

Inmates in Finland are training AI as part of prison labor

Empowerment or exploitation?

By Angela Chen | @chengela | Mar 28, 2019, 12:05pm EDT

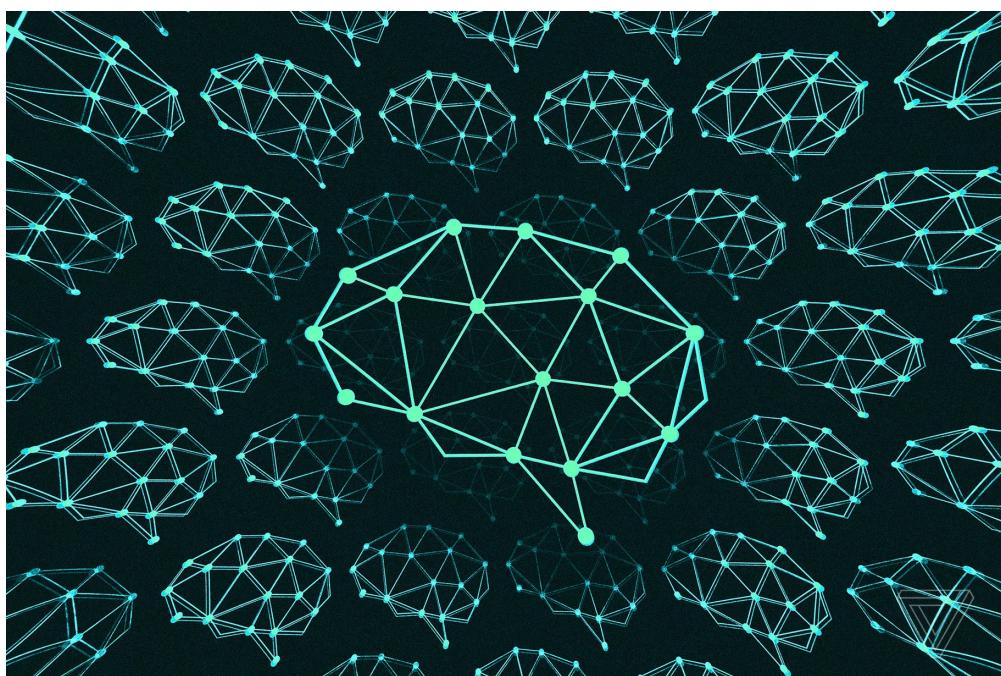


Illustration by Alex Castro / The Verge

“Prison labor” is usually associated with physical work, but inmates at two prisons in Finland are doing a new type of labor: classifying data to train artificial intelligence algorithms for a startup. Though the startup in question, [Vainu](#), sees the partnership as a kind of prison reform that teaches valuable skills, other experts say the claim of job training is more evidence of hype around the promises of AI.

Vainu is building a comprehensive database of companies around the world that helps businesses find contractors to work with, says co-founder [Tuomas Rasila](#). For this to work, people need to read through hundreds of thousands of business articles scraped from the internet and label whether, for example, an article is about Apple the tech company or a fruit company that has “apple” in the name. (This labeled data is then used to train an algorithm that manages the database.)

That's no problem for articles in English: Vainu simply set up an Amazon Mechanical Turk account to have people do these small tasks. But Mechanical Turk is "not really that useful when you want to do something [with the] Finnish language," Rasila says, and the company had only one trainee tagging lots of data in the Finnish language. "We saw that and said, 'okay, this is not going to be enough,'" he adds. The Vainu offices happen to be in the same building as the headquarters of the [Criminal Sanctions Agency](#) (CSA), the government agency that oversees Finnish prisons, and so, says Rasila, the founders had an idea: "Hey, we could actually use prison labor."

The partnership started about three months ago and Vainu is now working with two different prisons, one in Helsinki and one in Turku. Vainu shipped 10 computers to these prisons and pays the CSA for each task the prisoners complete. The amount is comparable to how much the startup would have paid for a task done on Mechanical Turk, though the CSA is responsible for figuring out how much of that goes to the prisoners, as well as selecting the inmates who do the data classification.

"HEY, WE COULD ACTUALLY USE PRISON LABOR"

Finland is famous for its progressive prison policies. Approximately one-third of the country's prisons are so-called [open prisons](#), where inmates live and work like normal citizens. [John Pratt](#), a researcher at the Victoria University of Wellington who studies different penal systems, notes that there is less of the "overwhelming emphasis on security" found in the United States. Prisoners [are generally required to work or do vocational training](#), but are sometimes even allowed to work outside the prison or remain self-employed.

Officials at the agency were excited to partner, according to Rasila, especially because the new jobs don't require anything other than a laptop. "There's no risk for violence," he says, adding that when it comes to other forms of prison labor, like metalsmithing, access to tools that can be turned into makeshift weapons can make a prison workspace "a dangerous place." Rasila estimates that, currently, a little less than 100 prisoners are working on Vainu's project for a few hours a day. (A representative from the CSA did not respond to a request for comment.)

Right now, Vainu and the CSA have an annual contract based on the number of tasks. The Vainu team hopes to expand elsewhere in Finland, and other countries where it can be hard to find people willing to do this type of work in local languages. To them, it's a win-win situation. One motivation for the inmates is to make money, of course,

but “a selling point of this was that the demand for training AI is actually increasing significantly, globally,” Rasila says. Similarly, the CSA [wrote in a release](#) that the program is part of its efforts to develop work activities that match “the requirements of modern working life,” and a PR representative pitched the partnership to *The Verge* as “an opportunity for inmates to have a job that can empower them.”

It’s not surprising, either, that there would be an especially high demand for this type of work in other countries, according to [Lilly Irani](#), a professor of communication at the University of California at San Diego. AI algorithms need to be trained in culturally specific ways, she says, and most Mechanical Turk workers are in the US.

Though Rasila says that this is an example of developing skills that can be useful in the future, he also says that the tasks have “zero learning curve” and only require (presumably pre-existing) literacy, which calls into question how useful this skill is. This type of job tends to be “rote, menial, and repetitive,” says [Sarah T. Roberts](#), a professor of information science at the University of California at Los Angeles who studies information workers. It does not require building high level of skill, and if a university researcher tried to partner with prison laborers in the same way, “that would not pass an ethics review board for a study.” While it’s good that the prisoners are being paid a similar wage as on Mechanical Turk, Roberts points out that wages on Mechanical Turk are extremely low anyway. One recent research paper found that workers [made a median wage of \\$2 an hour](#).

For Irani, there’s nothing special about AI in this story. In the US at least, prison labor has [long been controversial](#), with some saying that it economically exploits workers while others argue that it can help rehabilitate them. To her, the public relations push around the collaboration is more surprising than the fact that digital work has become part of prison labor. “The hook is that we have this kind of hype circulating around AI so that we can masquerade really old forms of labor exploitation as ‘reforming prisons,’” Irani says. “They’re connecting social movements, reducing it to hype, and using that to sell AI.”

Update April 1st, 2019: This article has been updated to include more information about the Finnish penal system.