

Amazon Mechanical Turk workers not as anonymous as they think

By **Carl Franzen** (<http://www.theverge.com/users/carlfransen>) on March 7, 2013 04:33 pm Email (<mailto:carl@theverge.com>) @carlfransen (https://twitter.com/intent/user?screen_name=carlfransen)

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Amazon's Mechanical Turk allows users to sign up for quick, low paying, online-based jobs like writing with photo captions, allowing other large Web companies including Twitter (<http://www.theverge.com/2013/1/8/3852596/twitter-mechanical-turk-real-time-search-advertising-revenue>) to crowdsource the labor they don't want to have their full-time staff doing. But now a new study (http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2228728) has found that while many users thought their work was anonymous, Amazon actually links it to their public Amazon profiles, identifying them. The researchers warn this could be combined with other information to identify people who don't necessarily want to be outed online.

"Users of Amazon Mechanical Turk generally believe that the workers are anonymous, identified only by a long obscure identifier like A3IZSXSSGW80FN," wrote one of the researchers behind the study, MIT associate professor of computer science Rob Miller, in a blog post (<http://crowdresearch.org/blog/?p=5177>) on the findings. "But it isn't true. Many MTurk workers are rather easy to identify."

Miller stumbled across his own Mechanical Turk public profile on Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com/gp/pdp/profile/A3IZSXSSGW80FN>) containing his full name. That led his team to look for more. They now estimate 50 percent of the website's 500,000 workers have been linked to public Amazon user profiles, and about 30 percent list workers' first and last names. Yet when they surveyed the workers, researchers found 80 percent of a group of 1,000 were unsure of or didn't think job posters had access to their real names, and that 95 percent "placed relatively high value on the security of their first and last name."

"USERS OF AMAZON MECHANICAL TURK GENERALLY BELIEVE THAT THE WORKERS ARE ANONYMOUS."



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AN ESTIMATED 50 PERCENT OF MECHANICAL TURK'S 500,000 WORKERS HAVE A PUBLIC PROFILE

The researchers conclude: "While neither the Amazon Profile or the WorkerID are individually a problem, it is still unsettling whenever such linkage occurs in ways that seem surprising to users." They advise the company to warn users more clearly going forward, or risk damaging its appeal as a trustworthy crowdsourced labor platform. *The Verge* has reached out to Amazon for a response to the study and will update when we hear anything.

SOURCE

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH NETWORK ([HTTP://PAPERS.SSRN.COM/SOL3/PAPERS.CFM?ABSTRACT_ID=2228728](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2228728))

CROWDSEARCH.ORG ([HTTP://CROWDSEARCH.ORG/BLOG/?P=5177](http://crowdsearch.org/blog/?p=5177))

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[onysi \(http://www.theverge.com/users/onysi\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/onysi)

That's a lot

Mar 7, 2013 | 4:53 PM (#148477975)

[Kangal \(http://www.theverge.com/users/Kangal\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/Kangal)

Well, Istanbul is a very populated place.

Mar 8, 2013 | 7:10 AM (#148586205)



[not a geek \(http://www.theverge.com/users/not%20a%20geek\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/not%20a%20geek)

I don't see why you wouldn't want the world (or your current employer) to know that you are willing to work for sweatshop prices . . .

Mar 7, 2013 | 5:11 PM (#148481759)

[turkalurk \(http://www.theverge.com/users/turkalurk\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/turkalurk)

Sweatshop prices? Psh. You're looking in all the wrong places!

<http://puu.sh/2VTmL.png> (<http://puu.sh/2VTmL.png>)

That's just from 2 months of using the service. You've gotta know how much you're willing to work for! I'm making more than I did at my part time job (college student here). There are people who can make upwards to \$700 a week off of this. Don't judge a book by its cover ;)

May 18, 2013 | 9:23 AM (#163400869)



[9876 \(http://www.theverge.com/users/9876\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/9876)

I tried it once. Made 50 cents in 1 hour. Thug Life!

Mar 7, 2013 | 5:32 PM (#148486263)



[Jameseh \(http://www.theverge.com/users/Jameseh\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/Jameseh)

For some reason I now feel compelled to go sign up for this now, hopefully I'll be able to afford a pick 'n' mix by the end of the day.

Mar 7, 2013 | 5:37 PM (#148487129)



[Jameseh \(http://www.theverge.com/users/Jameseh\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/Jameseh)

Never mind, they have a review process and I don't think Joe Bloggs from Fictional Lane will cut it.

Mar 7, 2013 | 5:42 PM (#148488257)

[savagemike \(http://www.theverge.com/users/savagemike\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/savagemike)

I wonder if anyone has looked into labor laws regarding this. Where does the 'work' take place exactly and do the



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APPLE CORE ([HTTP://WWW.THEVERGE.COM/FORUMS/APPLE-CORE](http://www.theverge.com/forums/apple-core))

workers have proper credentials to be doing work there?
It kind of seems like if I have to pay sales tax to Amaon when I buy something (NY here thanks) then Amazon might be acting as an agent to illegally employ foreign workers if the Turks are actually Turks – or similar, and the hiring company is in the US and paying the wage in the US.

Mar 7, 2013 | 7:06 PM (#148503623)

[Relayman5C \(http://www.theverge.com/users/Relayman5C\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/Relayman5C)

You need to learn the difference between “employee” and “independent contractor.”

Mar 8, 2013 | 11:31 AM (#148613527)

[savagemike \(http://www.theverge.com/users/savagemike\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/savagemike)

I don't think the distinction would be important in this context.

Mar 8, 2013 | 8:52 PM (#148716077)

[wch \(http://www.theverge.com/users/wch\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/wch)

Most of the workers are in America. They verify your identity. It's not like oDesk or similar freelance services, where just about anybody can sign up from anywhere in the world.

The “Mechanical Turk” name is just a reference to the “Mechanical Turk” magic show of the 18th century, where a machine seemed to intelligently play chess.

May 18, 2013 | 10:16 PM (#163491453)



[Zoglog \(http://www.theverge.com/users/Zoglog\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/Zoglog)

Welcome to your new LinkedIn :)

Mar 7, 2013 | 9:19 PM (#148539655)

[Carigis \(http://www.theverge.com/users/Carigis\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/Carigis)

thanks for the info..

Hope this helps, You can go into your amazon profile and select “pen name” to just make a fake one up which helps a little bit as it auto updates all your reviews ect.. or you can set your real name to first letter and last name if it's really common. but its totally messed up thats not disclosed. Im not even sure thats legal. I assumed it was an mturk only code.

usually you can't make much cash on mturk but sometimes you get lucky. I made about a grand one year on a task I came upon that was kinda fun and paid really well for some reason. i made the grand over a very short amount of time.. but usually the things the offer are like 1 cent to look up 20 things.. not sure how anyone would bother with that. even in india. more like slave labor.

Mar 7, 2013 | 9:51 PM (#148548049)

[Spamgirl \(http://www.theverge.com/users/Spamgirl\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/Spamgirl)

The title of this thread is misleading – we knew all along that our Amazon accounts were the same as our mTurk accounts, it was actually (mostly) the academic researchers who had no idea and are most impacted by this revelation. The title makes Turkers look like idiots, and that is offensive. I'm not surprised, though, as all articles about mTurk turn us into poverty-stricken button pushers who have no idea how to protect ourselves.

Mar 8, 2013 | 7:26 AM (#148586673)

[Carigis \(http://www.theverge.com/users/Carigis\)](http://www.theverge.com/users/Carigis)

no offense.. but most are working for pennies.. way below even minimum wage... mturk is close to slave labor.

and although i think most are aware its connected to your amazon account. I don't think most who use it know its linked to thier public amazon profile. doesn;t mturks terms prevent people offering jobs from even asking your name?

Mar 8, 2013 | 8:57 AM (#148591385)

Which browser are you using?

about 1 hour ago by LamYueFung

(<http://www.theverge.com/users/LamYueFung>)

3 comments

META ([HTTP://WWW.THEVERGE.COM/FORUMS/META](http://www.theverge.com/forums/meta))

Where's The Best Writing of the Week today?

about 1 hour ago by jmlares

(<http://www.theverge.com/users/jmlares>)

APPLE CORE ([HTTP://WWW.THEVERGE.COM/FORUMS/APPLE-CORE](http://www.theverge.com/forums/apple-core))

5S- stands for silky, read about the distinguishing feature here!

about 1 hour ago by Johansson

(<http://www.theverge.com/users/Johansson>) 1 comment

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about 1 hour ago by surfwashingtabs

(<http://www.theverge.com/users/surfwashingtabs>)

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