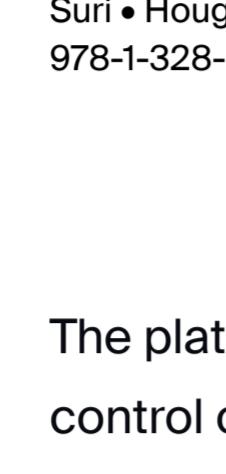


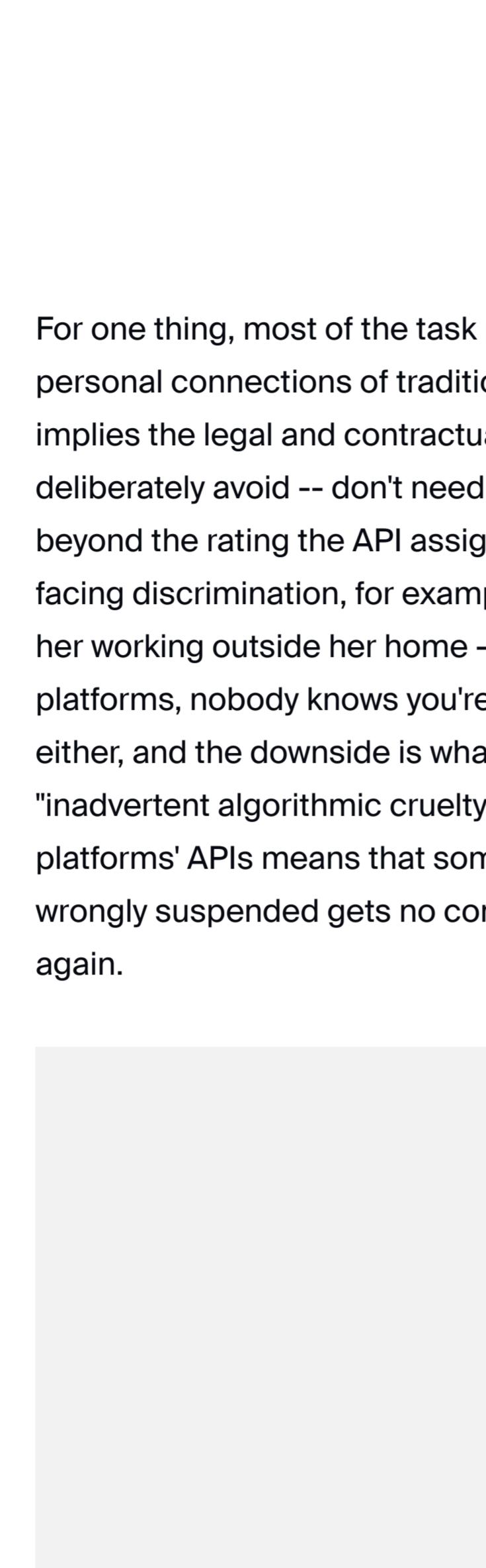
Ghost Work and Behind the Screen, book reviews: Lifting the veil on the internet's secret employment sector

Many companies' services are underpinned by 'ghost' workers with few employment rights. Two recent books explore their world.



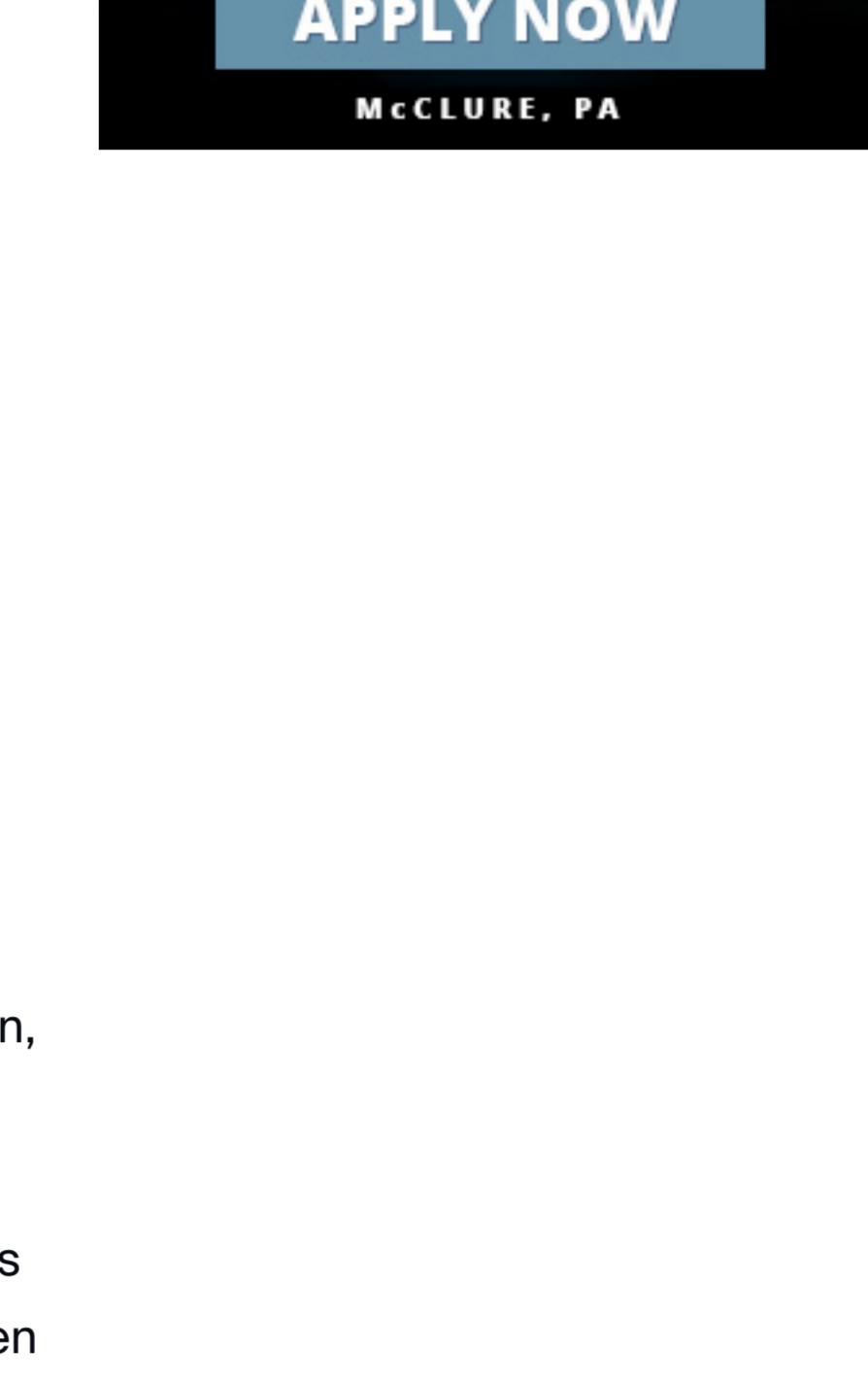
Written by Wendy M Grossman, Contributor
Nov. 22, 2019 at 12:35 a.m. PT

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Ghost Work • By Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri • Houghton Mifflin • 288 pages • ISBN: 978-1-328-56624-9 • \$27

The technology industry loves nothing better than to dress up something old in idealistic language and offer it up as a bright, new benefit. Flea markets existed long before eBay consolidated them into a website; clubs shared cars and friends surfed each other's couches long before Uber and Airbnb 'invented' the 'sharing economy'; and task-based employment existed for centuries before platforms like CrowdFlower, CloudFactory, and Amazon's Mechanical Turk began touting the flexibility of on-demand micro-employment. It was known as 'piecework', and it was associated with poverty and exploitation.



The platforms talk a good game. Workers, they argue, like the flexibility and control over their time and the convenience of working at home without the time sink of commuting and the constraints of traditional workplaces. In *Ghost Work*, the results of a five-year study of platform workers in the US and India, Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri find that all these things are true for many of the workers they interview -- but they are only part of the picture.



For one thing, most of the task platforms are designed to remove the personal connections of traditional workplaces. 'Requesters' -- 'employer' implies the legal and contractual relationship that all these companies deliberately avoid -- don't need to know anything about their labourers beyond the rating the API assigns their work. For some -- a disabled man facing discrimination, for example, or a woman whose culture frowns on her working outside her home -- that anonymity is a blessing. On these platforms, nobody knows you're a dog -- but nobody knows you're a human, either, and the downside is what web designer Eric Meyer has called "inadvertent algorithmic cruelty". The lack of empathy encoded into the platforms' APIs means that someone who suffers because their account is wrongly suspended gets no compensation and no certainty it won't happen again.

Gray and Suri call it 'ghost work' because this huge labour market is being rendered as invisible as housework by the claim -- which Janelle Shain has also noted -- that AI is these companies' special sauce. Neither riders nor drivers know, for example, that while a rider awaits her Uber car a woman named Ayesha in Hyderabad has a clock ticking down the seconds while she compares the driver's live photo to his on-file ID because shaving off his beard has led the system to flag him as a possible imposter.

Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media • By Sarah T. Roberts • Yale University Press • 266 pages • ISBN: 978-0-300-23588-3 • \$30

Imperceptible intermediations like this one happen in 1% of Uber rides, Gray and Suri write, and can be found throughout "automation's last mile". Technology companies like to parade the size of their AI muscles, but the hidden reality is millions of tiny gigs being carried out by humans on a freelance or contingent basis.

Lifting the veil on this secret employment sector is hard because the technology companies want to pretend it doesn't exist. Gray and Suri go directly to the workers themselves by using the platforms themselves to recruit them. Sarah T. Roberts also goes direct to the source after her curiosity about content moderation was piqued by a newspaper article in 2010. In *Behind the Screen*, Roberts presents the results of her eight-year study of one particular category of ghost workers: commercial content moderators, the people who review the online postings we're not supposed to see.

Roberts finds four styles of employment in this business: in-house teams (often lacking the status and benefits we associate with the technology giants); 'boutique' third parties offering a specialised service; large, call centre-style operations; and micro-labour platforms like those described by Gray and Suri in *Ghost Work*.

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