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A3: Crowdwork Ethnography

What do you know or believe to be true about the domain of crowdwork or clickwork?

I do not have much knowledge of Crowdwork or clickwork. I would imagine it to be the kind of work that needs to be done by a person instead of a machine. Else people would have found ways to automate it. I have heard of instances where clickwork is used to spam a website or generate organic traffic.

Sometimes crowdwork could also mean technologies like Grid Computing, where the compute resources of personal machines are used for a larger scientific problem. Crowdwork is an useful tool for tasks that can't yet be solved by algorithms and machines.

What do you know or believe to be true about the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform? *

I have never heard of the Amazon Mechanical Turk Platform. I think it is a platform where someone can post a task and can source crowdworkers to work on it. The crowdworkers might get paid for this? I think it is a platform to conduct crowdwork or clickwork.

What do you know or believe to be true about the people who perform crowdwork on the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform? *
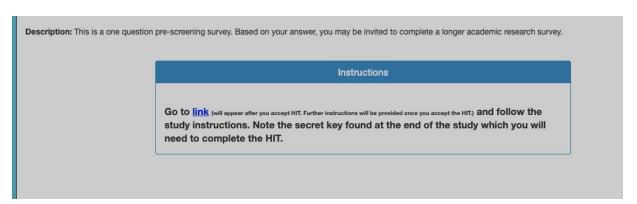
I think it is a quick and easy way for people to earn some money at the side. Some people might do crowdwork because they are inspired by the problem and want to solve with the help of collaboration. Crowdwork could be something that could be done at the side without consuming too much of your time, and yet it could give a sense of feeling that you are part of something big and substantial.

This assignment is an ethnographic account of my experiences being a crowdworker undercover. For the purposes of this account, I studied Human Intelligence Tasks or HITs to on Amazon mTurk - a crowdwork platform. Although I didn't perform any actual HITs, I previewed the HITs on mTurk, assumed the role of a requestor and explored the discussion forums on Reddit, joined their Slack channel and got a feeling for what it would be like in the day of a crowdworker.
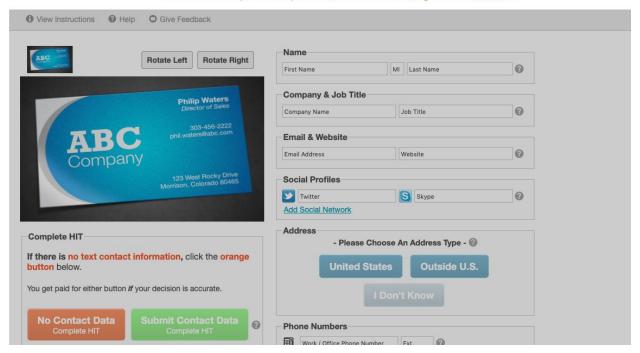
Amazon mTurk is a platform where requesters post HITs for crowdworkers to accept and work on them. A requestor also posts the price, a preview, description and the number of HITs available. When I first joined mTurk I was under the assumption that I could accept any HIT. As I browsed through the HITs what I found was I wasn't eligible for most of them. They all require you to have some type of 'Qualification' certified by mTurk or a requestor. These could be based on your HIT approval/rejection rate, number of HITs previously done, whether you have expertise in a particular language/skill or you stay in a particular location. Some of these HITs require qualification tests, and these are quite frankly ridiculous. For example here's the test I took to be able to moderate adult content. The test contains just two questions with checkboxes, once you hit submit you are qualified to perform HITs on adult content.

By previewing the HITs that I could accept without qualifications, I noticed that I was allowed to take part in mostly surveys. It felt like most of these surveys were for academic and research purposes or business and grad students trying get responses for their projects. I couldn't see any of the survey content until I accepted the work. But here is a screenshot of what it looked like. This survey paid $0.20 cents but you can't take the survey multiple times (for obvious reasons). I found that surveys aren't a great way to earn money on mTurk. Although it is a great way for requesters to get survey responses and do market research quickly.

Looking at all the HITs, I found a diverse range of work. Some of them required you to transcribe text from images. I found this tasks Business card transcription task to be particularly interesting. We are so much better at image related tasks and computers. Piping this data back to the algorithm will help us refine and make it better. I found Image, video and sound related HITs to be common in mTurk.

Here is an example of a similar image type task, but it requires me to take images of "Urdu" texts and add descriptions to them. This task clearly states the purpose for why it is collecting data. I noticed this to be fairly common in HITs requested through research or academics. I am concerned about how my work is being put to use, but I believe this is not a concern for the general population as long as they are getting paid well for the task.

After going through over 20 HITs (only those I was allowed to preview) I didn't notice anything too sensitive or anything that one would call as harmful to the mental health of a person. But if you were to look at how much each requestor is offering per HIT, It is pretty dismal. I would have to put in an inordinate number of hours to earn anything substantial. This is where I feel turkwork is not entirely 'fair'. Some of the tasks are just not worth spending the time on. For example, in this HIT I am supposed to rewrite an original question, rephrasing and fixing spelling mistakes if necessary. There are over 6K such HITS, each paying $0.05. Assuming I do close to 300 HITs a day, over a week I can earn close to 50$. Apart from the bad pay, I was mostly willing to perform many of the tasks. They were simple, easy to do and felt like it didn't consume too much of time and in some cases they sounded fun! I would really love to take a "Quiz for fans of English Premier League".

While previewing HITs I noticed an option at the bottom the screen that lets you report the requesters to Amazon. One could report "policy violation" or "broken content". This interface looks minimal and relies on Amazon to take down Bad HITs in the marketplace. There is no review system for the requestors, and this information is not available to the turker before taking up the task. How do turkers trust requesters to pay them on time? Or even pay them at all? After lurking around the web for not too long, I found this really interesting website. https://turkopticon.ucsd.edu/login. In this website, Turkers catalog all the requesters on mTurk and turkers rate them on four categories (Fast, Fair, Communication, Pay). The requesters list is updated regularly and helps weed out any suspicious or non-paying requestors.

The following documents gave me an insight into what is expected from a requester.

https://web.archive.org/web/20190609195651/http://wiki.wearedynamo.org/index.php/Basics_of_how_to_be_a_good_requester
https://web.archive.org/web/20190609195656/http://wiki.wearedynamo.org/index.php?title=Fair_payment
https://web.archive.org/web/20190912230027/http://wiki.wearedynamo.org/index.php?title=Guidelines_for_Academic_Requesters

After reading the above documents and experiencing a day as a turker, I came to slowly understand what turkers find 'fair'. Requester needs to identify themselves, more turkers were likely to do the HITs if they knew if it was coming from an authentic source. I found this example to be particularly interesting, it changed my assumption of turkwork. Previously I thought, turkers would be okay to do a task if they didn't know the purpose and reason. But the below example proves me wrong and shows that turkers do work with a sense of ethics and try to avoid tasks that do harm than good.

Example: Researchers working on spam algorithms did not identify themselves in HITs. Turkers grew concerned that the HITs were coming from spammers trying to *bypass* filters. Turkers avoided doing the HITs and posted negative reviews and discussion comments.

How should turkers be fairly compensated for their work ? I   The hourly wages should at least match the

I managed to find this one task, that struck out as funny and at the same time, raised a serious question of some types of crowdwork that are made me realize why we need crowdworkers. We need turkers to generate new data-sets for data science, tag images, perform content moderation at scale. They help drive our services and there is an urgent need for 'fairness' in turkwork.

Looking at the pay rates of HITs and looking at how they are nowhere close to the minimum wages made me wonder, how do crowdworkers earn enough money to support themselves? To answer this question, I lurked around reddit/mTurk forums. My first impressions were truly surprising. This is a

strong community of turkers who look out and help each other, even though they're separated by thousands of miles. Responses to Reddit posts are surprisingly fast, and there are plenty of resources for people to get started. After reading through the experiences of many first time turkers, here are my observations. It takes a while to earn money on mTurk platform. The first few months would require you to just complete enough HITs to be qualified for the well-paying ones. These milestones are usually 1k,5k and 10k HITs, once you have access to more HITs you have chances to earn more through the week. By the time you reach 1k/5k HITs you would have built an expertise around the HITs and learned new tricks to do it faster. Overtime, you get better at turkwork and earn more. Another common use across all turkers who make serious money is the use of browser scripts. They are dedicated pages and articles which explain how to install, setup and use these tools.

<script sharing good news>

<add paragraph on one such tool>

<what they consider to be fair>

Posted by u/Swiftbeat 4 days ago

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With the right amount of pay, we can do virtually anything!

GOT HITs?

💬 2 Comments   ↗ Share   🔖 Save   ⊘ Hide   🚩 Report

After spending the last two weeks exploring Reddit, mTurk and slack conversations, I found the above picture to best describe the work that crowdworkers do and what they consider to be fair. They wished to be paid fairly for their services and wished for the requesters to identify themselves. You can draw

an analogy to 'minions', they're in thousands, all of them do a bit of work to help the greater cause, whether Grut treats them fai, but help drive the growth of the

<insert discussions >

1. How this assignment did (or didn't) change the way that you understand the work of Amazon Mechanical Turk workers, their motivations,their concerns, and their lived experience (i.e. what it's *like to be a turk worker*)
2. How this assignment informed your understanding of what turk workers think is 'fair' and 'unfair' about their work, and why.
3. How this assignment did (or didn't) change how you, as a potential requester, will conduct research that involves using Mechanical Turk *or other microtask marketplaces* in the future—and *why*.