

Examining Crowd Work Through The Lens of Piecework

ABSTRACT

The Internet is enabling the rise of crowd work, gig work, and other forms of on-demand labor. A large and growing body of scholarship has attempted to predict the socio-technical outcomes of this shift, especially along three threads: 1) what are the limits of crowd work? 2) how far can work be decomposed? and 3) what are workers' relationships with their work and with others? In this paper, we look to the historical scholarship on piecework — a similar trend of work decomposition, distribution, and payment that was popular at the turn of the 20th century — to understand how these questions might play out with modern crowd work. To do so, we identify the mechanisms that enabled and limited piecework historically, and identify whether crowd work faces the same pitfalls or might differentiate itself. This approach introduces theoretical grounding that can help address challenging, persistent questions in crowd work, and suggests design interventions that may help avoid repeating history.