

INF302: Integrative Approaches to Technology and Society

This essay is a critical and formal reflection on one of the INF302 required readings, “Difference and Dependence among Digital Workers: The Case of Amazon Mechanical Turk” by Lilly Irani. I agree with the arguments written in the paper so I bring in external sources and facts to elaborate and expand on Irani’s arguments.

“Difference and Dependence among Digital Workers: The Case of Amazon Mechanical Turk” studies the problems with Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) is a crowdsourcing program that connects Requesters, employers, to Turkers, independent contractors, for data-processing tasks, known as Human Intelligence Tasks (HITs), that computers are currently unable to perform. These tasks require a large temporary workforce, which MTurk helps Requesters find. The problem with this microwork platform is the use of independent contractors has a lot of legal leeway, which in the case of MTurk led to abusive labor practices. These Turkers are often paid far below the legal minimum wage, and there are even ways in which the system is abused and they remain unpaid. The working and paying conditions for Turkers is well below international labor standards, but most of the legislative attempts to rectify these loopholes fell through.

Irani argues that there are three reasons that lead to the abuse of Turkers. First, data processing tasks are viewed as menial labor and therefore, are not valued. Second, MTurk gives too much power to Requesters in terms of denying pay to Turkers. Finally, labeling MTurk as a technology service rather than a labor service allows Amazon and employers to avoid accountability. I strengthen these arguments with my own secondary source findings, and I respond to many of Irani’s arguments. A current issue in many fields of study is the limitations of legislation in controlling the tech industry in a capitalist economy. I argue that the failing of legislation to control the contractor work industry is leading to human rights abuses in the tech industry.