



Crowd Work: The Fury and the Fear¹

Upon waking, I look at my phone. No messages, so I turn on my laptop and get it looking for some work. As I brush my teeth, an alarm goes off, and I rush back, toothbrush hanging from my mouth, to write some titles for porn videos. Once the 10,000 pieces of work are complete, I return to the bathroom. Next I grab my laptop and head to the kitchen to get breakfast, but before I can crack an egg the alarm goes off again. This time it is a survey that takes me over an hour, but when I get to the last page it tells me I don't qualify and that I won't be paid for what I had done up to that point. Infuriated, I head to Turkopticon, a site where workers can rate people who post work on Amazon Mechanical Turk, to warn others, but by now there are already over a dozen other comments from people who have already faced the same issue. After this I make breakfast, sit down, and watch for any work that might come through. I need \$100 today to pay the rent, buy some groceries, and pay for my daughter's school trip, but I'm not sure I'm going to get it. By bedtime, after being at my computer for over 12 hours, I only have \$20. Tomorrow I'll have to work extra hard, or maybe skip breakfast, or I might not make the rent.

This story isn't just mine, but the story of the thousands of people who rely on crowd work to make ends meet. On Amazon Mechanical Turk alone there are 40,000 workers from around the world, on the site at any given time. Of that number, approximately 40% claim to work on the site full-time, and they are the most vulnerable to the issues inherent to the platform. From wage theft and underpaying for tasks to content that is psychologically damaging, crowd work as it stands today is not a career that leaves people healthy and happy, and if we do not find a way to either legislate it or socially pressure the companies who operate these platforms to make a better work environment, the fear is that we all face a future of work that will leave us exploited.

To begin, what is crowd work? It is literally being able to access a huge number of workers in order to get a job done. On Amazon Mechanical Turk, or mTurk, each project is broken up into microtasks, which can be tagging a single photo from a thousand taken on vacation, or spell checking a single sentence from a novel, that are completed by workers known as Turkers. Each piece of work is called a HIT, or Human Intelligence Task, and the workers are referred to by Amazon as "artificial artificial intelligence". While their intent in using this term is to imply that one can build mTurk into software directly, it is an insult to refer to real humans with real intelligence in such a way, but Amazon continues to sell the workforce as nothing more than algorithms intended to make the internet tick. Along with microtasks comes micropay, and each piece of work is completed for only a few cents, with most HITs paying less than 10 cents each. The tasks themselves tend to come in huge batches, so the workers may sit for hours on a single project, doing the same thing over and over again until the work is done. While this means the project is completed quickly, which the Requester (the person who posts the work to the platform) enjoys, it also means that workers face monotony without breaks. It gets worse when the worker faces wage theft, which is not only condoned by Amazon, but built into the platform. When a Requester rejects work, they get to keep what has been done, since they use the submission to judge whether to accept the work or not, but they don't have to pay. Some Requesters even use rejections as a way to save money, randomly rejecting a certain percentage of HITs, often the same percentage as

¹ This chapter is part of the book on *Digital employment and working conditions in Europe* that will be released on mid-March edited by FEPS and UNI Europa.



they pay in fees. While workers can report this behaviour on Turkopticon, new workers rarely know that site exists since Amazon provides no helpful information to workers when they sign up, and they end up working for Requesters who reject their work. When a worker receives rejections, their approval rating is affected, which is a measure of how many of their HITs have been accepted or not. Requesters can use qualifications on their HITs to automatically determine who can do the work or not, and one such option is to limit the work to those who have a high approval rating. When you're new and end up working for a bad Requester who rejects you unfairly, you can see your approval rating plummet. The only remedy is to do more underpaid work for any Requester who doesn't reject, or give up, and almost 70% of workers do quit within 6 months according to Ross, Irani, Silberman, Zaldivar and Tomlinson (2010). For those who stick it out, an even worse fate is to be blocked by a Requester, often for no fault of their own. Some Requesters block workers just because they want new people doing their tasks, while others block seemingly randomly. These blocks build up on your account over time and if Amazon decides to review your account based on a new block, you can become suspended from the platform if you already have other blocks. Once this happens the worker is unemployed and there is no way to contest the suspension, since Amazon refuses to mediate disputes between workers and Requesters or between workers and the platform itself. Worse, if you haven't withdrawn your earnings to your Amazon Payments account, they're now gone, too.

This is a return to the assembly line with deskilling, surveillance and unregulated hours; since crowd workers are considered "freelancers" instead of employees, they don't enjoy the benefits that labour legislation offers. No restrictions on hours, no minimum wage, no vacation pay, no health insurance, and no protection from discrimination or unfair dismissal. That also means that it is acceptable for Amazon to pay Turkers outside of the US and India in Amazon.com gift cards, harkening memories of old mining towns. It is literally a labour situation reminiscent of the industrial revolution – there isn't even a way to ensure the worker is not a child or a slave. Beyond that, crowd workers are also not expected to pay into the same social services that a typical employee would, even though because of their low wages they are more likely to be accessing such services. In Canada, a worker such as myself does not pay into pension, employment insurance, or other similar safety nets, but if I end up suspended from mTurk I would likely have to turn to welfare to keep myself going. In fact, I make so little on mTurk that I could qualify for some assistance already! As we see many companies turning to crowd work to replace skilled workers and entire careers being shifted to such platforms, that means less and less people will be supporting social programs while more and more will need to access them. Together, the fact that employment legislation does not apply to "freelancers," both to protect them and to include them in supporting government programs, is a troubling state of affairs.

When I visited FEPS to speak about crowd work, many people brushed aside discussion of these issues as problems only found in North America, but there are thousands of Europeans already working on mTurk or similar platforms. For example, Clickworker claims to have over 500,000 workers in its home country of Germany, and it is open to anyone from around the globe, so the total number of European citizens who use the platform is likely far higher. Other platforms such as 99Designs, Testbirds, Crowdfunder, and Crowdfunder also have many European workers, but since those platforms do not release demographic numbers, we can't know how many of our neighbours might be full-time crowd workers. While these jobs and their associated low pay – workers on mTurk forums report average earnings of between \$2 - 40 USD a day – could be a boon for those who live in countries with a very low



cost of living, people who live in more expensive areas will struggle to make enough to survive. This may not be a problem today with the ability to work in traditional jobs or rely on social services to attain the basic needs of life, but what of the future? When teamed with the takeover of jobs by robots and algorithms, crowd work is further eroding what jobs are actually available. mTurk studies have shown that it can be used to diagnose medical conditions ("Is there a Doctor in the Crowd? Diagnosis Needed! (for less than \$5)", Cheng, Manoharan, Lease&Zhang, 2015), complete scientific research ("Crowd Science: The Organization of Scientific Research in Open Collaborative Projects", Franzoni & Sauermann, 2012), design software ("Collaborative Software Development Platforms for Crowdsourcing", Peng, Babar & Ebert, 2014), engage in graphic design ("The Good, the Bad and the Ugly", Florian Schmidt, 2013), write articles or books ("ProPublica's Guide to Mechanical Turk", 2010), and more. Those in professions once regarded as impossible to be completed by a robot are suddenly finding themselves replaceable by crowds – cheaper, faster, potentially more accurate, and accessible 24 hours a day. Europeans are not immune to this creep of the crowd, and it will not be long before jobs here begin to disappear as well, if they aren't already.

What will we do when those jobs dry up? Join the crowd work platforms, of course. Some may not see this as a dystopian future, but crowd work as a career has some dreary features. One example is the fact that you are constantly in vicious competition with your coworkers, whom you rarely have the opportunity to communicate with on the platform. For example, mTurk has no function on its website for workers to talk to each other, meaning it is literally every Turker for themselves. When work is to be completed, it appears in the listings and is made available to anyone who meets the qualification requirements. Suddenly, a mass feeding frenzy begins, with workers grabbing as many HITs as they can (to a maximum of 25 at a time, as there is a limit on each worker's queue). This results in good work disappearing in seconds and, once it's gone, those who need to keep working to make enough to survive are left to do the work which others who are in better financial circumstances have left behind. Some of the worst work that many have to resort to is content moderation. Child pornography, mutilated bodies, animal abuse, murder, and other abhorrent imagery that is reported on sites like Facebook, Youtube or Flickr used to make its way to companies in countries such as the Philippines where people would make their career around adjudicating the content of these reports. Today, even countries with such a low cost of living can be undercut, and now workers on mTurk are moderating such content for pennies a piece. It was only a week ago that I saw HITs where images from ISIS were to be given tags for their content, and each task paid only 5 cents. So, not only will we be faced with tasks that can leave us with nightmares, but we'll be forced to viciously compete with our colleagues in order to do them.

That isn't to say that crowd work is inherently bad, and there are certain groups of people for whom crowd work offers major benefits. For example, those with disabilities can work from home in an environment that is suitable to their condition, but only on platforms that are accessible. Caregivers can stay home with those they tend to while doing work during down time. People who live in areas that have high unemployment don't have to worry about a dearth of jobs or the high cost of traveling afar to work as they can always find something to do online. Felons and sexual offenders who have limitations on where they can travel and who they can work around can find employment that is satisfying and isolated, protecting others from harm. And those who work in areas where their skills may not be in demand find projects they can add to their portfolio on sites such as 99Designs or CoContest. For everyone else there are many other benefits, such as a flexible schedule, the ability to pick and choose



projects to work on, freedom from a boss and coworkers, new job opportunities on platforms within various fields, and the ability to work longer hours if greater income is needed. These benefits are significant, and crowd work should not be written off entirely or we lose these possibilities, but it is important that we make crowd work fair, ethical and sustainable in order to protect those who do benefit the most from such platforms. That means tackling issues such as workers being financially and psychologically exploited, forced to work without any time off, pushed into doing work that they are uncomfortable with, and isolated without contact with other humans who understand what they're going through. As traditional employees have come to expect, a workplace balanced in favour of the well being of both worker and Requester is a must.

This view of the future of labour can seem bleak, but workers are already banding together in order to change their work environment. A thriving, vibrant community has sprouted around mTurk, spurred on by the fact that Amazon does not facilitate inter-worker communication. Starting with the forum I am community manager of, TurkerNation.com, workers have collected in order to discuss the work they do, just as coworkers collect around a water cooler on the job. Discussion of the job itself, from what work is worth doing to how to maximize earnings, is just part of what the communities are for, and in many ways is just a small portion of their benefit. In a study completed over the summer of 2014, myself and Kate Zyskowski found that many workers used the forums most frequently as social support. They found friends in their coworkers, peers who understood what crowd work was like, especially at the worst of times. Workers come to each other's aid when a Requester mass rejects their HITs, sending emails to the company, or shaming them for their behaviour on Twitter. If a researcher posts a survey that is underpaid, or rejects those who complete it, the community will contact the school's ethics review board to complain. This support has even moved to campaign organizing through the website WeAreDynamo.org, created by a partnership between academics and workers, and intended to allow for anonymous discussion of how workers could collect in order to engender change. The first successful campaign of the platform was the Guidelines for Academic Requesters, a repository of tips on how to ethically use mTurk for research. The second campaign, named Dear Jeff Bezos, called for Turkers to write to Bezos, the CEO of Amazon, to let him know who they were, why they used mTurk, and what sort of changes they'd like to see for the future. While Bezos didn't reply directly, one request made by Indian workers – the ability to receive their pay by bank transfer instead of cheques which were more often lost than not – was granted after the campaign. While these are just the first steps in allowing crowd workers to fight for their rights, when paired with strikes and lawsuits by Uber drivers and Handy maids, it seems that finally the crowd is finding its voice.

In order to ensure crowd work is equitable to those who engage in it, governments must step up and make the companies who run crowd work platforms do so transparently. For example, on mTurk workers can't communicate, therefore they have no way to know who else is working there. Amazon does not release information on how many workers there are or where they come from, so no government can know how many of their citizens are working on the platform. As a result, they can't ensure that those workers, or the company itself, are paying appropriate taxes or into social systems typically funded through wage deductions or employer contributions. It also means that workers cannot organize, from providing each other social support to sharing knowledge to campaigning for their rights. If platforms were legislated to provide this information, we could ensure that workers could fight for a better work environment while the government would get its fair share of the profits being earned from



the labour. This would then entitle the workers to the support that is especially necessary when engaged in such a precarious job, such as access to healthcare, employment insurance and pension funds. Transparency is a simple first step towards bringing the rights of a crowd worker in line with those of a traditional worker, and with the industry throwing itself headlong into a future of work where employment is measured in minutes instead of years, it is vital.

Tomorrow, I will wake up, open my laptop, and start searching for HITs again. Compared to ten years ago when I first signed up for mTurk, my outlook will be different – instead of thinking that no one knows what I do and how negative it can be, I now know that people are finally discussing crowd work. I also know that people are listening to the workers, and while it took a decade to finally get the attention necessary to start engendering change that stops the descent into precarious, exploitive work for all, the time for action is now. We must petition our governments to protect all workers, not just those who have job security thanks to old legislation. We must pressure companies to be open about their workforce, and to consider changes that allow the workers to organize. Lastly, we must listen to workers to better understand their situation and how we can all offer them the support they need to be self-sufficient. Further discussion is necessary, and all stakeholders must join the conversation in order to gather the knowledge necessary to make solid choices going forward, but talk is not enough. The next step we must take now, before we find the situation is beyond repair, is action. There is no position that cannot be completed by a robot, an algorithm, or a crowd, and if you want to be able to work in a career where you can support your family and enjoy your job, it is up to you to join the fight.