor) and one worker (the musician using Instagram).

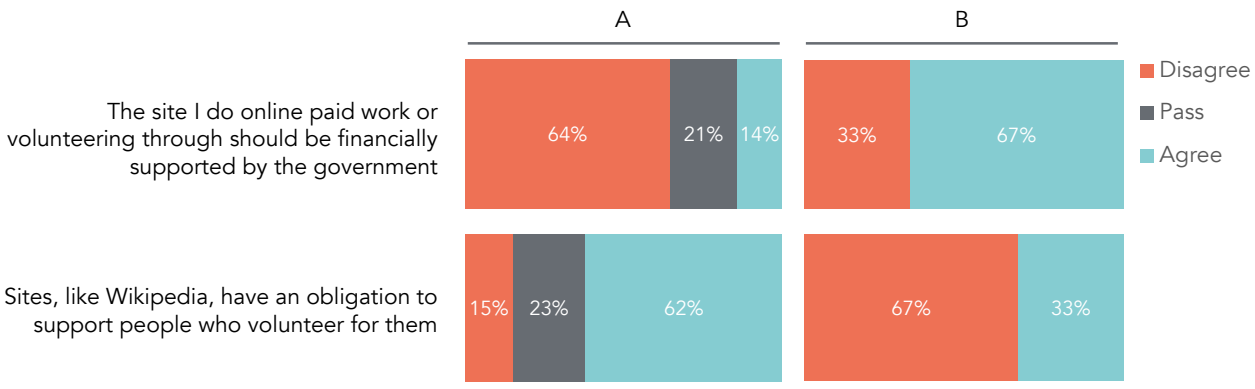
This is in line with the degree of consensus that arose in the workshop deliberations themselves, both within and across the worker and volunteer groups.

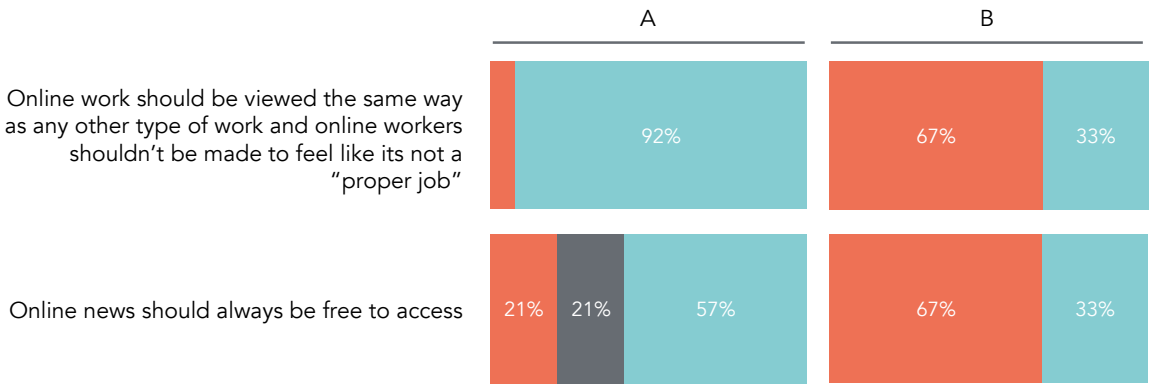
As a further reflection of this stability, within the Polis both groups agreed with a set of 13 statements which spanned the breadth of the themes.

Given the degree of consensus, when it comes to divergence between these groups there is less to say. Moreover, given the considerable difference in their sizes, voters in the smaller group will have had an outsized effect on this group's positions, and its majority volunteer membership will have influenced this also.

SUBTLE DIVISION

Where the dividing lines were clearest were on the statements below. Though group B's size makes generalisations difficult, their divergence does help accentuate what matters to group A.



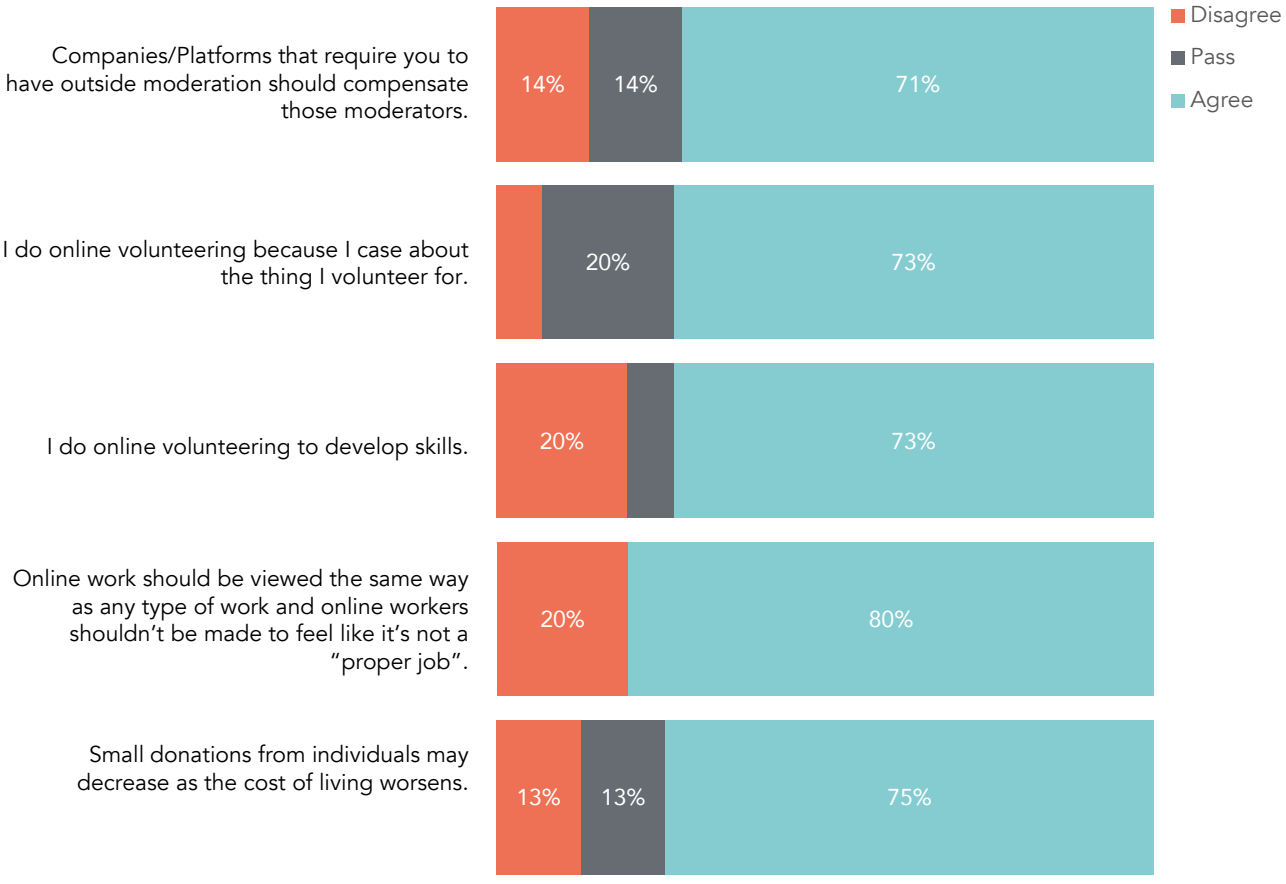


Broadly, the groups can be characterised from this as follows: group A had more support than group B for systems of web monetisation in which users are able to access information without monetary constraint, greater desire than group B for more support to be given to online workers and volunteers, and more strongly rejected Government funding of online work and volunteer spaces.

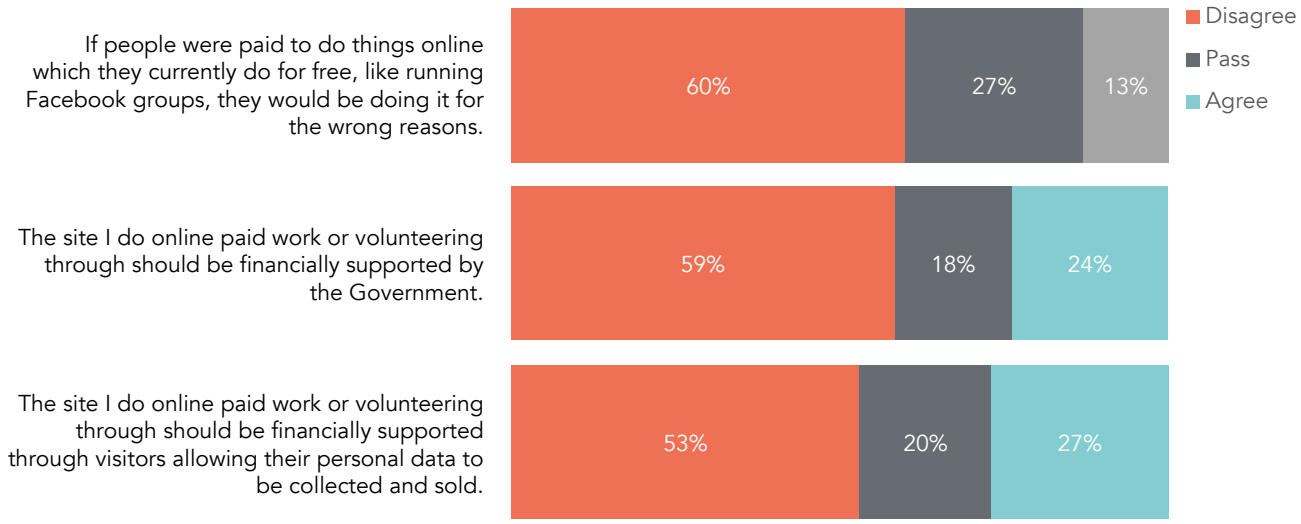
WIDER CONSENSUS

However, these differences sit against a backdrop of wider consensus. Looking at the total overall vote consensus, as distinct from looking at the consensus between the groups, there is strong underlying convergence on many points with 22/37 statements analysed having 50% or more shared agreement or disagreement across participants.

Moreover, of these, five had greater than 70% agreement (none had this degree of shared disagreement), including the following statements:



Despite being few in number, the overall vote statements with shared disagreement are together insightful:



These statements together characterise the overarching consensus across participants well. The first two show there is a broad sense that the status quo is flawed: rejection of a prevailing model of monetisation (the sale of site visitors' data), and the assumption that monetisation of existing online voluntary activities would introduce the wrong motives. Majority rejection of, and a degree of uncertainty towards, the statement regarding state funding for online work or volunteering also undercuts this as a point of division between the groups.

WHAT WE FOUND
EXPLORING THE KEY THEMES: FAIRNESS AND DESIRABILITY

The themes that emerged in our analysis were themselves partly set by the framing of Polis created by our initial seed statements. This was intentional, as we aimed to bring some minimal structure to the agenda of discussions, and ensure the themes that were focal to the research were addressed: what is a fair and desirable future for web monetisation?

Within this intentional structure, however, a range of sub-themes emerged:

- Fairness of online work/volunteering (2 submitted, 7 original)
- Financing of platforms (5 submitted, 6 original)
- Desirability of monetisation decisions (4 submitted, 2 original)
- Motivations of workers/volunteers (2 submitted, 5 original)
- What is work/volunteering (5 submitted, 1 original)

These themes in turn guided the discussions in the workshops, and are discussed below in a way that ties them together to address our overarching interest of what a fair and desirable future for web monetisation looks like.

FAIRNESS - SUMMARY

What emerged from analysis of the workshops and Polis was a sense that, despite varied experiences and relationships to web monetisation, most feel prevailing models are unfair to those seeking to do work online, requiring them to follow the constraints of platforms' designs, and building in little payment security around this work. Moreover, many among the volunteers and workers we spoke to had an overlapping experience of feeling their efforts go undervalued and obligations to support them go unmet by sites. Despite this, there was a sense that remedying the challenges currently faced would be difficult in practice, and that fairer alternatives to the status quo of web monetisation were unclear.

FAIRNESS - ANALYSIS IN DEPTH

Workers have to play by the platforms' rules to get paid - even when they don't understand what those rules are

Across the two groups, discussion of fairness came through in different ways. Among the workers, a prominent discussion centred around constraints: having to play by a platform's rules when it came to how you were paid and more broadly in how their online work was organised. Within this, many expressed a sense of being in the dark about how these rules work. As a musician who used social media to promote their music career said:

> *So even though every artist feels like they're getting shafted, we don't know exactly what the money that we're generating exactly is [...] sometimes it's just hard to know how much if you don't know exactly how much of the pie you're missing out. And if you don't know what that pie [looks like] to begin with.*[29]

Similarly, though there was a sense that there had to be fairer alternatives, almost all were uncertain about what these would look like. Those with experience of microtasking sites most strongly expressed a sense of unfairness, though they also had perhaps the strongest view that a fair alternative could be created. As an Amazon Mechanical Turk worker described:

> *I realised how low the pay was, how ridiculous the hours were, all the in-built unfairness, and [thought] would there be a way at some point for us to make this democratic? You know, pay people a fair rate and allow people that are working from home and who want to do it as a part time role, that they're paid fairly, they're paid on time, like, some sort of living wage potentially. [...] Like why isn't that fair? And why isn't that really a possibility? Like, what's wrong with the system that, you know, people shouldn't just be able to sign up somewhere and do it and be paid fairly?*[30]

Workers feel unsupported and isolated in their online work

Related to this was a recurring reference to the need for more guarantees and security in the context of online work. As a participant who had experience of a range of micro and macrotasking put it, when it came to reliably earning money, they found "the problem in this kind of industry [...] is there's no guarantees [...] unless you already got all your followers or you were established or you've got the money to advertise".[31]

In discussion of unfairness around monetisation models, participants also connected this to broader issues with the conditions of their work. In particular, what came through was how the isolation of much cloudwork and content creation meant navigating the world of online work was difficult. People felt they often lacked knowledge that would help them avoid costly and otherwise harmful features of their work. As the same participant above put it:

> *So it's knowing which are the best platforms, if you are going to subscribe to anything, you know, to become a premium [user]. It's knowing the best ones to use without wasting, like, vital startup funds, if you want to call it that [...] to get yourself out there. Yeah, if you don't know these things, it's very difficult, you know, because you could be wasting your money on this, that and the other, or you could have a minimum subscription of like three months and after two weeks you might think, well, this isn't working, it's a waste of money.*[32]

Workers feel the value and visibility of their work is beyond their control

A separate discussion within the theme of fairness revolved around how online work was perceived: its value, visibility and fluid nature. Across the workers' group, people varied in the certainty with which they felt they could attach value to their work. Those doing micro and macrotasking, to a greater extent, felt that the size and variety of skill levels in the global markets they competed in meant they felt the value of their work was largely unpredictable and out of their control.

29 Demos workshop, May 2022.
30 Demos workshop, May 2022.
31 Demos workshop, May 2022.
32 Demos workshop, May 2022.

In contrast, content creators using social media platforms for the most part felt that there was clarity to how people's activities were valued in this space when it came to making a living from them. In some cases, they saw this as fair. As a TikTok content creator described:

> *I feel like, if your content is getting consistent, numbers, comments, views, shares and stuff, impressions [...] then you should be able to get some money from that. But if it's, like, not resonating, I don't think… It's not that they're not worthy of it, but I don't think that should be monetised.*[33]

For other content creators, though they agreed that the environment they worked in provided a clear sense of what was valued by users online, they disagreed that this was in itself fair, insofar as it did not reflect people's skills or what is actually valuable:

> *There's some online work [where] you can write the best article possible, and sell it to a website. But, ultimately, if that great article isn't gonna bring in clicks… [Well] it's not the value that you're being paid for, it's what you'll bring back.*[34]

Related to this, across the workers group there was a consistent view that online work lacked visibility and as a result, people undervalued its worth. For some this arose from the fact that people only saw the end product of their work and often in a transient space, such as a social media feed. In this online environment in particular, content creators expressed how users could be inclined to not distinguish their use of social media as a space for leisure from others' use of it as a space for work.

For other workers, this lack of visibility arose from their work being entirely out of view to most. As a microtasking participant described:

> *If it was any other trade, like a plumber or electrician, you'd see the person, physically see them and you'd see them working [...] I think it's a different type of interaction [online]. [...] I think people just have a different, like, perception of that maybe? Because it's like a different relationship almost, it's a different working relationship to someone else [than] with a traditional, you know, trade or something.*[35]

Volunteers see financial reward as a challenge to online communities, but non-financial reward as integral to it

Among the volunteers, discussion of fairness centred on how, as their activities were not understood to be online work, different standards applied. This generally brought less expectation from those gathered that a site you volunteer for is obliged to reward you for your efforts, financially or otherwise.

An enduring sense was that a volunteer's actions mattered no more than that of other users in an online space, as all are part of the same community and so that makes it difficult to justify that a volunteer ought to be paid when others in that community are not. A participant who thought that you should be compensated added nonetheless that "it's difficult to draw that line of like, "Okay, I should get paid for this", when I'm roughly the same, I'm just a more trusted member of the community."[36]

However, some highlighted how even within voluntary environments online fairness can be addressed, albeit through non-monetary reward systems, and in part to support this sense of community. As a Wikipedia editor described:

> *One thing we do have on Wikipedia, is quite elaborate various systems for thanking people [...] I think these are quite important for the people who do all the work [...] you can just thank somebody for any edit. And that happens quite a lot. I give a lot of thanks, and I get a lot of thanks. And I think that's very important for community building.*[37]

33 Demos workshop, May 2022.
34 Demos workshop, May 2022.
35 Demos workshop, May 2022.
36 Demos workshop, May 2022.
37 Demos workshop, May 2022.

Volunteers see the obligations from sites towards them as complicated, but in some cases their treatment is straightforwardly unfair

Participants in the volunteer group recognised that obligations to reward efforts were not straightforward for all sites. As a participant who volunteered as a community moderator on a number of different platforms explained:

> *For example, Twitch requires people who make money on Twitch to moderate their chat. So I feel Twitch should be on the hook to compensate those moderators. Discord doesn't require you to have moderators. So you can't really ask Discord to compensate: you have to ask the people asking you to moderate to compensate you. So again, it's all going to completely depend on what platform you're on.*[38]

This brings out how other users (or creators) and not just sites are implicated in considering fairness. Some volunteers expressed how they did often feel underappreciated and undervalued for their efforts by other users:

> *[Moderating] should be a nice thing, not an angry thing [but] because of [abusive behaviour], sometimes you just feel really underappreciated. And just a token of appreciation [...] some financial recompense for the many, many hours [...] I love this community, I love this particular group [...] but the non-appreciation from some of the members - even longtime members - can feel quite exhausting.*[39]

As participants deliberated over their positive and negative experiences, more attention was given to how volunteering online can be extractive, and how people's efforts can go undervalued despite others benefitting from them. For example, a contributor to OpenStreetMap explained how there were vast differences in how people benefit from an open-source resource such as this:

> *There's an ecosystem [that has] grown up around our data and now companies make money out of it. So big companies, they get a lot of use out of it. Some people in the middle, like maybe if you're doing a bit of consultancy work or building stuff - so maybe someone like me - might get a little bit of work [...] But the people down the bottom who are doing the grunt work are getting nothing. It's really unfair. And I don't know how the money can filter down to them without making it like piecework and spoiling it. But overall, in the ecosystem, some people aren't making money out of it and it's the bigger boys who are making it, and it's not fair.*[40]

Furthermore, as this quote alludes, some who volunteer online may be in a position to do so only because of their wider financial stability; as a different open-source contributor put it, "I'm subsidised [so to speak] elsewhere, external to the community".[41]

Volunteers feel there are practical challenges to monetising their activities even where this is justified

Volunteers focused particularly on how, even where it is desirable, remuneration would be difficult given the nature of the activities they engage in. Some pointed to the difficulty of establishing what you were being paid for, for example, in the case of a moderator: whether that was time spent moderating or number of actions taken. Likewise, some drew out how moderation done well often meant that there was in a sense less work to do:

> *The people moderating almost are feeling like they're hosting a party. Because it's a great party, they're not necessarily having to constantly throw people out and fill everyone's drinks and things! They've set the scene and they've made sure everything is working alright. That's really what they could be paid for: it's the fun place to go, it's the place to talk about that subject. So having to do actually nothing at that particular moment is a sign that you're doing it well, rather than if you're*

38 Demos workshop, May 2022.
39 Demos workshop, May 2022.
40 Demos workshop, May 2022.
41 Demos workshop, May 2022.

frantically having to constantly chuck people out [...] then it's maybe a sign something's going wrong.[42]

This 'hosting' was taken by some as a clear articulation as to why they ought to value the contributions of their volunteering efforts more.

Others drew out how it was not entirely clear how distributing financial rewards would work with current monetisation models:

> *The views they're getting is profit for these companies, whether it's advertising or just what they can sell to investors, or, you know, [they can say to investors] this is the really most popular subreddit… Well, who's making the money from it? It's only Reddit isn't it? So [sharing] that is probably the way that I would think it's fair to do it but I don't know how you compartmentalise that - into individuals that are moderating it? That's how I would do it.*[43]

Volunteers place the conversation around fair monetisation in the context of wider fairness

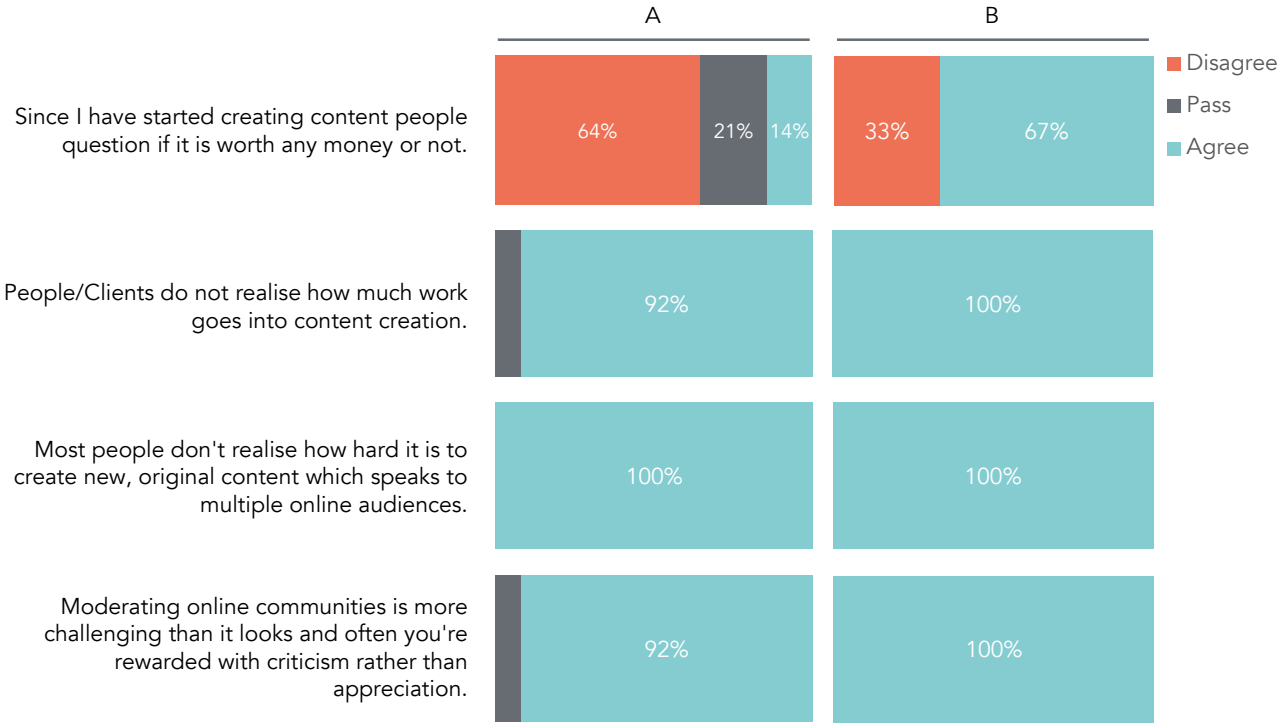
Finally, among the volunteers there was also more explicit attention given to connecting discussion of fairness online to how this played out in wider society:

> *I would say that as more awareness does come in, for how much people are being taken advantage of, in all routes of life, in terms of work and stuff like that [...] I think that this is just one tiny part of the conversation overall [...] companies that are making loads of money from advertising, loads of money from selling data, they need to start putting back. I'd rather donate my money to the NHS or something, whatever. But [...] something needs to change. And this conversation should be one of many, with many different mediums and people.*[44]

Polis insights on fairness:

Misunderstanding online work and volunteering, shared perceptions of injustice and participant uncertainty

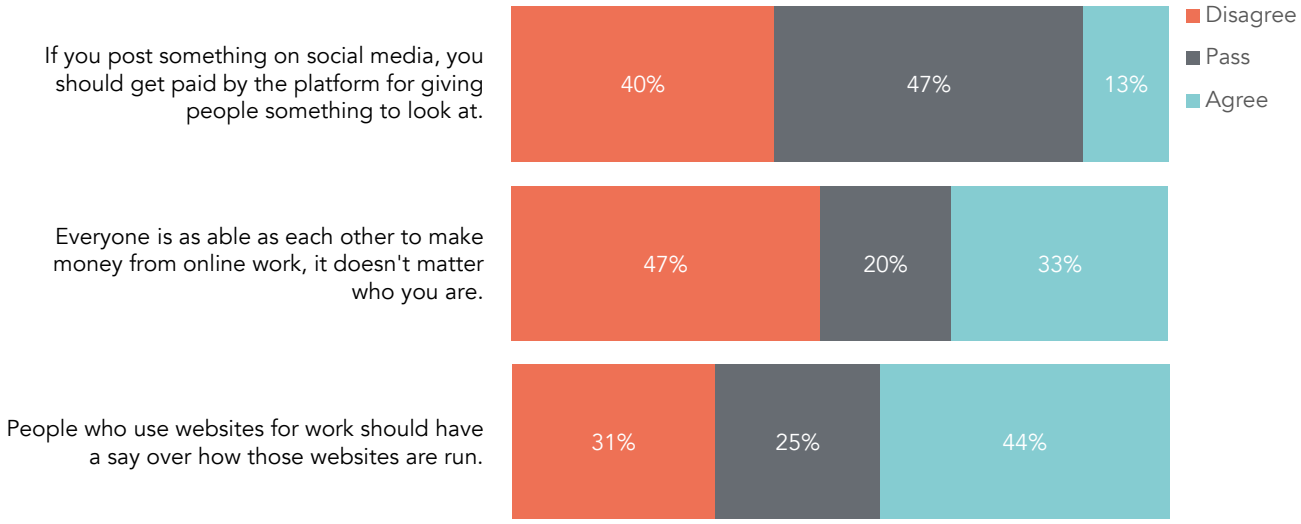
When it came to shared majority agreement across groups A and B, there was a focus in the Polis on statements about the value of work and volunteering online, which were notable for bringing out how both can be misunderstood.



42 Demos workshop, May 2022.
43 Demos workshop, May 2022.
44 Demos workshop, May 2022.

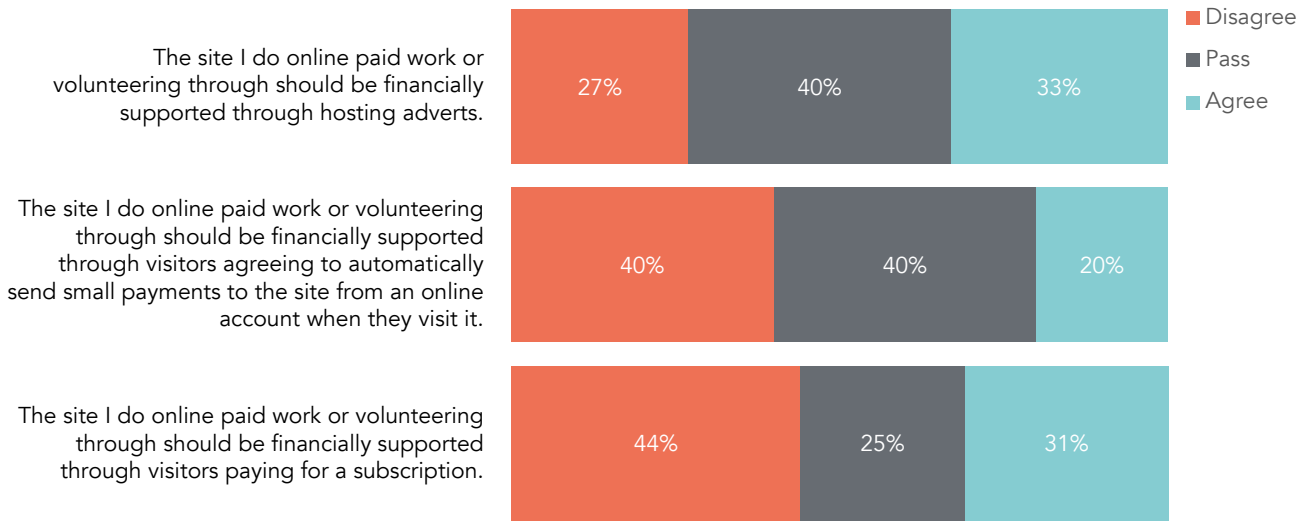
One statement coded within the theme of fairness that had consensus across the groups was 'Social media companies discriminate against some online paid work like sex work'. This statement was added as a seed statement, to address the challenge of systematic inequalities in some online work, and the example given was to bring in a voice to the discussion which we were unable to include.[45] What is striking about this is the implication that a majority of those in the discussions, despite such varied online work and volunteering experiences, nonetheless had a sense that a key set of platforms for online work - social media - are as a whole unfair in their treatment of some online workers, including those who were absent from the discussion.

We also gained insight from some of the areas with no overall majority in our Polis, or with a majority of pass votes, indicating a greater degree of uncertainty on these issues amongst our cohort In terms of overall votes across participants, eight statements fell into this category. Three of these were coded on the theme of fairness:



A possible explanation for uncertainty regarding the first of these statements is the lack of insight workers may have into the experiences of others; as highlighted previously, many reported an isolated world of online work. At the same time, the above evidence of solidaristic feeling among workers online has already suggested an awareness of injustice here, something perhaps demonstrated by the relative majority disagreement with this statement. Uncertainty on the middle statement may reflect the difficulties raised in the discussion among workers above, around assessing the value of people's online work, including content creation. Uncertainty around the final statement may reflect the fact that none of the participants in the workers group reported experience of exercising a say in this way. The relative majority agreement may in turn reflect their wish to have more control over platforms, as discussed above.

A further three of these uncertain responses were on the theme of how sites should be financed:



45 Though we sought the participation of a representative from an online sex worker's union, they were unable to join due to prior commitments.

What these suggest is that, despite a sense that prevailing conditions for online work and volunteering are unfair and in need of change, what ought to take their place is less clear. Given that, of the above, the means with the most support is advertising, despite people's criticisms of such existing monetisation models, it is clear participants remain cautious about putting their faith in alternatives at present.

DESIRABILITY - SUMMARY

A core discussion within the theme of desirability was around how a future we desire for web monetisation connects to motivations and what people want from online work and volunteering. The discussions brought out how determining motivations in both activities is complicated. Both can feature, directly or indirectly, financial, non-financial and mixed motivations at times, and while few need to work or volunteer online, the value of these activities to all was clear. Whatever people's motivations, there was a desire to protect certain parts of the Web from monetisation, so that they can remain free for all. However, it was clear that determining what ought to be protected is more complicated than it first seems.

Related to this, as we predicted, was a desire from some to protect the public goods of volunteer spaces from dangers posed by monetisation. At the same time, it was clear that all see reward more generally beyond monetisation as less clear cut, and see room for different kinds of reward in most spaces online. As such, people conceived of the topic less as a question of monetisation or no monetisation, but rather what is the right kind - or right kind of non-financial reward - for a given space.

DESIRABILITY - ANALYSIS IN DEPTH

Workers generally have a mixture of motivations for what they do, though in some cases they pursue it because online work is their only option

Across the two workshops, both often had overlapping positions on what was desirable when it came to web monetisation. Within the workers group, there was particular attention to how payment mechanisms shaped sites and how online workers had to behave as a result. As a blogger and newsletter writer put it, "Advertisement is quite usual but for me, it wouldn't be the one I would choose because it changes aspects of your website".[46]

There was also considerable discussion of online workers' varying motivations, both financial and non-financial, for their work as well as how these mixed. Few described financial considerations as their sole motivation, with most describing it as a way for them to earn additional income on top of their main source of work.

The only case of someone reporting that they solely engaged in online work, was a participant doing macro and microtasking who lost a job in hospitality during the pandemic and who is unable to work full time due to health conditions that predated the pandemic. Because of this, she sought alternative working from home options to bring in money alongside her partner's income. This participant also described how she had met many other women who were engaging in online work in similar situations.

Participants in the workers group discussed how their financial and non-financial motivations could be very closely tied. Most described how they saw the two motivations as in some sense feeding into each other: their passion for what they did spurred outside interest in their work, which in turn created business allowing them to invest further into their passion. As one participant, a podcaster, described:

> *I make [podcasts] as like, tasters, something to draw people to my business [...] So yeah, my motivation is helping people and then also turning my passion into monetisation.*[47]

For others, they saw the potential to monetise what they do online as a bonus but not an essential motivation:

> *The monetisation side of things, for me, it's more a bonus than the central part. I just like making*

46 Demos workshop, May 2022.
47 Demos workshop, May 2022.

music and if I get paid for it as an extra, then that's awesome. But it's not essential. I did it for a long time without being paid and it was still just as fun really.[48]

Finally a smaller number discussed how, the longer they engaged in their online work, the more their financial motivations became essential if they wanted to continue to do it at all. As one participant, also a musician, described: "When I first started, I didn't really care too much for the monetisation behind it. But then as the years go on, funding yourself independently is not cheap."[49]

Workers believe there are parts of the online world that should remain free for all

There was also some discussion about how desirable the potential for increased web monetisation was in relation to preserving freely available content online. As one participant put it, "the news should always be free, like everyone should be able to access the daily news, because I think it's just essential, just for life".[50]

However, deliberations in the workers group drew out how even an essential category of content such as the news was, in practice, difficult to categorise since so much could fall under its banner. Initially, there was a sense that news content could be delineated straightforwardly, yet as other participants pressed on the question of which sources counted, the category became fuzzier.[51] As one participant highlighted, when it came to how people were seeking out this information, "there's places [on social media] where you can actually get all that sort of news for free anyway", a style of news consumption they claimed many had become accustomed to and preferred.[52]

Though we did not refer to it using her term during the deliberations, this draws attention to what Stephanie Rieger has dubbed the 'Essential Web'. This is the notion that there are certain "websites that must remain accessible outside of paid subscription tiers as they've been deemed essential to local culture, knowledge, or social wellbeing."[53]

Volunteers believe there are parts of the online world that should remain free for all

Generally, there was a shared sense among the volunteers that certain forms of content ought to remain free. At the same time, some drew out how the fact that something was currently free did not necessarily reflect the choice of those behind the site:

For the smallest [sites], you know… There's an awful lot of stuff on the Web, that, really, if they tried to charge for it, as has happened

with some newspapers, nobody would pay for it anyway. So they've got no option but to be free.[54]

Likewise, some pointed out how much of what ought to be freely available was at present behind a paywall, and that, in particular, content that becomes a matter of archival interest should remain accessible:

We shouldn't have gated communities. There should be, you know, links to things from blogs from other sites, which you can still access [...] many, many years later and it shouldn't be all locked down and that you've got to pay, you know, 20 subscriptions to be able to access content.[55]

48 Demos workshop, May 2022.
49 Demos workshop, May 2022.
50 Demos workshop, May 2022.
51 Developments in monetisation could have implications for debates around what ought to count as a news publisher in wider internet regulation. For more on this, see for example: Judson, E. The Online Safety Bill: Demos Position Paper. Demos, April 2022. Pp.17-18. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/osb-response.pdf [Accessed 5 July 2022].
52 Demos workshop, May 2022.
53 Rieger, S. Three futures: Exploring the future of web monetization. P.35.
54 Demos workshop, May 2022.
55 Demos workshop, May 2022.

Volunteers recognise a place for financial reward if it is less upfront - a dynamic that already plays out for some

Beyond this, when it came to the volunteer group, there was generally initial strong resistance to the prospect of financial reward for what are currently voluntary activities, and concern over the negative effects of monetisation on these. The extent of this was such that when we reached out to volunteer-run communities about taking part in this research, in a number of cases merely asking people if they were interested in joining the workshops was treated as controversial by them.

In our workshop with volunteers, those from communities with principled traditions of resisting monetisation highlighted how a similar dynamic played out within these communities. As one Wikipedia editor put it:

> *A lot of our contributors, you know, really don't need the money, don't want the money, often have very strong objections to anybody getting money [...] I've been paid as a Wikipedian-in-residence [coordinators between Wikipedia and other institutions] and that was sort of mildly controversial.*[56]

However, as the deliberations continued, volunteers did discuss the desirability and existence of *alternatives* to financial reward systems in these environments (though financial rewards that were circumscribed, such as vouchers, were also considered).

The most desirable financial rewards were those that would be able to be in the 'background' of volunteer spaces to some degree. Another Wikipedia contributor suggested this would be appropriate for people carrying out less visible administrative work, though they argued this would "need to be quite closely monitored".[57]

There was also support for more ad hoc financial reward, partly due to the view that a wage would alter the relationship between current volunteers and sites and other users, and partly because it would introduce legal complexities which were deemed burdensome. There was more support for optional 'tip jar' or micropayment monetisation formats in a manner that would less likely undermine any sense of community:

> *As a user of communities, I would love to be able to use a tip jar at times when I valued the work that they've done, or just their attention, or just their support within those communities [...] I'd love to like bang someone a quid or a fiver occasionally, if you see someone struggling, or you just think they've done really well. And so I suppose, turning that around, other people might see me in that way and want to do the same [...] there shouldn't be a sort of expectation of a wage, but something like the tip jar, micropayments that right at the beginning of this session we talked about, [that] really piqued my interest.*[58]

When it came to motivations, there was generally a perception from volunteers that their motivations diverged from those of online workers, and a stronger emphasis on the role of non-financial motivations among volunteers.[59] As one participant put it, "the fact that everyone here is volunteering their time shows, you know, money and profit and greed isn't necessarily the biggest motivator in society, is it?"[60] Still, there was recognition that people benefited from their volunteering in various non-monetary ways. One Wikipedia editor discussed how it gave him a mental workout in the way someone else might do a puzzle, while an activist in the discussion pointed to the social change they wished to see that their volunteering supported.

Some also noted that online volunteering can be carried out so as to develop skills and support one's work elsewhere, meaning there are indirect financial benefits for some. A participant from the open-source development community discussed how this was increasingly a factor in his line of work. He talked about employers recognising the virtual badges people can receive in, for example, Microsoft technology support forums for helping others:

> *[...] you don't get [these accolades] lightly, like, you actually have to put some graft in to get some form of recognition and some form of reward back from Microsoft. So, it's more of a career booster*

56 Demos workshop, May 2022.
57 Demos workshop, May 2022.
58 Demos workshop, May 2022.
59 For detailed discussion of motivation in the context of open-source software and standards volunteering specifically, see: Krasodomski-Jones, A. et al. The Open Road. Pp.27-32.
60 Demos workshop, May 2022.

for me: the more people I help and the more people who I get my name in with, and the more I'm recognised online and within the community, the better it will help my career in the future.[61]

Volunteers see trade-offs between introducing reward systems and maintaining the identity and autonomy of volunteering online

Discussion of motivation also tied into the theme of how it is difficult to establish what a volunteer is being rewarded for. Part of this stems from the way in which volunteers identify as part of an online community:

> *I don't feel like I'm volunteering, because if I wasn't moderating, I'd still be on that forum giving advice and taking part in it. It's a community and what everyone else [in this workshop] is doing, I'm assuming [...] is you're part of a community, and that's a really important thing for a lot of people. To then be monetised for it is, I wouldn't say no, but it's really difficult because then you're creating a… You're no longer a volunteer that's doing it for enjoyment, you might still be doing it for enjoyment, but there's [then] an added factor.* [62]

More broadly with regard to desirability, there was discussion of valuing the democracy that is present in volunteer-run spaces, though there was recognition that at times this clashed with the need for control, for example, of moderating. However, there was a preference still for this control being one exercised by volunteers and users of a site, rather than by the company that runs the site in question in the case of volunteer-run spaces in privately-owned forums such as Reddit.

This tied in with a desire to maintain, in the face of monetisation, the autonomy that volunteer-run spaces online allowed for. Partly this was due to the perception of better conditions this offered people for their efforts, and partly because of a sense that monetisation introduces power in a damaging way:

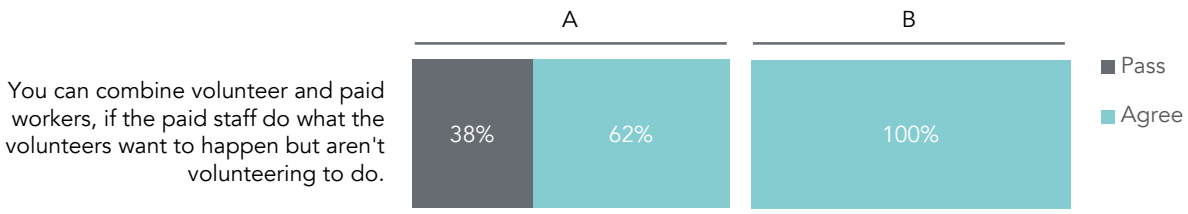
> *So we control when we do things, what we do; you pick up particular tasks that you want to do. As soon as you are paying people, you're then in the business of somebody telling somebody [what to do] [...] and that is a guaranteed source of tension.*[63]

Polis insights on desirability:

Improving monetisation models, volunteer remuneration and participant uncertainty

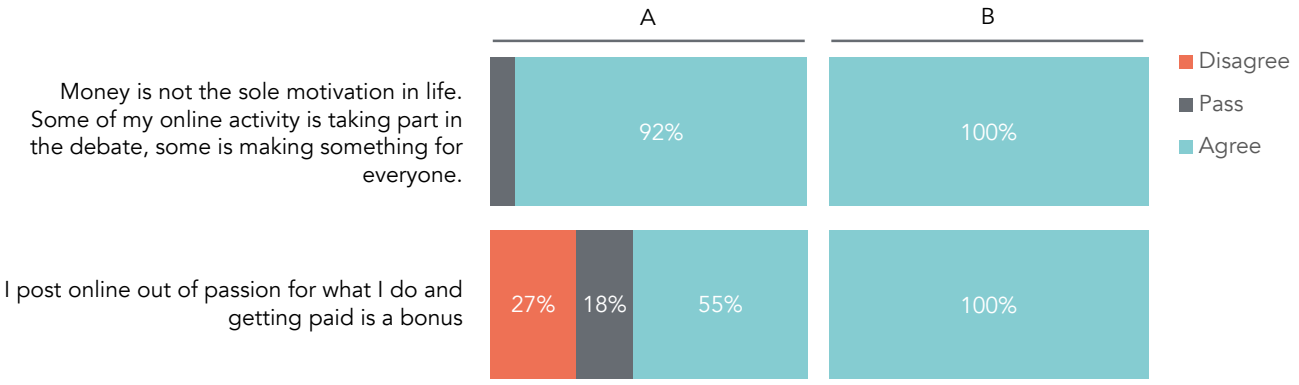
Analysis of the Polis provides further insight into the theme of desirability. As highlighted above, two groups emerged by the close of the Polis, a group A (14 participants) and a group B (3 participants), and across there was just one instance where the majority of both groups disagreed with a statement: 'The site I do online paid work or volunteering through should be financially supported through visitors allowing their personal data to be collected and sold'. 50% of group A and 67% of group B disagreed with this. Given that this is referring to a prevailing system of web monetisation, it underlines how participants felt existing models of web monetisation were in need of improvement. However, in the case of the buying and selling of personal data, this disagreement may also stem from concerns over privacy.

The areas of convergence on points of agreement also shed light on what is deemed desirable by a majority. In particular, there was a shared majority belief that voluntary and remunerated roles can coexist. Notably, there was no disagreement with this suggesting that, at minimum, all believe that a blanket rejection of this option is undesirable.



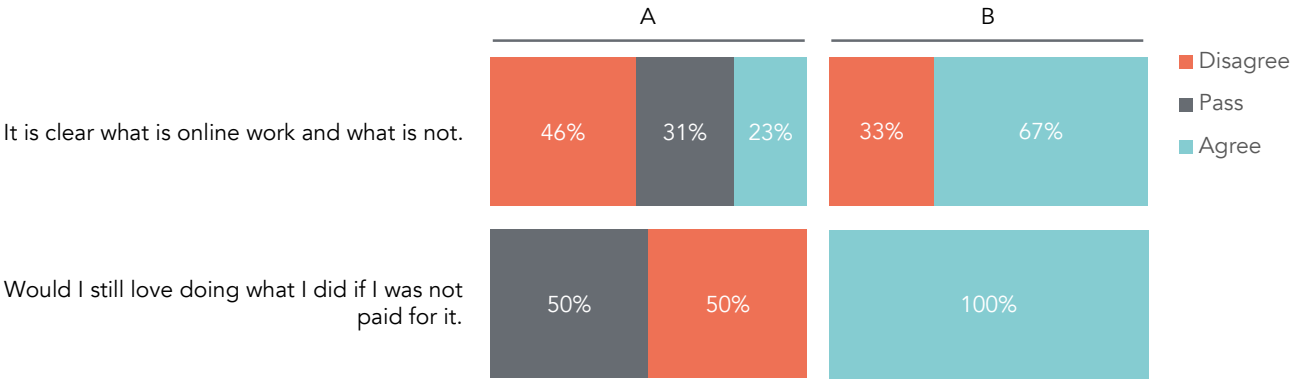
61 Demos workshop, May 2022.
62 Demos workshop, May 2022.
63 Demos workshop, May 2022.

There was also shared agreement in seeing paid activities as potentially blurring at times the line between work and mere interest, suggesting a closer affinity of some in the workers group with volunteers' non-financial motivations (though the reference to posting and 'the debate' focuses attention on content creation work):



Two of the statements coded within the theme of desirability had particularly strong consensus - between 90-100% - and these solely concerned volunteers: 'When a community discovers that some members/mods are being financially incentivised it may change the dynamics of the community'; 'As a volunteer I want control of my time and my priorities.' These underscore the suggestion from the volunteer workshop that any form of remuneration ought to be in the 'background' of volunteer spaces, and the shared view that autonomy is a condition of online volunteering that people greatly value.

A final two statements regarding desirability considered what counts as work or volunteering and people's motivations for these:



The value of capturing the uncertainty in these areas in particular is they highlight just how much online workers' and volunteers' perceptions of these activities are prone to variation. In combination with the analysis above about the shaping of activities online by the presence of monetisation, these votes suggest that where people may stand on these issues is very much open to change.

WHAT WE FOUND
EFFECTS OF DELIBERATION

This research sought not only to understand people's views on web monetisation as they are, but how these develop during deliberative discussion when people are presented with information about the topic and are given the opportunity to reflect on alternative positions, trade-offs, and consequences of different views. The particular value of this to the topic of the future of web monetisation is that, as the above has highlighted, it is an area of uncertainty and one where people's views are likely to develop further.

For policymakers and campaigners seeking to create a fairer, more desirable future for web monetisation, it is not enough therefore to just understand what people's current views are on the topic. It is vital to understand what their views might be on reflection and after learning more about the topic, including as it becomes a matter of increasing public debate with the emergence of alternative monetisation technologies.

Polis' tracking of people's opinion groups as they shift with changing votes gives some insight into the effects of this deliberative process, both the 'learning phase' when they were presented with information on web monetisation and able to ask questions about it, as well the subsequent discussion.

Small shifts in opinion seen in the deliberations reflect the level of consensus discussed above: what differences were present were slight and nuanced

Prior to the first - volunteers - workshop, the opinion groups on Polis were split between 11 (group A) and 2 (group B) voters, respectively. During this workshop, this shifted to a group of 10 (group A) and of 5 (group B) halfway through and by the close they remained at these same sizes.

Prior to the second - workers - workshop, the opinion groups on Polis were still split between 10 (group A) and 5 (group B). During this discussion, this shifted to three groups of 9 (group A), 5 (group B), and 3 (group C) respectively. However, soon after the workshop had ended, this shifted back to two groups of 14 (group A) and 3 (group B) where it subsequently remained. This reversion suggests that what differences arose were not strong enough to break the underlying consensus, and again, that these differences were nuanced.

Among the workers group, participants generally expressed little change in their positions by the close of the discussion. However, this did not imply a resistance to hearing others. All appeared during the deliberations to be open to others perspectives and to alternative considerations and trade-offs posed by the facilitators. This was reflected in participants' concluding reflections. As one person put it, "I wouldn't say my mind changed but I would say, my mind broadened."[64] Furthermore, some were explicit that their views on the subject of web monetisation were still highly contingent, both in relation to their sense of what they can demand and what monetisation means were available to them:

64 Demos workshop, May 2022.

> *"What would make me change my mind would be [...] knowing my worth and feeling confident with it and then if I evolve with my activity online, I would definitely look for some new ways to make some money [...] So it depends on many things but it's definitely not fixed."*[65]

Among the volunteers, some stated their opinions had not shifted (including some who started from an openness to paying some to support voluntary endeavours), while others said they remained essentially uncertain on the topic. In contrast to the worker's group however, some volunteers were very clear that their views had changed considerably. In particular, some changed their mind about whether being paid for currently voluntary online activities was in conflict with motivations for engaging in these. As one participant told the group:

> *"I think before today, I would have said yes [these are in conflict]. But now I have heard some different opinions from different people, I think I'm more leaning towards the view that no, they don't always have to be in conflict. You can love something and be part of a community but still need your time compensated for that."*[66]

What appears to have driven this was not a new interest in earning money from currently voluntary activities, but rather a greater sense that volunteers should be valued. As one volunteer put it, "I have definitely changed my opinion about trying to value more of my own time."[67]

What does this mean? Persistent consensus still open to change

The above suggests two things. Firstly, there is a degree of persistent, underlying consensus across the majority of online workers and volunteers when it comes to what a fair and desirable future for web monetisation would be. This also possibly increases with exposure to information on the topic and opportunity to deliberate upon it.

Secondly, contingency here seems particularly dependent on awareness and understanding of developments in this area, and of the perceived value of one's online work or volunteering. This is particularly striking given the variety of online work and volunteering experiences brought to the discussions: it appears that what someone's work or volunteering online is matters less to their views on web monetisation, than simply having experience of these at all.

65 Demos workshop, May 2022.
66 Demos workshop, May 2022.
67 Demos workshop, May 2022.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TOWARDS A FAIRER FUTURE FOR WEB MONETISATION

Workers feel they have little control in the prevailing systems of web monetisation and broader conditions of online work. They are beholden to platform monetisation rules which they don't understand, unsupported from platform's themselves, isolated from other workers, and feel their efforts are often out of view from users. They generally have a mixture of financial and non-financial motivations for what they do, though in some cases they pursue it because online work is their most viable option, making questions of fairness all the more pressing.

The situation differs for online volunteers, whose primary interest is supporting the public goods they nurture and as such they tend to be resistant to monetisation. At the same time, they also recognise that *reward* is integral to maintaining these same communities and, particularly on reflection, they are not entirely averse to financial reward where it is appropriate and used carefully. Moreover, volunteers see that some already make financial gains within their communities that others do not, with the latter simply being exploited.

To address these challenges, we need to build worker and volunteer power and visibility:

Strengthening collective power

- **Site monetisation design must involve the workers who this affects**. Relying on the goodwill of sites here will not be enough however, and online workers need to feel less alone in their situation moreover. Decision-makers and civil society working on related internet reform issues should support and promote the developing online worker sector of the trade union movement.
- **Ensuring workers have fair systems of web monetisation cannot be viewed in isolation from their rights more widely**, and we endorse the recommendations set out by Fairwork for how to achieve better protections for workers in the UK platform economy.[68]
- **We need to develop volunteer power**. Unions that accept volunteers should work to extend efforts to online volunteers, and existing civil society networks, for example for open-source developers, should make this empowerment a priority.[69] Experimentation with new forms of volunteer voice should also be pursued.[70]

68 Howson, K. et al. 'Policy brief: Protecting workers in the UK platform economy. Fairwork, December, 2021, pp.6-10. Available at: https://fair.work/wp-content/uploads/sites/131/2021/12/Fairwork-UK-Policy-Brief.pdf [Accessed 3 July 2022].

69 The National Council for Voluntary Organisations, for example, lists unions that accept volunteers, see: NCVO. 'VOLUNTEERING – WHAT TO DO IF THINGS GO WRONG'. NCVO. Available at: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-volunteering/if-volunteering-goes-wrong [Accessed 6 July 2022]. The CHAOSS network, supported by the Linux Foundation, is an example of a network that can work towards greater volunteer power. See: CHAOSS. 'Home'. CHAOSS. Available at: https://chaoss.community/ [Accessed 6 July 2022].

70 For example, a proposal for publicly-funded "volunteer labor auditors" that would collect data on volunteers' activities to assist negotiation with companies that benefit from it. See: Li, H., Hecht, B., Chancellor, S. 'Measuring the Monetary Value of Online Volunteer Work'. *Proceedings of the Sixteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (ICWSM2022), May 2022, p.603. Available at: https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/19318/19090 [Accessed 3 July 2022]

Improving worker and volunteer visibility

- **Organisations who rely on online labour should take the Fairwork pledge to demonstrate commitment to fairer treatment.**[71] This will help address the lack of visibility of microworkers in particular.
- **More research is needed into whether and how a lack of visibility for creators dovetails with monetisation, including how this may be compounded by inequalities.**[72] Research exists on inequalities in content creation more generally but there is room for deeper understanding.[73] To aid this, **sites should allow independent data access to researchers so that better scrutiny of this challenge can be carried out.**[74]
- **There needs to be greater recognition of how volunteers' contributions support platforms and the introduction of reward systems (financial or otherwise) should be made on a case-by-case assessment that involves the volunteering community in question.**[75] Moreover, the way in which reward systems relate to inequalities in volunteering must be addressed in the process. As Demos research has highlighted for volunteer developers, for example, "For some [...] upskilling, economic security and a love for coding covers the costs of participation, but for many potential participants the barriers remain high."[76]

TOWARDS A MORE DESIRABLE FUTURE FOR WEB MONETISATION

Motivations for online work and volunteering can vary and these have a bearing on how workers and volunteers think about what a desirable future for web monetisation is. Nonetheless, there is a shared desire for fairer monetisation for workers and in the case of volunteering, there is support for reward systems, including financial rewards where appropriate. What matters, for both workers and volunteers, is that these systems favour their autonomy and voice, and in the case of monetisation systems, that these do not prevent people from accessing certain essential content online for free.

To work towards this more desirable future for web monetisation, the following needs to be pursued:

Exploring web monetisation in the context of online reward

- **Desirability must be understood not as a question of monetisation or no monetisation, but rather what is the right kind of reward - financial or otherwise - for a given online work or volunteering environment.** Decision-makers and civil society efforts to promote web monetisation reform should be attentive to this distinction. This matters particularly to volunteering, as without this reorientation there is a risk that giving volunteers justified rewards for their contributions is wrongly resisted because it is conflated with an inappropriate form of reward.

Exploring what it would mean to protect the 'Essential Web'

- **Research is needed with the public as a whole on what counts as 'essential' online content that must be protected from monetisation.** Stephanie Rieger's concept of the 'Essential Web' is useful in advancing discussion around how to ensure expansions in web monetisation do not undermine accessibility of content. The idea is that there are certain "websites that must remain accessible outside of paid subscription tiers as they've been deemed essential to local culture, knowledge, or social wellbeing."[77] What these are in practice however is hard to unpick.

71 Fairwork. 'Join the Pledge: Together for Fair Platform Work!' Fairwork. Available at: https://fair.work/en/fw/join-the-pledge-together-for-platform-work/ [Accessed 3 July 2022].
72 Our participants' frustrations at people overlooking the work they put into content creation resonates, for example, with Black creators' being imitated and uncredited. See: McClay, C. 'Why black TikTok creators have gone on strike'. BBC, 15 July 2022. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-57841055 [Accessed 3 July 2022].
73 For example: Blank, G. 'Who Creates Content?' *Information, Communication & Society*, March 2013. Vol. 16:4: 590-612. Available at: https://www.dhi.ac.uk/san/waysofbeing/data/data-crone-blank-2013.pdf [Accessed 3 July 2022].
74 This argument adds to existing calls on other bases for wider researcher access to platforms' data. See: Judson, E. *The Online Safety Bill: Demos Position Paper*. Demos, April 2022. P.24. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/osb-response.pdf [Accessed 5 July 2022].
75 For further recommendations into what these could look like, see: Krasodomski-Jones, A. *Everything in Moderation: Platforms, Communities and Users in a Healthy Online Environment*. Demos, October 2020, pp.18-21. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Everything-in-Moderation.pdf [Accessed 3 July 2022].
76 Krasodomski-Jones, A. et al. The Good Web Project: Recognising and Realising Digital Democratic Infrastructure. Demos, May 2022, p.14. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Good-web-1.pdf [Accessed 3 July 2022].
77 Rieger, S. Three futures: Exploring the future of web monetization. P.35.

Exploring which organisational forms best support worker and volunteer autonomy and voice

- **Research is needed into what forms of organisation best foreground worker and volunteer autonomy and voice in tandem with different reward systems for different online work or volunteer spaces**. A recurring view from our research was that online workers and volunteers want to preserve their autonomy and ability to exercise a say over what they do, but where do private, public, cooperative and other forms of organisation best suit? And in combination with which kinds of non-/financial rewards?

TOWARDS BETTER DECISION-MAKING ON WEB MONETISATION

We saw persistent, underlying consensus across the majority of online workers and volunteers when it comes to what a fair and desirable future for web monetisation would be. Moreover, this appeared to have increased with exposure to information on the topic and opportunity to deliberate upon it. From this we have been able to go some way towards understanding what a fair and desirable future for web monetisation looks like to workers and volunteers and make the recommendations above.

However, attitudes here are highly contingent as participants told us, given awareness and understanding of developments in this area, and changing perceptions of the value of one's online work or volunteering. Moreover, web monetisation technologies are very much in the process of developing and so we can expect attitudes to continue to change. What is needed are ongoing, high-quality discussions. More such opportunities were supported by those we spoke to. As one microworker put it, "It seems like we're only just starting the process [of these conversations]".[78]

The future of web monetisation is far from set - so we need optimal forms of dialogue, deliberation and decision-making with workers, volunteers and the wider public

- **Decision-makers who hold sway over the future of web monetisation - from site management, to politicians, to participants in international internet governance forums - must pursue the best quality processes of decision-making in the future. This must be as inclusive as possible, bringing in workers, volunteers and the public as a whole.**
- Moreover, while specific technologies hold promise - including Grant for the Web's Web Monetization API - it is clear from our research that even where people think there must be fairer alternatives to existing monetisation, many remain uncertain about what these would look like. This underlines the importance of ensuring people feel a part of the decisions made about this future.
- To support this effort to keep the conversation open, Demos is keeping the Polis conversation used in the research going, and we invite online workers, volunteers and the wider public to take part at: **http://costsofcreation.demos.co.uk/**.

78 Demos workshop, May 2022.

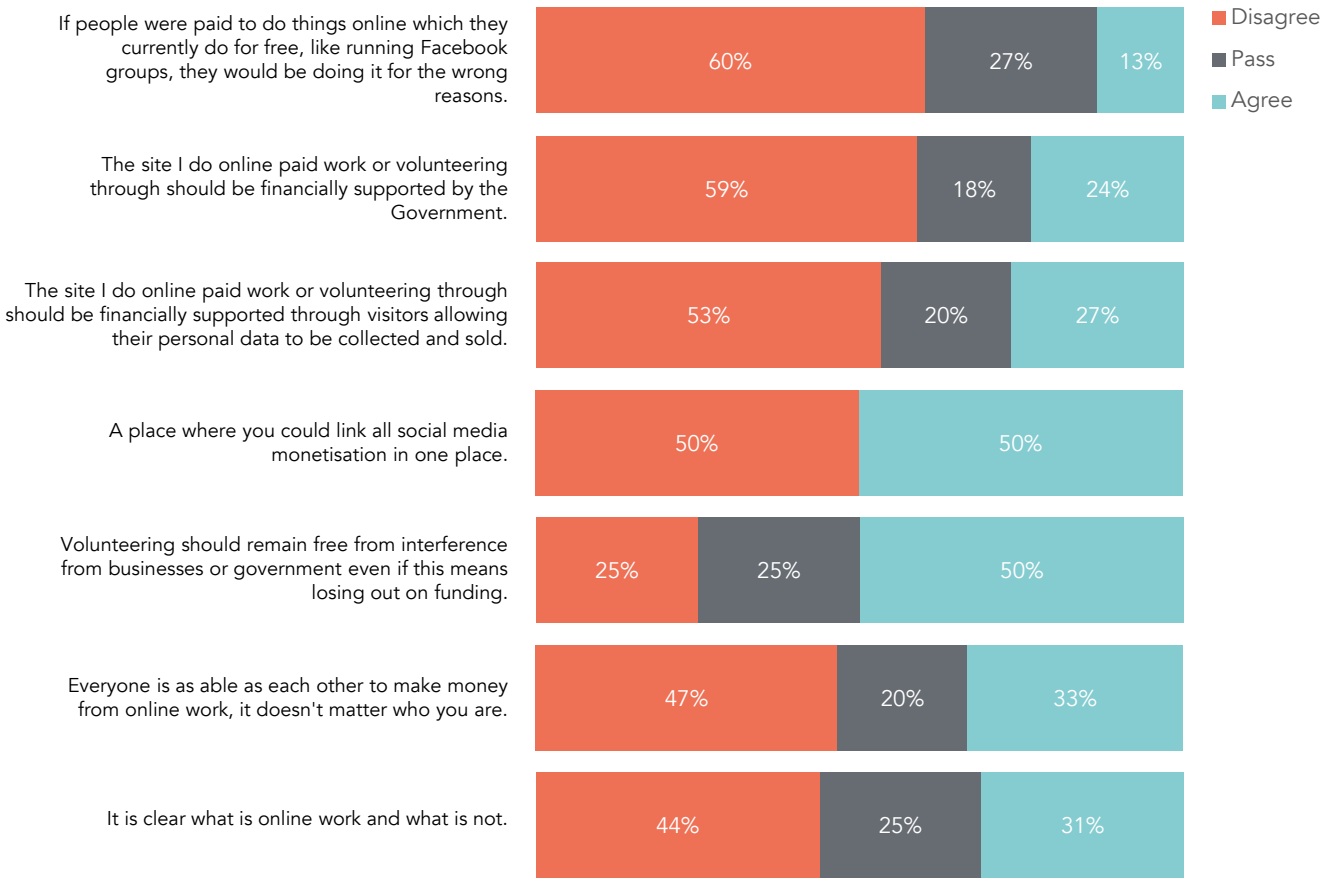
APPENDIX

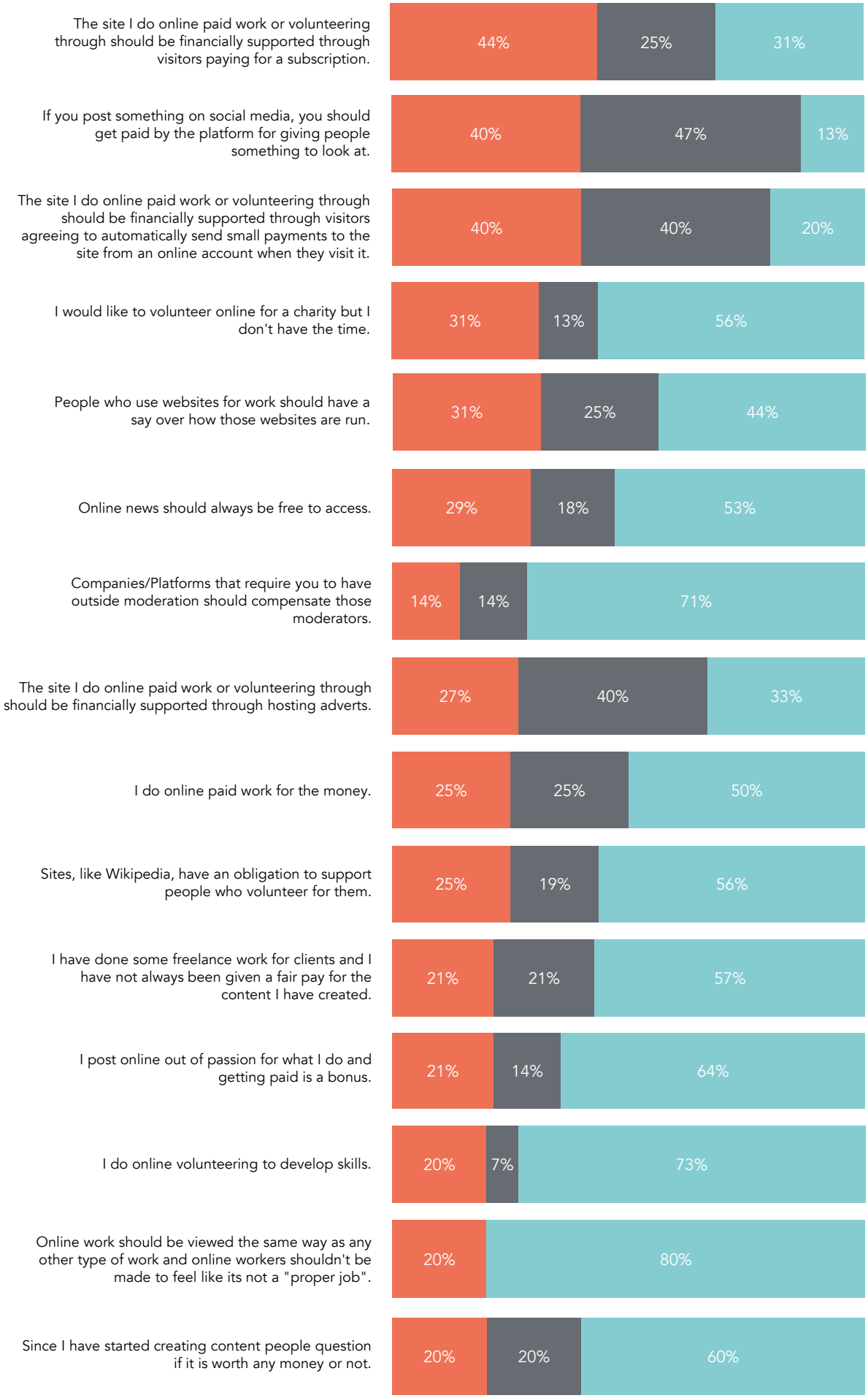
MODERATION GUIDELINES

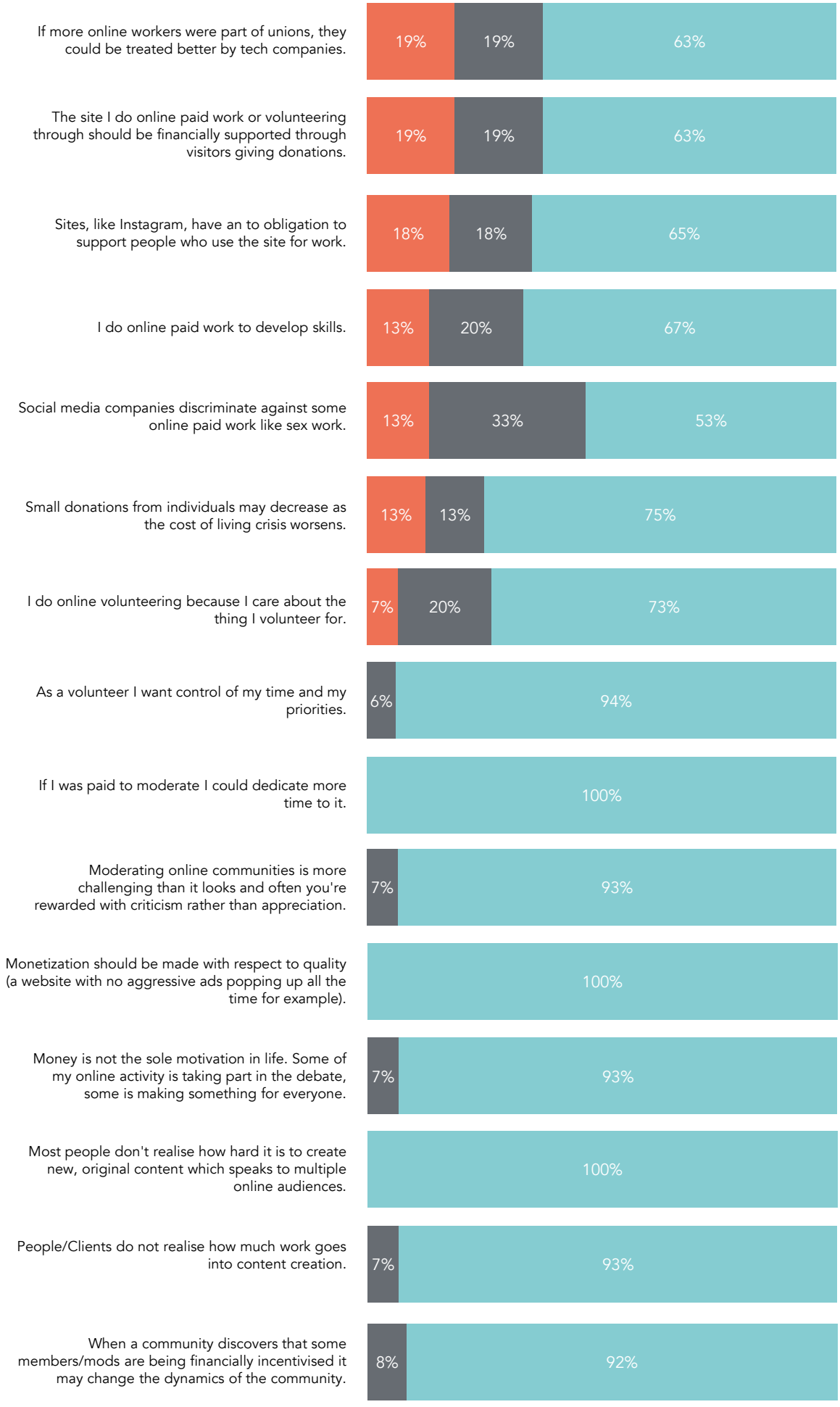
We use the following general guidelines for rejecting submitted statements:

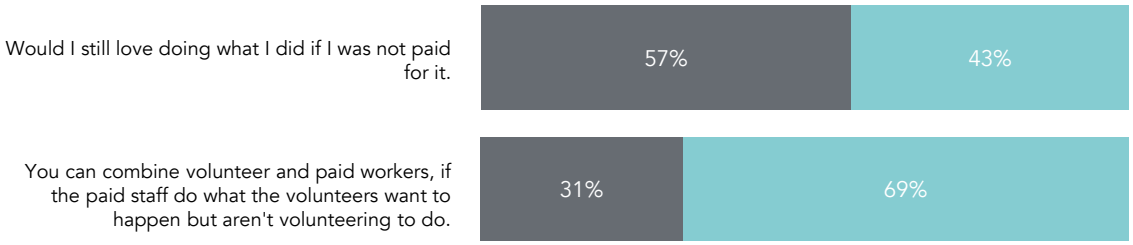
- Because they are nonsensical (e.g. "asfiuasfkj").
- Because they make sense but have no meaning in isolation (e.g. "This is great").
- Because they are not relevant to the discussion (e.g. "We need to build more schools").
- Because they closely repeat an existing statement's point.
- Because their generality would make interpretation of people's agree/disagree/pass responses difficult (e.g. "We should try to prioritise good web monetisation").
- Because their grouping together of multiple points would make interpretation of people's agree/disagree/pass responses difficult (e.g. "It could help creators to make money but could also incentivise monetising the wrong things and only benefit the well off").

STATEMENTS AND OVERALL VOTES




The site I do online paid work or volunteering through should be financially supported through visitors paying for a subscription.
44%
25%
31%
If you post something on social media, you should get paid by the platform for giving people something to look at.
40%
47%
13%
The site I do online paid work or volunteering through should be financially supported through visitors agreeing to automatically send small payments to the site from an online account when they visit it.
40%
40%
20%
I would like to volunteer online for a charity but I don't have the time.
31%
13%
56%
People who use websites for work should have a say over how those websites are run.
31%
25%
44%
Online news should always be free to access.
29%
18%
53%
Companies/Platforms that require you to have outside moderation should compensate those moderators.
14%
14%
71%
The site I do online paid work or volunteering through should be financially supported through hosting adverts.
27%
40%
33%
I do online paid work for the money.
25%
25%
50%
Sites, like Wikipedia, have an obligation to support people who volunteer for them.
25%
19%
56%
I have done some freelance work for clients and I have not always been given a fair pay for the content I have created.
21%
21%
57%
I post online out of passion for what I do and getting paid is a bonus.
21%
14%
64%
I do online volunteering to develop skills.
20%
7%
73%
Online work should be viewed the same way as any other type of work and online workers shouldn't be made to feel like its not a "proper job".
20%
80%
Since I have started creating content people question if it is worth any money or not.
20%
20%
60%


If more online workers were part of unions, they could be treated better by tech companies.
19%
19%
63%
The site I do online paid work or volunteering through should be financially supported through visitors giving donations.
19%
19%
63%
Sites, like Instagram, have an to obligation to support people who use the site for work.
18%
18%
65%
I do online paid work to develop skills.
13%
20%
67%
Social media companies discriminate against some online paid work like sex work.
13%
33%
53%
Small donations from individuals may decrease as the cost of living crisis worsens.
13%
13%
75%
I do online volunteering because I care about the thing I volunteer for.
7%
20%
73%
As a volunteer I want control of my time and my priorities.
6%
94%
If I was paid to moderate I could dedicate more time to it.
100%
Moderating online communities is more challenging than it looks and often you're rewarded with criticism rather than appreciation.
7%
93%
Monetization should be made with respect to quality (a website with no aggressive ads popping up all the time for example).
100%
Money is not the sole motivation in life. Some of my online activity is taking part in the debate, some is making something for everyone.
7%
93%
Most people don't realise how hard it is to create new, original content which speaks to multiple online audiences.
100%
People/Clients do not realise how much work goes into content creation.
7%
93%
When a community discovers that some members/mods are being financially incentivised it may change the dynamics of the community.
8%
92%


Would I still love doing what I did if I was not paid for it.
57%
43%
You can combine volunteer and paid workers, if the paid staff do what the volunteers want to happen but aren't volunteering to do.
31%
69%

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PUBLISHED BY DEMOS JULY 2022

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