

<http://collectivate.net/journalisms/2014/3/9/crowdmilking.html>

TREBOR SCHOLZ "CROWDMILKING"

Last week I had the pleasure of delivering The 2014 Grafstein Lecture in Communications at the University of Toronto Law School. I decided to share it here:

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Before the tsunami hits, you know how it is? The sea recedes, leaving a dead desert in which only cynicism and dejection remain. All you need to do, is to make sure you have the right words to say, the right clothes to wear, before it finally wipes you away.

At first glance, the situation in the United States and Southern Europe seems to prove the Italian theorist and activist Franco Berardi right. [1]

The suicide rate in the US, Canada[2], and Europe, especially among the middle-aged, has Today, we are all unemployed on probation and the worry about careers and jobs unites generations. One worker at the crowdsourcing market place *Amazon Mechanical Turk*, a modern-day-agera, put it this way:

"I realize I have a choice to work or not work on AMT, but that means I would also not need to make the choice to eat or not eat, pay bills or not pay bills, etc." (Felstiner)

Incredibly shaky working conditions lead to personal despair but such precarity should not be understood as unsolvable individual problem. At least 10 million people are working in the crowdsourcing industry and you can add the some 42 million US-American freelancers, and the unpaid student interns who --according to Ross Perlin-- generate at least \$2 billion in profits for corporate America each year. And don't forget the 20,000 Japanese workers who die of *Karoshi*, death-by-overwork, year in year out.

Let me tell you: I just can't help myself. I feel irate thinking about the ways in which the crowd sourcing industries are wiping away 100 years of labor struggles for the 8-hour workday, minimum wages, paid vacation, and employer-supported-health insurance, and the abolition of child labor. I mean, just think of the Haymarket Riots, the anti-sweatshop protests after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, or the Strike at Ford's River Rouge Plant in 1941. Essentially, digital labor and crowdsourcing in particular, set back the clock for organized labor to the second half of the 19th century when the 80-hour week was the norm.

Buy-in for Berardi's poetic hymn, sung to the living dead, paralyzed before the wave, would leave us with nothing but the "great exit." His stark picture of financial atrophy, godforsaken boredom, and pointless work is not especially hospitable to discussions about contemporary forms of work that are worth defending, of emerging projects of worker organization, and of upstarts that we should be building.

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So what I would like to do in the next 45 minutes is to first provide you with an overview of the invisible and sometimes exploitative forms of contemporary work as they are playing out online. I will then talk about a very small area of my research, which is a critique of the ethics of crowdsourcing and Amazon Mechanical Turk in particular. AMT, as it is often abbreviated, has been discussed widely now but what is hardly discussed is how workers could start to negotiate, gain some bargaining power, or organize (Marvit). Taking cues from Cesar Chavez, the recent fast food worker unionization drives, and a few concrete projects of worker organization, I will discuss some obstacles to worker organization (Greenhouse).

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As you can see we are having our hands quite full-- so let's get started.

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In 2007 I started to write about digital labor asking about the financial value that is generated by users on social networks like MySpace-- if you still remember that. Spending time on Facebook, Farmville, or Candy Crunch, then, was about what I called an immanent violence of participation. Two years later, I convened the first large interdisciplinary conference on digital labor: *The Internet as Playground and Factory* conference at The New School and last year, I published the book of the same title with Routledge. (Scholz) As an artist, writer, and activist, I teach courses on contemporary work, and right now I'm in the process of convening the next conference on the topic "Digital Labor: Sweatshops, Picket Lines, Barricades," which will take place at The New School November 14-16, 2014.[3] I bring this up because in my publications, projects, and events—and also in this talk-- I'm bringing together designers, social entrepreneurs, artists like Alex Rivera with legal scholars like Miriam Cherry, and media theorists like Andrew Ross or Christian Fuchs who just brought out his new book: *Digital Labor and Karl Marx*. [4]

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Other recent books about this Post-Fordist avant-garde about contemporary labor include *Living Labor*[5], based on an exhibition that took place in Oslo in 2013, *Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor*[6], 2011 and *Dead Man Working* [7] by Carl Cederstrom and Peter Fleming 2012. There is also a catalogue of The Workers exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Arts in Massachusetts in 2012.[8]

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So, what are some of the main questions that are coming up in this discussion? Much of the literature is coming to terms with what labor actually means in the context of the Internet. Is labor even the right term to apply here? Is what we are seeing on Facebook really Exploitation 2.0, or, "crowdmilking," as I refer to it? Scholars account for the blurring of work and leisure, play and labor. The German media theorist Julian Kuecklich introduced the term playbor.[9]

There were also more problematic terms that were licked around. Just take "gamification," as part of which the principles of gaming, let's say the mechanics that help to release the addictive energy when playing CandyCrunch or Angry Birds, are re-directed to work tasks. Other central questions include the all-pervasive capture of value on the Post-Snowden Web for commercial and governmental ends, the continued validity of Marx's labor theory of value, and the question of alienation, and the politics of time.

But first, let me clarify that when I am talking about digital labor I am thinking of *a human activity sometimes undertaken solely for pleasure that has economic and symbolic value and can be performed at any time. This labor is not bound to the factory, the office, or the household; it is performed constantly – in real time- on unprecedented scale and on a large variety of devices. Leisure and work are enmeshed beyond recognition.*



cc attribution: Trebor Scholz

To bring the term a bit more to life, I designed this map, which addresses the basic division of contemporary work online, which is really two-fold: waged and uncompensated. So, have a look at this map. It may help to keep misrepresentations and totalizing accounts of these emerging forms of work at bay. What do we have in mind when talking about “digital labor”? Specificity goes along way when discussing these novel forms of work. We’ll find that terms like “immaterial labor” really speak to a particular segment of this landscape. From this 32,000-foot perspective, I will zoom down and only pick one example-- the sale of the Huffington Post.

Together with Kenneth Lerer, Andrew Breitbart, and Jonah Peretti, Arianna Huffington founded the Huffington Post as an umbrella for left-leaning commentary in 2005. The simple idea was to draw attention to existing content, by aggregating it from various blogs and add some original text to that mix. The site started featuring bloggers who Huffington appreciated and also managed to attract posts by then-senator Barack Obama and celebrities like Oprah. The game plan was simple: this combination of stars and bloggers would increase the social capital for the latter who would remain happy campers despite never being remunerated for their work. This recipe worked out just fine until 2011, when dark clouds started to move into the land of HuffPo. That year, Arianna Huffington and her initial investors turned around on their writers when they sold the company for \$315 million to AOL. Not only was this an obvious affront to the writers but Huffington was also rather blasé in her response to the outrage of the bloggers. “Go ahead, go on strike,” she snapped.

And so they did. In February 2011, Visual Arts Source which had frequently cross-posted material on Huff Po started to boycott the site. One month later the strike and call to boycott was joined and endorsed by the National Writers Union and the Newspaper Guild. In April 2011, the labor rights advocate Jonathan Tassini filed a class action suit for \$105 million in back wages for the thousands of uncompensated writers. The call for boycott wasn't especially successful and the class action lawsuit was lost. As it turned out, making money off the backs of these writers was not illegal. In my opinion, however, it was highly unethical and deserves our condemnation and perhaps even boycott of the site. What is unethical about this, you might ask. Well, just like the volunteer chat room moderators for AOL in the 1990s, these unpaid bloggers for Huffington Post were –at least in part–working there with hopes of making a living from their work one day. Clearly, some of them had that expectation. Monetizing their good faith and sympathies for the project was, you might agree, unethical. And very clearly, projects like Fairnopoly [10] and Craigslist show that profit maximization is not inevitable when it comes to companies that are reliant on user-submitted material. Craigslist turns up its nose at \$500 million in advertising revenues every year (Carney). They know when enough is enough, as Newmark put it; it's not about profit maximization and users did not ask for ads.

Huffington is an interesting example because publishers and magazines like The Atlantic often cite such writing for exposure in their effort to explain why they're not paying some of their writers (Coscarelli). “Exposure Doesn't Feed My F*cking Children!,’ as one journalist put it.

The broad landscape of unwaged digital work also includes the volunteer customer service workers who put in regular shifts for free on sites like Apple or Verizon. And yes, I am also talking about our cognitive labor on Facebook, Reddit, LinkedIn, and Google.

In short-- we're becoming what Dallas Smythe called an “an audience commodity” [11]. Sut Jhally goes beyond that when he suggests to consider “watching time as immediate commodity. When the audience watches commercial television it is working for the media, producing value... .”(Jhally). Since June 2013, Edward Snowden has given us a stream of persuasive accounts of the extent to which we are captured-- our data are collected, analyzed, and sold, which allows advertisement companies, the NSA, and its British equivalent the GCHQ, to profile us, make predictions about our future likes.

Telecommunications companies profit mightily.

source: NSA data center by Trevor Paglen

In this “Like Economy,” Internet companies can market to us in a more personalized and targeted way. Still controversial in 2007, it is clear today that we are generating value through our presence and activities, through our daily routines, and sociality (*FORA.tv - Democratization and the Public Sphere*). If we are not paying for the service, then we are the product and services like Gmail and Facebook are becoming socially too expensive.

When performing ourselves, we are putting in emotional labor to fit into the institutional context and communal values of, for example, Facebook- quite in the sense of Arlie Hochschild's “emotional labor” and the “outsourced self.” (Hochschild). We are re-creating our identity online and on corporate platforms. We are more than generous with our time, time that we are taking away from other activities and from our loved ones.

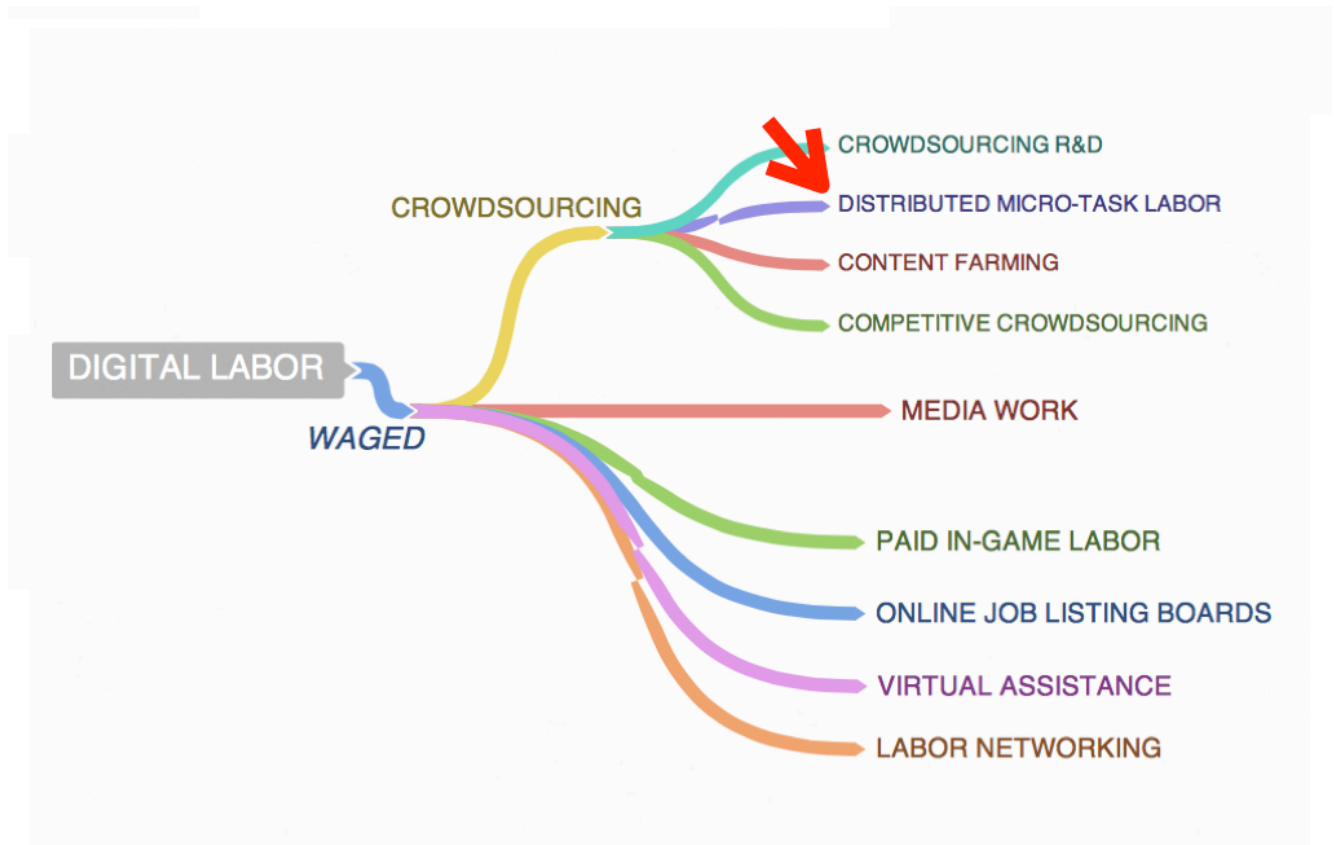
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But let's take a slight turn at this point, and also acknowledge that there are forms of digital work that I'm more than happy to give away for free. They are equally part of this landscape and it doesn't need much explanation when I say that working for Wikipedia, Open Street Map, Science Commons, Foldit,[12] Challenge.org, Distributed Proofreaders, or eBird [13], is not the same like “working for,” contributing our time and data to, corporate intermediaries.

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Now, let me shift your attention to waged digital labor. Out of the hundreds of different work environments that I researched, I will only talk about one example of compensated work online.

But hold on just one moment, this is as good a moment as any in this presentation to just come to a full stop and at least briefly mention-- briefly acknowledge -- the 1.2 million FOXCONN employees in Shenzhen or the miners of rare earths in Congo whose desperate work conditions are the basis for our digital work and Apple-obsessed lifestyle. The unionization efforts at Foxconn, discussed by Vincent Mosco and others [15], would be a topic for a different talk [14].



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So, when talking about crowdsourcing we can step from Shenzhen to Savar, Bangladesh where last year, 5 garment factories collapsed.

Workers there were paid 20 cents an hour, manufacturing clothes for brands like Calvin Klein and Zara. When the building on Rana Plaza that housed these factories crumbled, the death toll soared to 1,129, immediately making this the biggest disaster in the history of the garment industry. While everybody was searching for the owner of those factories, the CEOs of Zara, H&M, and Calvin Klein walked away unharmed. *The Toronto Star* reported about

Sweatshop activists who recently demanded Wal-Mart, The Children's Place, and others to compensate Rana Plaza victims.

And it is very clear at this point that we can draw a straight line from those traditional sweatshop economies to the Internet, which is exactly not a remote and "exceptional" "place" that is in some way independent from the rest of society: it's exactly *not* a brave new, separate "cyber world." Internet exceptionalism- the concept of crafting Internet-specific laws that diverge from regulatory precedents, is controversial at the very least [16]. The Internet is a fertile ground for the continuation of age-old sweatshop economies. Just listen to the CEO of CrowdFlower, winner of the "Netexplorateur" prize," Lukas Biewald, who spoke plainly to a group of young tech entrepreneurs just four years ago: *"Before the Internet, it would be really difficult to find someone, sit them down for 10 minutes and get them to work for you, and then fire them after those 10 minutes. But with technology, you can actually find them, pay them the tiny amount of money, and then get rid of them when you don't need them anymore."* (Marvit)

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But no, CrowdFlower is not alone. Just take the Melbourne-native company 99Designs, very active in the European and American design market. No, they don't house their workers in treacherous buildings. They don't put them up at all. Instead, workers toil at home and in cybercafés all over the world.

99designs offers competitive, crowdsourcing for designers. Currently, the company has a pool of 200,000 registered designers who engage in such speculative design work, which the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada prohibits for its certified members.

So, for example if you are a client who is looking for a logo you might spend the very reasonable sum of \$300. And for that you receive 116 completely executed designs. But of these 116 designers only one will receive the payment of \$180, and I'm not sure if I have to spell this out but that means that 115 designers worked for free, for no pay at all. (Schmidt) And you don't have to be a math genius to understand that this means that \$120 went to the intermediary, the company that connects workers with those who are looking for work. 99Designs states that it ran 180,000 of these kinds of crowdsourced competitions that are of course global in nature and that are as much a waste of creative labor as architecture competitions.



source: Metropolis

Therefore, not only do wages hit rock bottom but degrees in design, decades of experience, and reputation are cut out of the equation and any talented student in a dorm room of an art college in Brazil can compete with designers in Canada. What it means to be a designer, then, has completely changed.

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Miriam Cherry writes that "these technologies are not enabling people to meet their potential: they are instead exploiting people." (Marvit) And I would add to that that work is re-organized against the worker. Peter Fleming and Carl Cederstroem in their brilliant little book *Dead Men Working* liken the click workers to the zombies in George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*. Also for Steven Shaviro, in "our society [that] endeavors to transform death into value, ... the zombies enact a radical refusal." They are blank and terrifying, he writes, and the danger that they present is real: they kill and consume. (Shaviro 84-85)

In no small part because of the global recession, the fields of digital zombie labor are blossoming. Crowdsourcing platforms continue the attempts by Taylor and Ford to make production processes most effective, but now, there's no consideration for the worker being able to own the product of their labor. In fact, today, they would not even know what they are producing at all. And if that was not enough, much of the crowdsourcing also neatly finishes what Thatcher and Reagan started when they broke the spirit of unionized flight traffic controllers and miners in the 1980s.

still from *Sleep Dealer* by Alex Rivera

"The border is closed but the network is open. Employers get all the work without the worker," as Alex Rivera put it in his film *Sleep Dealer*: no commitment, no care for the worker, just a "superabundance" of the global 24/7 work force. [17] So, artists do play a role in this discussion in that they are alert to the problem and draw public attention to it. Rivera's film is a great example but I'm happy to offer many more examples in our Q&A period after this lecture.

In the various digital labor industries, employers have worked hard to misclassify workers. They really created a new genre with their linguistic stretching exercises. They refer to their workers as "task rabbits" or, almost fondly, "rabbits," "cloud workers," or "providers." But maybe, you might also say that that's not a stretch at all but rather the icy reality of it-- these workers really are treated, or are functioning like rabbits. If you follow the Web 2.0 Ideology, workers are just energizer bunnies-- fountains of *perma-youth*, of bodies who will never age or tire.

But consider this: a "cloud worker" or "task rabbit" is also a citizen and a human being who will get hungry comes noon, whose body will tire from long hours of screen-bound work. Obfuscating the language surrounding contemporary work is also aimed at muddying the understanding of the nature of the work relationship itself. Importantly, companies insist that all crowdsourced workers are **independent contactors** instead of **employees**, a status that would come with rights.

At Amazon.com's "fulfillment centers" (think warehouses) in Delaware and also in Germany, there are misclassification disputes with unions who object to the categorization of retail workers as logistics workers.

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Here, now we are getting to the one example of crowdsourced work that I want to detail a bit more- not so much because it is unknown to you (I bet that most of you are quite familiar with AMT) but because there are novel manifestations of worker organization around this platform.

I will make the general story brief, you might have heard this before. Founded in 2005, Amazon Mechanical Turk has 500,000 registered workers with 50% of them living in the United States and some 32% in India. In the US, the great majority of American AMT workers are women and there is some indication that many of them are caring for an elderly relative or a young child. (Marvit).



Credit:

Photo by Lewis Hine. Home work on tags. Home of Martin Gibbons, 268 [?] Centre Street, Roxbury Mass. James 11, years old; Helen 9 years and Mary 6, work on tags. Helen said she could tie the most (5,000 a day at 30 cents). Mary does some but can do only 1000 a day. They work nights a good deal. The night before Helen and James worked until 11:00 P.M.



source: Cleaning: People

Talk about Housework There is an intriguing parallel to care work, to invisible domestic labor, to the Wages for Housework Campaign that didn't so much ask for housework to be paid by the hour but that much more questioned the entire social construction of that work, the back stage arrangement itself and demanded for it to become visible and acknowledged. But again, that's not the main focus of this talk.^[18]

The CEO of CrowdFlower echoes this sentiment: "CrowdFlower, and others in the crowdsourcing industry, bringing opportunities to people who never would have had them

before, and we operate in a truly egalitarian fashion with anyone who wants to can do micro-tasks, no matter their gender, nationality, or socio-economic status..." Don Tapscott also takes up this rhetoric of empowerment in his book *Wikinomics* that is amazingly oblivious to the moments of exploitation in crowdsourcing.

This is a good moment to mention that AMT workers do not know what they are working on, they don't have any information about the identity of the employer, and so far, few of them have any contact with other workers.

And when you look closer, interestingly, the AMT workers are not merely toiling for money, they are not simply seduced by choice. Their motivations vary widely. Some reported that they do it to "kill time" or "learn English," while others said that they are on AMT to pay the bills.

In *The Mass Ornament*, Siegfried Krakauer discussed the Tiller Girls [19], an artificially produced dance troupe in the United States and then exported to Europe to demonstrate the greatness of American production. The ever repeating and perfectly synced motions of their routines, suggested the hyper efficiency of the assembly line. But in comparison to the workers on Amazon Mechanical Turk, the Tiller Girls seem like nonconformist dropouts, flower children really.

There really was a different vision behind AMT. Just take IBM's projection of creating supercomputers that will be smarter than people, in the 1970s. Unlike IBM, AMT uses imperfect computers to integrate a network of humans into the processes of the machine. It is trying to make you forget about the workers.

So what are these workers actually doing? The Mechanical Turk workers are logging on to the website and pick from a large range of tasks like tagging and labeling images, the transcription of audio or video recordings or the categorization of products, all of which are usually paid only a few cent per task. Click workers are sitting in cybercafés or in their homes, pursuing their toil as if it was a pastime.

The screenshot shows the Amazon Mechanical Turk interface for creating a new project. The top navigation bar includes 'Home', 'Create', 'Manage', 'Developer', and 'Help'. The 'Create' tab is active, leading to the 'Start a New Project' page. On the left, a sidebar lists various task categories: 'Categorization', 'Data Collection', 'Moderation of an Image', 'Survey', 'Survey Link', 'Tagging of an Image', 'Transcription from A/V', 'Transcription from an Image' (highlighted), 'Writing', and 'Other'. The main content area is titled 'Example of Transcription from an Image' and contains the instruction: 'Transcribe the text contained in the image'. Below this, a list of instructions is provided: 'Look at the receipt and copy the number of items purchased.', 'Provide the dollar amount for tax.', 'Provide the dollar amount for the total sale.', and 'Do not use dollar signs (\$) but make sure you have two decimal points. (ie 4.35)'. An image of a receipt is shown, with the following text: 'CHECK #389369-1', 'TRAY # 1', '1 QUOTE-3 CHECK \$2.59', 'TAX \$0.25', 'SUB-TOTAL \$2.84', 'TAX \$0.25', 'TOTAL \$2.84', 'TAKE AWAY', 'Time: 12:11 1 CUSTOMER', 'Store ID: 0117'. To the right of the receipt image are three input fields: 'Number of items on receipt', 'Tax amount', and 'Total spent on all items'. A 'Create Project' button is located at the bottom right of the main content area. At the bottom of the page, there is a link to 'Use an Existing Project'.

How does it work? To post a task, requesters, including startups, non-profits, major corporations, and Internet spammers, need only to have a valid credit card. Amazon takes a 10% percent commission from the task price paid to workers as a fee for using its platform.

Mechanical Turk allows you to break down tasks into thousands of pieces. Work assignments typically include the tagging and labeling of images, the transcription of audio or video recordings, and the description or categorization of products. Researchers use it for social science surveys.

Imagine that you need to make a small change to 4000 images, for example and let's say Photoshop can't automate that specific task. If you hire a single worker to do the job, it'd be far more costly than asking 1000 workers to alter 4 images each, paying them 2 cents per task.

Amazon choreographs this rote, repetitive, and potentially exploitative work, it insists that it is a neutral bystander who does not get involved with any labor disputes on the site.^[20] One worker questioned the ludicrous logic of this refusal to take responsibility by asking who would be responsible for a slave trade that is taking place on one's property if not the owner of that property.

Moshe Marvit pointed out that there are many tasks where the minimum age of 18 years of age is not scrutinized. Add to that, that payment for the work that is performed can come in the form of game credits, which especially attract minors. (Marvit) And if that wasn't enough, consider that companies-requesters-also have the right to exclude workers such as those from India, for example, because they are considered inferior workers in this world of online labor. Sure, you can see that Amazon seems to be somehow out of reach not only of Federal Labor Law but also the Civil Rights Act. I mean, really, I'm not a lawyer and I know that some lawyers are working on this-and I mentioned a few names-but for a large part, there seems to be a wait-and-see mentality among the legal community when it comes to the Internet. Alec Felstiner laments that in several papers on crowdsourcing. ^[21] Should not more legal scholars engage with this difficult subject?

Many of you will know that the inspiration for the name Mechanical Turk came from the chess playing automaton designed in 1769 that allowed a small-bodied chess player hidden in a wooden box to control the mechanical hands of a Turk. It was a major hit in Europe, admired by the likes of Charles Babbage and Edgar Allen Poe.

Not all of you, however, will be familiar with the fact that 18% of the workers on Mechanical Turk are attempting to make a full-time living on the site, which is practically impossible as even experienced workers generally make no more than \$2 per hour, which is also the going hourly rate for companies like CrowdSPRING and many others.

Vice President of Amazon's Mechanical Turk service, Sharon Chiarella, explains in an interview that AMT is all about choice, empowerment, and opportunity.^[22] According to Chiarella, workers "vote with their feet" when it comes to rejecting tasks that are underpaid. Some businesses have "deep relationships" with their AMT workers, she said. She also listed Oprah as an example of a requester on AMT as if she is in any way representative of businesses that populate the site. Given the bleak work realities that I described, such statements seem disingenuous at the very best. The goal of Amazon Mechanical Turk is profit and not the liberation of workers.

It is also important to acknowledge that desperation drives people knowingly into exploitative situations. They know full well that they are exploited and they are still going for it. Not many workers will acknowledge to themselves that they are exploited; they might even say that they are doing it by choice, and that in places where even McDonald is not hiring-AMT makes the difference between paying rent and living in a tent. Some workers argue that the main cause for discontent is a few bad requesters. And if only they would be identified and ostracized, all would be good in the land of Mechanical Turk. Identifying these black sheep, however, would not lift up the minimum wage floor in that industry. But who then is responsible for the plight of the lowest earning workers on AMT, laborers who work their tails off for \$120 for a 60 hour-week. And \$120 -- that is a good week, in

fact. At times, it is just \$50 for the same number of hours. Whether or not we want to accuse the workers of false consciousness, we shouldn't forget to ask who created the conditions that put people in such a precarious situation that makes it so difficult for them to turn away from such self-exploitation.

And I doubt that any of you would be surprised if I tell you that for employers, or what Amazon calls "requesters," this is a sugar sweet deal. They have access to a global 24/7 workforce on demand, they remain anonymous and they only pay if they are satisfied with the results. **Or, they don't pay at all and can still use the work. Amazon explicitly permits that.** And really, should we be surprised that corporations feel emboldened because they can skirt minimum wage legislation in the unregulated arena of the Internet where the rules are heavily tilted toward employers? Come on. AMT might be the most unregulated marketplace in history and where is the activism? Where are the protesting workers? Where are the Federal judges tackling this difficult situation? Where are the union organizers?

Of course, the situation is complex. It's not clear at all if there would be a flourishing crowdsourcing industry if basic worker rights would be enforced. But that's the same back-and-forth that we are currently seeing with the Obama administration trying to lift up minimum wages to \$10.10. Individual workers might lose their job but collectively and for society as a whole such more appropriate minimum wage floor should be welcomed. Speaking at a Law School, we might also address legal struggles. Enforcing Federal labor law online is by no means a US-centric argument. Most large crowdsourcing businesses are in fact located in and operated out of the United States, which means that some of their operations should have to answer to American Labor Law.

An explicit application of the Fair Labor Standards Act to the Internet and an enforcement of that application, would have significant ramifications far beyond the borders of the U.S. Currently, one lawsuit against the company crowdFlower, brought forth by one worker, Christoph Otley, who asserts that the company should have paid him minimum wages and acknowledge him as an employee rather than an independent contractor. The results of this class-action suit remains to be seen.

Listening to all this, you might ask yourself if trade unions are really passé? You might wonder about new forms of digital solidarity and mutual aid. Well, unions, organized networks, or associations are important because they could lobby for the application and enforcement of Federal Labor law online, which could change entire industries that profit from online work. They could inform workers of their rights, fight for more ecologically sustainable work environments, challenging their status as "independent contractors," broaden the definition of employment to include more contemporary work practices. They could coordinate campaigns, and document, as well as publicize unfairness.

But just when labor appears to be engaging with the turn toward service-industry employment, with the unionization of adjuncts and hotel workers, walkouts at Walmart, and strikes in the fast-food industry, the ground is already shifting. To become relevant to this large and growing distributed workforce, unions would have to completely restructure and for that, they have to understand some of the obstacles that they're facing.

They would have to acknowledge the pervasive "negative solidarity"— what Jason Read defines as "the weak bond orienting isolated and competitive individuals against those who are failing to work or bear their share of austerity." [23] Could such negative solidarity be turned into a positive political project?

Anonymity of the workers and employers is one of the biggest problems for unions because without access to the workers they can't run organizing drives. Simply posting a well-paid task on Amazon mechanical Turk that details a union drive wouldn't be an effective way to

move ahead. Sure, there are Reddit threads where AMT workers share “HITs Worth working Turking For.” [24]

But it is true-- these are not the days of *On The Waterfront*; today Marlon Brando, aka Terry Malloy, would be on Facebook. Sure, Malloy could use Facebook, Qzone, and RenRen to inform other workers about union campaigns but it'd not be safe to organize on those platforms. Also creating a well-paying HIT on Mechanical Turk that informs workers about union activities would be a rather mute attempt.

Traditionally, there were capitalist owners on the one side and the mass of workers on the other, frequently represented by a union. Today, there are anonymous individuals, facing anonymous employers, in some cases. Unions cannot easily represent workers through firm-by-firm collective bargaining because workers have contracts with more than one company at a time. So, today, the US-American Freelancers Union lobbies entire industries but in the end it mostly becomes a provider of health insurance.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the TurkerNation forum. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a logo, login fields (User Name, Password, Log in), a 'Remember Me?' checkbox, and buttons for 'Help' and 'Register'. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with links for 'Forum', 'Latest Posts', 'Turk Alert', 'Twitter', 'Facebook', and 'Shop on Amazon', along with a search bar and an 'Advanced Search' link. The main content area features a 'Forum' header, followed by promotional banners for Amazon.com (Deal Of The Day: The Wizard of Oz: 75th Anniversary ...), eBay (right now on), and CrowdSurf (GREAT PAY RATES! GET PAID INSTANTLY!). A note below the banners states: 'Note: clicking on the above banners and making ANY purchase returns a commission to Turker Nation. If you can't see the ad, please click on Shop on Amazon instead. | Want to advertise here? PM Spamgirl to learn more!'. Below the banners are social media sharing buttons for Facebook (Like 50), Twitter (Tweet), and Google+ (+36 Recommend this on Google). At the bottom, a yellow box contains a message: 'If this is your first visit, be sure to check out the FAQ. You must register before you can post or view the content of private forums. To start viewing messages, choose the forum that you want to visit from the selection below.'

Other questions are about scale and individualism. oDesk and Elance, for example, have somewhere between 2.5 and 3 million deeply individualized workers each. On Turker Nation, a forum for Mechanical Turk workers, one person called “spamgirl” writes that “unions are a way for greedy people to take advantage of companies. As a person who rallies against corporations to behave in just that manner, I would never become a part of any other organization’s plans to do the same. As a group, Turker Nation can fight its own battles we can choose when to fight back and when not to individually.” Another worker who calls herself “taintturk” writes on the same subject: “Eventually, someone who is desperate to put food on the table will start working on hits that pay \$3 an hour or less. Great reason for union right? No. It's their choice and technically, they are determining their market value and doing it to themselves.” (“Turker Union”) How to break through these takes on worker organization?

An additional serious threat is that of automation, the replacement of workers with machines. Think of Amazon.com, which with its acquisition of the robotics company KIVA, which already paved the way for the replacements of the workers in their fulfillment centers with robots, which makes negotiations very difficult.

Yet another problem is that of identity. Just like bike couriers or workers in a fast food joint, some digital workers might just sign on for five hours per week and don't even think of themselves as workers. NYU professor Ross Perlin reminds us that the full-time intern, for example, might still self-identify as a student and not as a worker.

For them this is just a transitional occupation. On Amazon Mechanical Turk, some people get busy after their regular job is done; they do it instead of watching television. The division between work/play, work/consumption, and work/entertainment and work/leisure is blurred beyond recognition. Some AMT workers don't think of what they are doing as labor.

Working on AMT is also a way to feel part of some kind of John-Wayne-frontier-saga of techno-utopianism; it is cool. Some AMT workers asserted that they were drawn to outsourcing because of the wow-effect of technology. So, this novelty, what I call the web 2.0 ideology plays a role here as well: Tom Sawyer's whitewashing the fence for the 21st century.

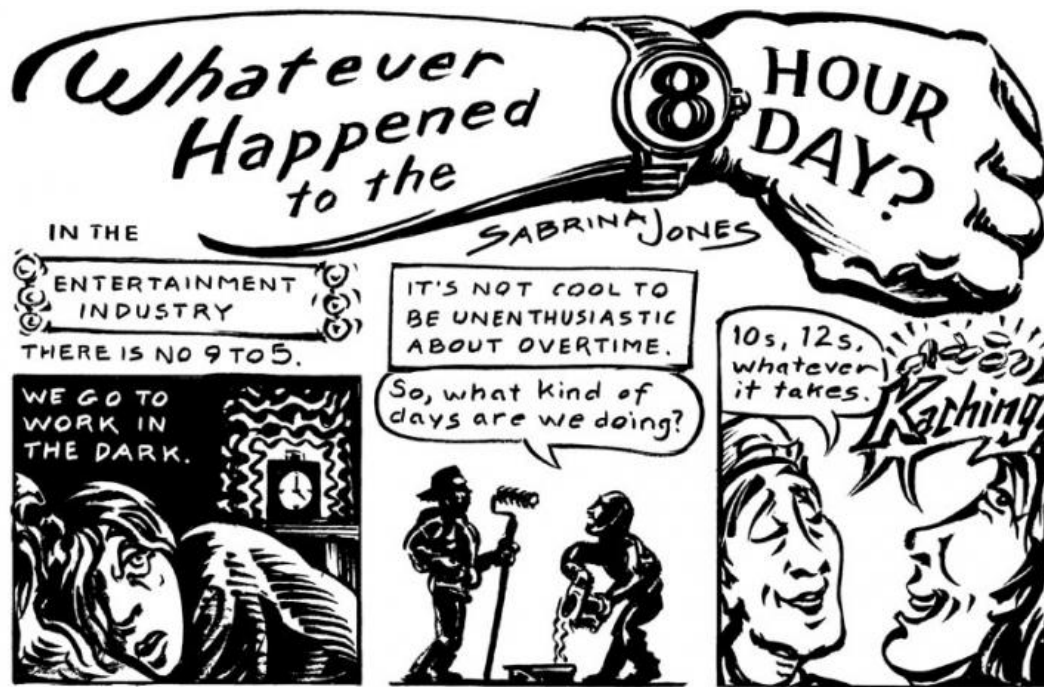
Lastly, it appears to be hard to reach legal recognition as a "community of interest" for such a trans-nationally distributed workforce, which could then function as a bargaining unit. The last time a case like that was heard in a US American court was 1995. Ursula Huws reports that in the Caribbean and in Brazil there have been successful organizing drives of "e-workers" but such efforts were always limited to national boundaries. Two national unions for Mechanical Turk workers, in India and the United States, would be a first and perhaps possible step.



There are precedents of unions that overcame equally challenging situations. In the early 1960s, Cesar Chavez cofounded what was later called the United Farm Workers Union (UFW), which unionized migrant farm workers while moving with them from field to field. Under Chavez's leadership, the UFW organized consumer boycotts against nonunion grapes and lettuce, which eventually, after several years, led to higher wages for these migrant farm workers. Historically, this is important.

Organizing migrant farmworkers was considered impossible. Equally, unionizing Walmart workers or workers in the fast food industry has been deemed impossible and yet we witnessed a serious intensification of efforts for unionization in that sector in the last year. In his book *For the Win*, Cory Doctorow plays through a successful scenario of unionization of gold farmers.

Or, remember the great victory of 2012 when the Stop Online Piracy Act-- short SOPA-- was defeated, at least for now- after Google and Wikipedia and countless others switched their websites to black on January 18, 2012 and senators received millions of e-mails, countless phone calls and letters, etc. Elected officials suddenly realized that SOPA could become a voting issue. It would be a mistake to think that organizing digital workers is just a matter of connecting them online. It would be a big mistake to forget about the traditional real-life protests in addition to the virtual strikes that we have seen at IBM in Second Life, for example.



source: Occupy

So far, the crowdsourcing industry hasn't seen much opposition from workers but there are sites of negotiation and connection in the making. For Amazon Mechanical Turk sites of worker organization include Cloudmebaby, Turkopticon, Reddit, and Turkernation. These platforms are offering places where workers can identify which requesters pay late or don't pay at all. In other words, the surveyed are turning into surveyors; in this regime of sousveillance,[25] the disciplined are "disciplining" back. How productive these sousveillance platforms for workers really are, remains to be seen. The power of such sites seems far smaller than that of traditional unions.

Before I conclude, I'll go a bit more into detail about one of these platforms for mutual aid among AMT workers. Turkopticon, is a web-based intervention that is already used by more than 7000 mechanical Turk workers. Technically, Turkopticon, is simply a browser extension for Firefox and Chrome. Lily Irany and Six Silverman built a system that allows workers to connect and evaluate their employers in terms of their responsiveness when it comes to communication about worker concerns, their fairness when it comes to their pay rates, and also with regard to the legitimacy of them rejecting work. The designers of Turkopticon insist that employers should have to provide a reason for rejecting work that

has been already performed. On its landing page it states that Turkopticon helps the people in the “crowd” to watch out for each other--because nobody else seems to be.” Like some Reddit forums, Turkopticon aims to change the situation of the worker who can now connect with others like him or her to coordinate, recommend, complain, and possibly decide to boycott a particular employer.

Turkopticon can teach us how to expand the capacity for action to eventually overcome the current stalemate of digital labor. Websites like Cloudmebaby, Turker Nation and Turkopticon also finds historical resonance with the history of German wandering apprentices (Wanderleute in German) who shared information about the businesses that took them into their employ.

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Today, you can either wait for the immaterial worker movement to materialize or are you can be part of the reshaping and invention of coalitions that will help to meet collective needs.

For while there are indeed serious questions involved here about worker protections, and in particular organizational structures that enable deeply exploitative scenarios of work, such criticism does not mean to deny that crowdsourcing can help individuals and that crowdsourcing practices can contribute to the common good. It does mean, however, that taking the next steps for crowdsourcing means to preserve its positive potential and that will be hard work.

If current trends continue, crowdsourcing will be associated with virtual sweatshops. Laura Henderson, a Mechanical Turk worker, wrote: "I got really angry [about AMT] but people don't get angry anymore. I am angry, but I can't get other people to get angry."[\[26\]](#)

One thing is clear: for crowdsourcing to live up to its promises, it will take a lot of hard work. And without outrage, conflict and protests digital solidarity and mutual aid will not be able to make significant strides.

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 - [2] <http://www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/episode/2013/11/05/why-elderly-men-have-the-highest-suicide-rate-in-canada/>
 - [3] http://www.wired.com/beyond_the_beyond/2014/02/call-proposals-digital-labor-sweatshops-picket-lines-barricades/
 - [4] http://www.amazon.com/Digital-Labour-Karl-Christian-Fuchs/dp/0415716152/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1394809513&sr=8-1&keywords=Digital+Labor+and+Karl+Marx
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 - [8] http://www.massmoca.org/event_details.php?id=631
 - [9] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WjorEAlExs>
 - [10] <http://fairnopoly.de>
 - [11] In 1981, in *Dependency Road*, Dallas Smythe wrote that "People are subject to relentless pressures from Consciousness Industry; they are besieged with an avalanche of consumer goods and services; they are themselves produced as (audience) commodities."
 - [12] <https://fold.it/portal/>
 - [13] <http://ebird.org/>
 - [14] <http://www.chinalaborwatch.org/news/new-451.html>
 - [15] <http://www.queensu.ca/sociology/people/emeritusfaculty/mosco.html>
 - [16] In *The Next Digital Decade*, Eric Goldman comments that in 1996, a judge called the Internet "a unique and wholly new medium of worldwide human communication." (p 65) Especially when it comes to the enforcement of basic worker rights, the Internet should not be deemed "unique."
 - [17] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW8oSRSzS7M>
 - [18] <http://www.law.wustl.edu/centeris/pages.aspx?ID=9567>
 - [19] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XQ17OZ4mwU>
 - [20] Already in 1994, when Bezos founded Amazon, he described it as a "regret minimization framework, meant to fend off late-in-life regret for not staking claim in the Internet gold rush." (Jackson)
 - [21] http://works.bepress.com/alek_felstiner/
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