
Enacting Collective Ownership Economies within Amazon's Mechanical Turk

Kieran Browne

Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
kieran.browne@anu.edu.au

Ben Swift

Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
ben.swift@anu.edu.au

Abstract

This paper details a socially engaged art project which enacts collectivist economic relations within Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform. We paid workers on the platform to collectively author a plain-language edition of Karl Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. When published, this text will become an asset owned by the workers who maintain authorship and will earn royalties on sales. This project examines the extent to which economic relations on the platform are locked into a neoliberal ideology and suggests alternative economic possibilities for crowdwork.

Author Keywords

Labour; Socially-engaged art; Amazon Mechanical Turk.

Introduction

In this short paper we describe a current project attempting to enact alternative economic logics within Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform (AMT). We are interested in how AMT's structure enforces a neoliberal paradigm and whether modes of collective ownership can function within this infrastructure. This project, whose crowdwork phase is now complete, will produce a plain-language edition of Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party* as interpreted by AMT workers. While the book is still incomplete, excerpts produced by the workers adorn the left-hand margins of the following pages. We detail the process and challenges as-

Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for third-party components of this work must be honored. For all other uses, contact the owner/author(s).

Copyright held by the owner/author(s).
CHI'20., April 25–30, 2020, Honolulu, HI, USA
ACM 978-1-4503-6819-3/20/04.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3334480.XXXXXXX>

“The upper class is only able to thrive by manipulating money and exploiting the lower class for cheap work.”

“When industry advances, the modern labourers get left behind. These people do not progress along with the technology that makes industries function better, they end up with lower than they were before.”

“When a person fully understands their circumstances then the solutions to societies problems should become immediately apparent.”

“We simply want to get rid of the current system in which labourers exist to increase capital.”

sociated with the project and reflect on the relationship between contemporary crowdwork and Marxist thought.

Background

As work becomes increasingly mediated through technology it has become common to mistake existing social relations for novel technical ones. Crowdsourcing platforms like AMT take to new extremes the division of labour and the isolation of workers, but are merely continuations of a trajectory present in Western economic thought since the end of Keynesianism in the 1970s and the rise of neoliberalism. Writers who have theorised “crowdwork” have tended to foreground the technical networked relation of “the crowd” over the social and political logics of their work. Despite this new technological landscape, these relations can be examined in fruitful dialogue with theorists like Marx because the concepts—alienation, deskilling, unwaged labour etc.—are still significant aspects of the relation between labour and capital.

Irani and Silberman [6] note that writing on crowdwork oscillates between jubilant speculation and ‘sweatshop’ exposés. This paper will read as one of the latter.

Amazon legally defines AMT workers as independent contractors; a move which renders their labour unwaged and not subject to hard-won workers rights and benefits [6]. The platform instead adopts neoliberalism’s marketplace as its defining abstraction. This ostensibly places the worker and employer on an equal footing; both are conceived as singular economic actors making purely rational, self-serving choices. However, this interpretation ignores the existing power asymmetry between capital and labour as well as the ways in which AMT’s design prioritises employers over workers [2]. The wagelessness of crowdwork, combined with the conversion of organised labour into individuated,

competing economic actors has only further disenfranchised workers. Hara et al. [4] analysed over 3.8 million tasks on the platform and found astoundingly that the median hourly wage was less than \$2 USD, with only 4% of workers making or exceeding U.S. federal minimum wage. Simply ensuring minimum wage is far from sufficient to rebalance the economic power relations on the platform; as La Berge [7] puts it “wages are needed and wages are not enough”.

Work and Crowdwork

The differences between work and crowdwork are mostly superficial. Technologically-mediated labour may take division of labour, alienation, wagelessness and so on to new extremes, but it does not create genuinely new relations between people. Instead, new technology provides opportunities to renegotiate existing power relations. Sometimes this results in a democratisation of power, for example the internet ending mass media’s monopoly on truth (or, indeed, lies and propaganda). More often, established power differentials are entrenched or even exacerbated. Crowdwork waters down hard-won victories of the labour union movement. Minimum-wage, the 8-hour work day, safe working conditions, sick-leave etc. are replaced with a laissez-faire market of labour. The deterministic view of technology ignores the social contexts in which these technologies are developed, and naturalises the relations that emerge.

There are genuinely positive effects that could be produced by technologically enabled crowdwork platforms; crowdwork systems could provide gainful employment for those housebound or temporarily out of work. However, while the remuneration for labour remains so low, it will likely only entrench cycles of inequality.

“Instead of hiding exploitation behind the mask of religion and politics, they are directly showing the brutality of the exploitation without any shame.”

“...the disastrous effects the machine’s division of labor; the concentration of money and land for few, over production and crisis”

“The rich people want to relive the past while the poor people want to live in the future.”

“Laborers are the unsung, disposable foot soldiers of an industrial army ran by the capitalists.”

Alienation-as-a-Service

AMT is marketed as just one of many web/cloud services offered by Amazon [5] and as such it appears at first glance to be a software service. But the actual software which AMT runs on is nothing exceptional.

When launching AMT in 2006, Jeff Bezos announced “You’ve heard of software-as-a-service. Now this is human-as-a-service” [5]. Similarly, the startup CrowdFlower, (originally “Dolores Labs” and since renamed “Figure Eight”) use “Labor-as-a-service” to describe their platform [5].

Irani and Silberman [5] argue that AMT is powerful because it renders workers invisible. Human labour is hidden behind the abstractions common to software services. AMT allows employers to use workers as if they were a software service; that is, through a familiarly impersonal system language of APIs and CSVs. AMT’s tagline is clear about its value proposition; “access a global, on-demand, 24x7 workforce”. What AMT is selling, then, is a perfectly alienated workforce. Cheap, expendable, compliant labour. Employers need not know their workers. Workers don’t know who they are working for. Work can be “rejected” (and not paid for) with little recourse. Workers also do not generally know who they are working with, and this makes political organisation nearly impossible. They are also rarely given insight into the product of their labour. Marx’s term, *alienation*, aptly expresses this condition.

The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him [8].

Enacting Alternative Economies

As part of our theoretical interest in the economics of AMT, we attempted to enact alternative economic logics within AMT. Doubting that the economic relations implied by AMT are fixed, we set out to discover if the infrastructure of AMT could be appropriated for more equitable, worker-centric economic logic. In opposition to the normally extractive capitalist mode implied by AMT, this project does not claim the product of the AMT workers’ labour as its own. Instead the product becomes a collective asset of the workers who produced it.

We paid AMT workers to collectively author a plain-language edition of Marx’s *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. This project can be understood as a work of socially engaged art [3, 7], a practice gaining traction in contemporary art, which works with communities and organisations to alter social relations and to create change.

The aims of the project were threefold. To introduce AMT workers to the existing theories of labour politics, to produce a compelling edition of *Manifesto* updated for the language of the 21st century, and to create an asset for the authors of the volume.

To achieve this final aim, we needed to collect some identifying datapoint from the authors that could be used to distribute royalties in future. This had to be done without breaking the rules of the platform and without appearing like a scam to AMT workers. After much indecision we chose to ask for a pseudonym for identification, this balanced our intentions of authorship attribution and identification with the likely concern workers might feel giving their names to strangers. We also asked workers to bookmark a webpage which will serve as a communication channel for updates about the project and payment after the term of the AMT task has expired.

“The upper class is only able to thrive by manipulating money and exploiting the lower class for cheap work.”

“The business leaders cannot offer citizens freedom in this economy.”

“The laborers will rise, in time, to overthrow the 1 percent, even if violence is the only road left to them to do it, if it means a road to equal opportunity.”

“The proletariat, the lowest of the world’s people, cannot rebel unless society allows them to.”

Process

The manifesto was manually divided into 561 passages of approximately two lines each. The task was described on AMT as “simplify passages from an old book”.

Participants were paid US\$1.04 for each passage translated. To arrive at this price, we took the Australian Journalists Published Media Award’s weekly wage for a new employee [1] and applied this pro rata to the division of work allowed for on AMT. This amounted to AU\$1.55 per task, or US\$1.04 based on the exchange rate at the time of the experiment (31st January 2020). The task was posted and, likely due to the comparatively high reward, was completed in full in just over 20 minutes.

We do believe that it is incumbent on employers, including researchers, to pay a living wage, however it is also necessary for us to acknowledge that our ability to command hundreds of dollars of university research funds is an extraordinarily privileged position.

Conclusion

The present economics of crowdwork are not native to software, they reflect the dominant economic paradigm of our time. This paradigm is the same one that has weakened the labour movement and led to stagnant wage-growth for decades in spite of growing GDP. To imagine a worker-centric crowdwork we ought not look to new technologies, technology is only instrumental in this case. The ideas of Marx and other social theorists are surprisingly applicable to crowdwork despite drastically changed technologies. We presented a work-in-progress socially-engaged art project applying collective ownership within AMT. This project demonstrates that these alternative economic logics are compatible with crowdwork even if they are not encouraged by the existing platforms.

REFERENCES

- [1] 2010. Journalists Published Media Award 2010. Fair Work Ombudsman <http://awardviewer.fwo.gov.au/award/show/MA000067>. (2010). Accessed: 2020-02-09.
- [2] Janine Berg. 2015. Income security in the on-demand economy: Findings and policy lessons from a survey of crowdworkers. *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal* 37 (2015), 543–576.
- [3] Claire Bishop. 2006. The social turn: Collaboration and its discontents. *Artforum* 44, 6 (2006).
- [4] Kotaro Hara, Abigail Adams, Kristy Milland, Saiph Savage, Chris Callison-Burch, and Jeffrey P Bigham. 2018. A data-driven analysis of workers’ earnings on Amazon Mechanical Turk. In *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–14.
- [5] Lilly C Irani and M Six Silberman. 2013. Turkopticon: Interrupting worker invisibility in amazon mechanical turk. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems*. 611–620.
- [6] Lilly C Irani and M Six Silberman. 2016. Stories We Tell About Labor: Turkopticon and the Trouble with "Design". In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems*. 4573–4586.
- [7] Leigh Claire La Berge. 2019. *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*. Duke University Press.
- [8] Karl Marx. 2009. Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf>. (2009).