GIG WORK ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Case Study 2: Online Support Tools and Forums for AMT Crowdworkers

Learning, Evaluation and Research Activity II (LER II)

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

The size of the online work market was estimated at about US$4.4 billion in 2016,[1] growing at a rate of 25.5 percent annually.[2] Microwork or crowdwork platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), Crowdflower, and Clickworker employ a large number of online workers—a 2016 study estimates 40 million registered workers, of which 10 percent are "active users," meaning they complete at least one task a month.[3]

Online work may enable new opportunities for flexible and remote work. However, recent studies on online work, particularly microwork, have highlighted some of the risks for workers, from low wages and unstable earnings to the alienation of workers and loss of opportunities for collective bargaining.[4] The absence of grievance redressal mechanisms, combined with the lack of formal social protection mechanisms further amplifies the precarity of online work.[5]

Online outsourcing through microwork platforms is driven by demand from medium- and large-scale enterprises located predominantly in developed countries, with many workers catering to this demand located in developing countries.[6] Because of the over-supply of labor, online platforms may initiate a race to the bottom with wages on the platforms spiraling downwards.[7] Online gig work has been recommended as a viable alternative for creating economic opportunities, especially in low-income countries.[8] However, contextualizing this recommendation with the ground realities reveals strenuous working schedules and job insecurity among workers who perform crowdwork on a full-time basis.[9]

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[1] Graham, M., Hjorth, I., & Lehdonvirta, V. (2017). Digital labour and development: impacts of global digital labour platforms and the gig economy on worker livelihoods. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 23(2), 135-162.

[2] Kassi, O., & Lehdonvirta, V. (2016). *Building the online labour index: a tool for policy and research.*

[3] Kuek, S. C., Paradi-Guilford, C., Fayomi, T., Imaizumi, S., Ipeirotis, P., Pina, P., & Singh, M. (2015). *The global opportunity in online outsourcing.*

[4] Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., Wood, A., Barnard, H., & Hjorth, I. (2018). Could Online Gig Work Drive Development in Lower-income Countries?. *The Future of Work in the Global South*, 8-11.

Wood, A., Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., Barnard, H., & Hjorth, I. (2016). *Virtual production networks: Fixing commodification and disembeddedness.*

Graham, M., Hjorth, I., & Lehdonvirta, V. (2017). Digital labour and development: impacts of global digital labour platforms and the gig economy on worker livelihoods. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 23(2), 135-162.

[5] Berg, J., Furrer, M., Harmon, E., Rani, U., & Silberman, S. (2018). Digital labour platforms and the future of work. *Towards Decent Work in the Online World*. Rapport de l'OIT.

[6] Kuek, S. C., Paradi-Guilford, C., Fayomi, T., Imaizumi, S., Ipeirotis, P., Pina, P., & Singh, M. (2015). *The global opportunity in online outsourcing.*

[7] Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., Wood, A., Barnard, H., Hjorth, I., & Simon, D. P. (2017). *The risks and rewards of online gig work at the global margins.* Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute.

[8] Kuek, S. C., Paradi-Guilford, C., Fayomi, T., Imaizumi, S., Ipeirotis, P., Pina, P., & Singh, M. (2015). *The global opportunity in online outsourcing.*

[9] Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., Wood, A., Barnard, H., & Hjorth, I. (2018). Could Online Gig Work Drive Development in Lower-income Countries?. *The Future of Work in the Global South*, 8-11.

Crowdworkers in developing countries are often professionals with high educational qualifications. For example, 20 percent of Indian crowdworkers have a postgraduate degree.[10] Highly educated workers performing low-skilled work indicates under-utilization of skilled labor in developing countries.[11]

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[10] Berg, J., Furrer, M., Harmon, E., Rani, U., & Silberman, S. (2018). Digital labour platforms and the future of work. *Towards Decent Work in the Online World*. Rapport de l'OIT.

[11] Ibid.

2. RESEARCH QUERY

In a bid to understand the changing contours of the platform economy and promote interventions that support worker agency and rights, this study examines the role of online information-sharing tools and social media forums. Do supporting organizations meant to help workers, such as information-sharing platforms, successfully facilitate workers' understanding of their rights and improve their ability to organize? Are social media tools effective in improving worker access to information and promoting worker agency?

This study examines online tools and social media forums for workers, or "Turkers," on Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT). AMT is one of the oldest and longest-running online microwork marketplaces, owned and operated by Amazon under Amazon Web Services. Workers are spread out geographically, but most are from the United States (75 percent) and India (18 percent).[12] Employers or "requesters" can post Human Intelligence Tasks (HITs) on the platform, usually tasks a computer is unable to do that require human intelligence, such as identifying images, data entry, subtitling, transcribing text, or answering survey questions, etc. Workers can then select from a list of such tasks to complete in exchange for a reward set by the requester, which is awarded after approval. Requesters can set the validity of a HIT, the duration it should take a worker to complete the task, and the number of responses required. Since the number of responses is capped, workers must accept a HIT quickly. Once a worker accepts a HIT, it goes onto their queue. Workers can then address queued HITs within the time frames set by the requester.

The application programming interface (API) endpoints assign unique identifiers to workers on the platform that requesters can use to review the work and communicate with workers in a limited capacity. However, AMT actively discourages workers from using real names and personal identifiers, and requesters from asking workers for their contact details. Workers receive no information about requesters from AMT, only details of the task they must perform. Platforms like AMT witness a large volume of activity and produce millions of ghost workers, largely due to the "paradox of automation's last mile," which Gray and Suri observe as the never-ending need for human interference in developing automated machines.[13]

Turkers on AMT use a combination of tools and online fora to band together to work against what Gray and Suri term as the "algorithmic cruelty" in online crowdwork.[14] Forums like Reddit, TurkerNation Slack workspace, and MTurk Crowd, and tools such as Turkopticon and TurkerView, allow workers to share reviews and resources. These forums also function as discussion boards for workers to congregate and converse in the everyday and organize campaigns for collective action. For example, Dynamo, a platform created by researchers at Stanford University, helps AMT workers collectivize.

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[12] Berg, J., Furrer, M., Harmon, E., Rani, U., & Silberman, S. (2018). Digital labour platforms and the future of work. *Towards Decent Work in the Online World*. Rapport de l'OIT.

[13] Gray, M. L., & Suri, S. (2019). *Ghost work: How to stop Silicon Valley from building a new global underclass.* Eamon Dolan Books.

[14] Ibid.

For the purposes of this study, we looked at two online tools, Turkopticon and TurkerNation, selected because of their popularity among workers and their widespread usage. They also appear in guides and tutorial material to help workers improve their working efficiency and earnings on AMT. We also examined social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and YouTube. The aim of the study is to investigate variant types of platforms that exist and question their usefulness for online workers. The choice of platforms was based on an initial survey of the literature, as well as from consultation with USAID and The Cloudburst Group, which suggested that these are the most commonly used platforms by AMT workers. However, as we found in our study, while they are the most used in aggregate, this aggregate is based on usage by American workers. Indian workers tend not to find them as useful, and instead rely on other more commonly used social media platforms. A brief description of these platforms is as follows:

TURKOPTICON

Turkopticon is a website and browser extension which enables workers to review requesters and HITs posted on the AMT platform. The browser extension integrates directly into the workflow of the platform and displays requester ratings on four parameters: level of communication, generosity, fairness, and promptness. Reviews are documented on the website and Turkers can check these reviews before accepting a HIT. The tool seeks to help workers ascertain the reputation of requesters and avoid unethical requesters through collaborative information sharing with other workers on the platform. The website also serves as a forum where Turkers can discuss various aspects of AMT work. The forum is moderated by its creators, researchers from the University of California San Diego (UCSD), who ensure the integrity and quality of reviews. Turkopticon is one the most popularly recommended add-ons among Turkers.

TURKERNATION

TurkerNation is a discussion forum that aims to help Turkers access better quality work opportunities on the platform. It attempts to bridge the gap between Turkers and requesters by allowing both to post alerts about high quality tasks in the forum. Turker Kristy Milland played a key role in setting up TurkerNation and has been a community manager on the forum since 2005. Initially a web forum and a chat space, TurkerNation (now operating on Slack, a messaging app for workplaces) enables Turkers to share information about reliable or well-paying HITs on the forum. The conversations on the forum are segregated into various channels: "Daily HIT Threads" where HITs are posted and reviewed regularly by workers; "quals" where qualification HITs are posted; and a separate channel where requesters can post about issues that they face and connect with workers directly. Workers engage in casual banter about working on the platform on the "General" channel. Conversations on both Slack and Reddit are strictly moderated by five or six Reddit users.

SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS (FACEBOOK, WHATSAPP, TELEGRAM)

Besides specialized platforms such as Turkopticon and TurkerNation, social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp also serve as high-activity sites for Turkers to initiate and join virtual networks. Although our study initially focused on Turkopticon and TurkerNation, early interviews with Indian Turkers revealed that these platforms did not cater to their needs but served the needs of Turkers in the U.S. better. Instead, most Indian Turkers used and preferred social media groups. Each of these social media platforms also gives rise to a characteristically different kind of

interaction among workers. For instance, while WhatsApp and Telegram groups typically involve smaller groups and are more personal and local, Facebook groups facilitate virtual associations among workers who are both geographically disparate and proximately located.[15] Conversations revolve around "good HITs" and "bad requesters," along with sharing other resources or work opportunities, similar to other online forums.

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[15] Yin, M., Gray, M. L., Suri, S., & Vaughan, J. W. (2016, April). The communication network within the crowd. In *Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on World Wide Web* (pp. 1293-1303). International World Wide Web Conferences Steering Committee.

3. METHOD AND LIMITATIONS

For this study, we recruited respondents through a two-stage sampling process. In the first stage, we administered a baseline survey as a HIT via AMT, with an upper limit of 40 respondents limited to workers located in developing countries. Forty was chosen as a suitable limit, as the objective was to reach 12 to 15 workers in total. The questions in the survey consisted of location, educational qualifications, duration of work on the platform, use of AMT for primary or supplementary income, and frequency of use of the two forums mentioned above. We were only focused on those respondents from developing countries, which in this case turned out to be all from India. We received 40 responses from India and shortlisted 13 workers, taking a cross-section across educational qualifications, work experience on the platform, and frequency of use of Turkopticon and TurkerNation, for a semi-structured interview. We conducted five semi-structured in-depth interviews (three via phone, one via Google Hangout and one via Google Chat). Of the five in-depth interviews, two workers from the baseline pool were interviewed and three workers were recruited through snowball sampling. These interviews were conducted over telephone. The eight other shortlisted respondents from our baseline survey did not respond to a request for an interview. We then also administered our interview questions through a survey form as a HIT via AMT to the baseline survey respondents, based on the assumption that workers were reluctant to engage off the platform. This strategy provided nine responses, but a few responses were sparse on detail. From this, we conducted an additional four phone interviews, increasing the total number of respondents to nine. We also looked at workers' activity on public social media groups on Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube. Respondents provided information about WhatsApp group conversations.[16]

We reached out to the moderators of TurkerNation, of which Kristy Milland (the founder of the forum) refused to participate in the study. While no formal reason was given for not participating, we heard from other scholars working on the subject that this could be because workers who use these platforms have increasingly begun to vent their frustration with AMT to the moderators even though they have little capacity to bring about direct change within AMT. We interviewed one of the other moderators of the TurkerNation Slack workspace. We also reached out to Lilly Irani, one of the creators of Turkopticon. Her comments have been supplemented with existing research on Turkopticon available in the public domain. To understand the labor market conditions in India and existing research on community fora and assistive tools for Turkers, we conducted interviews with noted experts Mary Gray, Mark Graham, and Jacki O'Neill.

Critiques of crowdwork platforms such as AMT point out the invisibility of workers on the platform,[17] making it very difficult to contact workers due to the heavy intermediation. This was experienced first-hand in recruiting respondents for the study, making it nearly impossible to reach workers outside the bounds of the platform. Snowball sampling could not be used initially because of the lack of response from workers from the baseline pool. Their apprehension could be attributed to mistrust, as many

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[16] Doing in-person interviews was not feasible, as the population of workers is geographically spread across the country and therefore not reachable in our five- to seven-day fieldwork interval. The short time available also made it difficult to establish relationships of trust with workers, and to explain the purpose of the study. Snowballing as a strategy can result in a less diverse sample, but we had to use this as a method because of the difficulties in accessing workers.

[17] Irani, L. C., & Silberman, M. (2013, April). Turkopticon: Interrupting worker invisibility in amazon mechanical turk. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 611-620). ACM.

workers inquired about our relationship with AMT during the interviews. The short time frame for conducting the study further limited opportunities to gain workers' trust and enter their communication networks to gather more detailed information.

3.1 RESPONDENTS' PROFILES

All the responses received for the baselines and shortlisted candidates were from workers located in India. The candidates we shortlisted had a minimum educational attainment of a high school degree and maximum of a postgraduate degree. We received more male respondents than female, with 30 male respondents and 10 female respondents. The majority of workers in the sample reported using AMT as their main income source. Most respondents who were working full-time on AMT reported using it as their primary source of income, but not as the sole source of income for their household. Most respondents were graduates and had full-time work experience, which they either quit or continued to work on along with part-time work on AMT. However, six out of nine interviewees cited AMT as their first work experience. Turkers joined the platform based on recommendations from personal connections, online searches, and through offline advertisements for online work.

Workers who left full-time jobs to work on AMT mentioned a dislike for hierarchical setups in traditional work environments and a preference for flexible work environments. Two of the nine respondents specified that their motivation to join AMT on a full-time basis was due to a health condition or a disability. Most of the part-time workers use AMT because it offers a good source of supplementary income. Motivations to join AMT also included aspirations for higher incomes over time.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 TURKER EXPERIENCES OF WORK

Confirming the findings in some of the emerging literature on Turkers in developing nations, Indian Turkers are generally satisfied with their earnings, owing to a favorable exchange rate. However, the availability of work fluctuates greatly, preventing many workers from generating stable earnings. One of the Turkers commented:

> *"This is highly irregular work. I target around $10 for a day. We can earn $50 one day and the next day earnings might be half a dollar only. We never know what's going to happen tomorrow."*

Indian workers face further constraints because of poor internet connectivity, and in some cases, fluency in English. Jacki O'Neill, for example, documents cases of Indian Turkers working out of internet cafes; this often means that workers help each other in completing tasks. Workers with weak English skills often rely on a friend or use an acquaintance to help translate tasks in exchange for sharing a proportion of earnings. These constraints often mean that the Turkers who do well on AMT are high-skilled workers with some financial means, often computer scientists, which affords them the luxury of internet connectivity and English education.[18] Many of these high-skilled workers turn to online work because of the unavailability of job opportunities that meet their skill level; moreover, online microwork is often associated with "knowledge work," which is culturally more acceptable than manual work, even if the latter pays better or provides a more predictable income.

As most requesters are based in the U.S., more work is available at night in India, causing Turkers to make drastic alterations to their schedules. They work between 25 to 80 hours in a week in sync with U.S. clocks. Time management is a major issue, particularly for workers who also have other jobs. A respondent who has a full-time job in a multinational corporation observed that:

> *"Most work comes around 9 p.m. as the requests are from the U.S., and I work for about four hours. But if the work comes later at night, I have to stay up even longer to do it. This disrupts my next day of office work."*

Working at night also results in solitary working hours—many Turkers say they have some form of entertainment (e.g., TV, Netflix, etc.) to keep them company. Alienation and loneliness among crowdworkers has also been well-documented in the literature.[19] Delays in payment and unfair rejections by requesters are common and frequent concerns. This is amplified by the unresponsiveness of AMT and the absence of any grievance redressal mechanisms. These concerns are common for Indian

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[18] Martin, D., O'Neill, J., Gupta, N., & Hanrahan, B. V. (2016). Turking in a global labour market. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, 25(1), 39-77.

[19] Wood, A., Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., Barnard, H., & Hjorth, I. (2016). *Virtual production networks: Fixing commodification and disembeddedness.*

Graham, M., Hjorth, I., & Lehdonvirta, V. (2017). Digital labour and development: impacts of global digital labour platforms and the gig economy on worker livelihoods. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 23(2), 135-162.

and American workers alike, as borne out by our interviews and existing literature, and spurred the creation of online tools and forums like Turkopticon and TurkerNation.[20] TurkerNation is a good example of how workers came together, despite the fragmentation of labor on online forums, to try to collectively address their concerns.

4.2 USAGE NEEDS AND PATTERNS

Workers reported joining several AMT worker forums that they found through quick internet searches when they first started working on AMT. Respondents reported being fairly familiar with Turkopticon, which they use to avoid rejections, read requester reviews, and share their experiences on AMT. When questioned about the criteria for accepting work on AMT, workers prioritized requesters who were least likely to reject their work, even over the remuneration offered for a certain task. For workers, a rejected task means time wasted that could have been spent more productively elsewhere, as well as the possibility of not being able to access future opportunities because of poor ratings. On the other hand, TurkerNation usage was close to zero in our sample—only one respondent mentioned having used it in the past, and most others said they had never heard of it. This was surprising given the popularity of the platform among the broader Turker community. The TurkerNation moderator told us that the shift to Slack and Reddit led to many members leaving the forum.

When workers were prodded further about supporting platforms and information-sharing forums they used, all respondents reported being a member of at least one social media group, either on Facebook, WhatsApp, or Telegram, in which they are active on a regular basis. Our respondents most commonly used groups designed exclusively for Indian Turkers (and named as such, e.g., Indian Turkers) on WhatsApp. Workers who have been on AMT for eight to ten years were outliers, as they mentioned not finding tools like Turkopticon and similar support forums valuable, but they also reported being fairly active on WhatsApp groups, providing mentorship and guidance to other members.

Turkers' modes of access varied by platform. Many respondents found out about Turkopticon through these social media groups and tutorial videos on YouTube. Workers find Facebook groups through Google searches and offline acquaintances who also work on the platforms. Workers discover WhatsApp groups through online references or virtual meetings when doing a HIT.

Conversations on social media groups generally revolve around working on AMT, with workers sharing HITs and discussing new developments related to AMT (e.g., the introduction of Hyperwallet as a new payment mode). Respondents also mentioned discussing other opportunities for online work, with experienced workers sharing links to other websites that they use for working from home. Conversations are sometimes about work, life hacks, new tools, or how to manage time.

WhatsApp groups are often saturated with repeated HITs due to their small size and common sources of information. Almost all respondents observed that activity in WhatsApp groups has also decreased due to a decline in the amount of work on AMT.

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[20] Irani, L. C., & Silberman, M. (2013, April). Turkopticon: Interrupting worker invisibility in amazon mechanical turk. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 611-620). ACM.

4.3 MORE INFORMATION, BETTER HITS, AND A FEW FRIENDS

Online tools and social media forums help workers address information asymmetries on AMT and access better work. Turkopticon functions as a "basic information system" for Turkers, who use it to identify and avoid requesters who have a bad reputation on the platform, whether for unfair rejection, bad communication, or unfair compensation. Some workers referred to Turkopticon as an "eye-opener" and a "bridge" between workers and requesters.

The difficulties of finding and retaining good HITs (by adding them to their queues) are also mitigated by these tools. One of the respondents told us about a script called PandaCrazy:

> "There is a script called PandaCrazy that I use a lot. It helps us catch the HIT. Since each HIT has a particular ID, we take that and paste it on PandaCrazy which does the catching for us. Catching means getting hold of the HIT, adding it to your queue. Once it's there, the requester can be contacted."

Reviews and discussions on these spaces also enable workers to identify better jobs faster, thereby reducing the time spent looking for work. In this way, social media groups and online forums reduce some of the unpaid labor that goes into looking for work. This is a major issue for workers—some said looking for work can take up nearly half their time on the platform. The "crowd," in this sense, mediates the availability of work, distributing individuals' labor that goes into finding work.[21]

In addition, these groups and communities provide a space to connect to other workers and tackle alienation while working. As observed by another respondent who is a full-time worker on AMT:

> "I felt the need to have a place where I can interact with other workers, not initially but after having worked on the platform for a while. I decided to join these groups for safety and communication purposes and also for awareness about any changes that may be happening on MTurk."

This sentiment corresponds with the finding in some of the emerging literature on collaboration among micro-workers. Jacki O'Neill and Mary Gray, for example, point to the high degree of engagement and collaboration among micro workers in India. In some cases, workers use these forums to inform each other about good HITs they are unable to take on themselves; this builds their social capital among their community of peers. Good jobs go quite quickly, and many are offered at night; workers pass good jobs on to one another. In other cases, online engagement has also enabled offline friendships—Turkers in Hyderabad, for example, have regular meetups at a local cafe. Some Turkers conduct training sessions on Skype, which are then shared through social media channels.[22] This literature points to how some Turkers may collaborate with other family members, friends, and colleagues, old and new, to manage work together. However, these associations are typically geographically spread out—Turkers have online company, but physically they typically work alone, late at night, and geographically spread out. As

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[21] Gray, M. L., Suri, S., Ali, S. S., & Kulkarni, D. (2016, February). The crowd is a collaborative network. In *Proceedings of the 19th ACM conference on computer-supported cooperative work & social computing* (pp. 134-147). ACM.

[22] Ibid; interviews with experts

will be noted later in this report, such collaboration need not reflect the experience of all Turkers, and some continue to work in isolation.

These fora thus fill in for functions which are not fulfilled by AMT but are important for working on the platform. They facilitate information flows, rebalance some power hierarchies between requesters and workers, and enable the sharing of experiences. Mary Gray also suggests that the sense of community forged through the tools and forums was especially important for Indian workers compared with American workers.[23] This is because Indian workers had been scammed previously by recruitment agencies or employers, and thus preferred relying on word-of-mouth references from friends and colleagues; moreover, the importance of community for Indian workers is further accentuated by the unavailability or inadequacy of formal complaint mechanisms.

4.4 SMALL AND LOCAL IS PREFERABLE

Web forums like TurkerNation, MTurk Crowd, and Facebook groups were used much less frequently by respondents compared to WhatsApp or Telegram groups. Turkopticon, TurkerNation, and MTurk Crowd are seen as being mostly for American workers—the HITs shared on these forums were largely targeted at Turkers based in the U.S., and Indian workers were disallowed from accepting these HITs by requesters. Requesters can set a preferred location, and some of the higher-paying HITs can only be accessed by workers in the U.S. Mary Gray also pointed out that xenophobia and racism were common on many of these platforms, deterring participation from Indian workers.[24] Some forums also explicitly ban Indian workers, and moderators claim this is mostly because of excessive spam posting by Indian workers. Barriers to access due to negative stereotypes and language fluency often lead to underrepresentation of Indian workers in transnational worker forums.[25] In many of the "global" forums, culturally specific references and American slang are common. In contrast, the familiarity with the language of conversation and embeddedness within communication subcultures in Facebook or WhatsApp groups makes it easier for workers to participate.

Earlier studies on Indian Turkers document the widespread use of Facebook groups.[26] In contrast, all the workers we spoke with preferred WhatsApp and Telegram. This could be because of the growing popularity of WhatsApp as a platform in India. In addition, WhatsApp groups are seen as being smaller, more private, local, or communal spaces. The preference for smaller and more localized groups, usually nationality-based, has been observed in other developing countries as well.[27]

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[23] Gray, M. L., & Suri, S. (2019). Ghost work: How to stop Silicon Valley from building a new global underclass. Eamon Dolan Books.

[24] Yin, M., Gray, M. L., Suri, S., & Vaughan, J. W. (2016, April). The communication network within the crowd. In Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on World Wide Web (pp. 1293-1303). International World Wide Web Conferences Steering Committee.

[25] Milland, K. (2019). The unsupported Crowd: Exclusion of Indian workers in Amazon Mechanical Turk communities.

[26] Gupta, N., Martin, D., Hanrahan, B. V., & O'Neill, J. (2014, November). Turk-life in India. In Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on Supporting Group Work (pp. 1-11). ACM.

[27] Wood, A. J., Lehdonvirta, V., & Graham, M. (2018). Workers of the Internet unite? Online freelancer organisation among remote gig economy workers in six Asian and African countries. New Technology, Work and Employment, 33(2), 95-112.

Parallels exist between web forums and discussion forums for workers across nationalities and social media groups consisting of workers who are co-located. Functionally similar, both facilitate information sharing and help improve access to work, but the geographical proximity of workers translates into stronger relevance and hence better associations through localized groups.

Aside from familiarity and relevance, mistrust is another reason for the preference for smaller groups. Several Turkers noted concerns around freeriding in larger groups. This mistrust is amplified by the reduced availability of work on AMT. Some workers also expressed mistrust of authenticity and credibility of ratings on more popular forums such as Turkopticon. One worker said, for example, "Some reviews might be selfishly created so others don't work on it, who can vouch for them?" Workers were also worried about their accounts getting suspended if they used a more visible and well-known tool like Turkopticon.

The fewer the members, the easier it is to build trust. Geographical and occupational familiarity helps in reaffirming this trust. Smaller groups form a circle of trust for workers, wherein they get relevant information and provide any that they might have. These associations may be as large as spanning the geographical breadth of a country or as small as consisting of two family members of the same household working on AMT. The classification of groups based on workers' nationalities suggests the importance of familiarity, trust, and kinship, as workers also join these groups through personal acquaintances and advertisements. Mentorship and guidance provided by experienced workers and the resources shared by them are automatically verified within this circle of trust. As stated by one of our respondents in reference to the WhatsApp group he was a part of,

> *"The WhatsApp group has three to four admins but they only moderate if there is talk about something other than MTurk. But otherwise we trust each other, we don't think anyone will lie on the WhatsApp group. We found each other on MTurk, so everyone is a known worker there for sure. I mean why would anyone lie there? On Turkopticon, people from outside AMT, non-workers, can also come. But why would anyone participate? They can, but I don't know why they would."*

The preference for WhatsApp groups over online tools might also reflect a prior familiarity with the platform. WhatsApp is a widely used messaging device in India;[28] in the U.S., in contrast, there is a longer history of using online messaging boards and tools. This might also explain why Indian workers do not use TurkerNation, particularly with its shift to Slack. One of the respondents mentioned having tried various forums but preferred using WhatsApp groups for daily communication, saying:

> *"I tried TurkerNation and other forums, but they were not user-friendly. Their interface wasn't as smooth as Facebook or WhatsApp. I am not used to other types of forums."*

Furthermore, the "always on" logic of working on AMT is supported by the 24/7 active WhatsApp and Telegram groups, allowing workers to complete a task as it is shared on the groups. One female worker informed us:

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[28] O'Neill, J., Toyama, K., Chen, J., Tate, B., & Siddique, A. (2016, June). The increasing sophistication of mobile media sharing in lower-middle-class Bangalore. In *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development* (p. 17). ACM.

> *"WhatsApp stays on all day and most of the workers on the group are online the whole day. So I get direct messages from them."*

This might also signal a network effect,[29] where people are more likely to use social communication tools most used by their peers or professional circles because the benefits increase with the rising number of users on the platform.

4.5 THE CROWD MAY NOT WORK FOR EVERYONE

Some of the workers we spoke with had very low levels of engagement on these forums and little interaction with other workers. They used these forums to primarily access, and occasionally share, basic information, but no stronger bonds of solidarity were experienced, nor were these interactions seen as an opportunity for bargaining.

Many workers mistrust AMT, and this spills over to mistrust for online communities as well; they would rather just concentrate on the work and improve the quality of their output. With a drop in the availability of HITs, some are even worried about losing their HITs to other Turkers. Collaboration in a competitive marketplace is seen as an unhelpful strategy. Because of the declining amount of work, many Turkers we spoke with reported accepting HITs even if the requester was rated poorly.

> *"Now that the availability of work is so low, just getting a HIT is a big deal, so we usually just accept it. We don't think much even if the requester rating is low. We generally feel like it's worth the risk…If the number of reviews is less, then it's worth the risk."*

It may also take time for people to build trust in online communities. This was true of AMT—a few Turkers noted how online work has a reputation of being a scam, and they were thus skeptical of joining AMT in the beginning. This association might extend to perceptions of online communities as well.

Offline similarities and affinities may also play a role in how online communities are formed and used. Many of the examples of workers collaborating on platforms are based on the experiences of Turkers in Bangalore, Chennai, and Hyderabad, all cities with large business process outsourcing (BPO) and information technology (IT) sectors, of which many are Turkers or otherwise engaged in online work. In many ways, it is seen as a continuation of the knowledge work they are already doing. In contrast, some of the workers we spoke with who reported little connection within online Turker communities lived in less densely populated Turker areas and had less occupational affinity of identity. For example, one of the women we spoke with lived in a small town in Gujarat, with both her and her father working on the platform in different shifts.

The choice of platform available to workers and its rules, implicit or explicit, can shape the level of engagement among workers. In some social media groups, moderators are strict about the type of issues that can be discussed—some Turkers mentioned that non-AMT conversations are actively suppressed. This could discourage the building of broader solidarities among workers. A female worker with a Bachelor of Commerce who is a full-time worker on AMT told us:

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[29] Tufekci discusses this in the context of social movements birthed on social media.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest.* Yale University Press.

"Conversation not related to AMT is not permitted on the group. But they also didn't allow us to share other avenues of online work. I had to put forward this point and argue against this rule because sharing such opportunities is helpful for all as most workers in the group work from home."

This contrasts with online forums and discussion boards (e.g., MTurk Forum, TurkerNation, etc.), which facilitate and encourage everyday conversation among workers, as mentioned by the TurkerNation moderator we spoke to.

Our conversations with workers highlighted the variations in their experiences on the platforms as well as the forums—not all users are active members of the community or establish solidarities beyond basic information sharing. Being an active member of these social media communication channels requires workers to make investments of their own emotional labor.[30] People have differing inclinations, aptitudes, and capacities to engage in such labor, and it can become a new source of stress. As Zeynep Tufekci and Matthew E. Brashears point out, "some people do not take as readily to accepting digitally mediated sociality as others." Referring to such preferences as "cyberasociality," they find that such people "are less likely to use platforms for digitally mediated social interaction to broaden their social networks or to forge new social ties online while they are equally likely to use digital channels for utilitarian purposes."[31]

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[30] Raval, N., & Dourish, P. (2016, February). Standing out from the crowd: Emotional labor, body labor, and temporal labor in ridesharing. In *Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing* (pp. 97-107). ACM.

[31] Tufekci, Z., & Brashears, M. E. (2014). Are we all equally at home socializing online? Cyberasociality and evidence for an unequal distribution of disdain for digitally-mediated sociality. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(4), 486-502.

5. CONCLUSION

Online tools, forums, and social media groups play an important role in improving Turkers' access to information, identifying good HITs and requesters, reducing time spent searching for HITs, enabling workers to exchange quality work opportunities, and retaining them to continue working on AMT. Further, virtual communities can help create new solidarities among geographically dispersed workers. Smaller and localized groups are more successful at overcoming barriers to trust and in mitigating the alienating effect of work on crowdwork platforms by making conversations more relevant and relatable by creating a familiar environment. While concrete examples of increases in bargaining power and momentum for collective action do not appear prima facie, Skype training sessions for new Turkers and guidance from experienced workers on WhatsApp groups are examples of collaborative activities that benefit workers.

To what extent, however, do such information flows or new solidarities enable access to better work and improve worker rights and bargaining capacities? In some cases, as the examples in this report have noted, workers access better HITs and save time looking for good work. However, broader market conditions ultimately shape access to work and the efficacy of online tools in finding work. Numerous Turkers in India noted that as the amount of work on AMT has reduced, usage of these platforms has also decreased, in some cases, because people are reluctant to share the leads they find regarding good HITs.

It is thus important to recognize the limited capacity of these platforms. While they do ease the workers' experiences and workers have used these platforms to form new collaborative networks, they can ultimately only do so much. Workers are themselves quite aware of the limitations of these tools. "Accountability should come from MTurk itself, not from the forums. Because if they can't force the requesters to behave, who actually can?" remarked one of our respondents.

In this case, the unresponsiveness of AMT further worsens the situation and arguably even prevents these tools from realizing their full potential. Yet, it is imaginable that a responsive online microwork platform or other digital work platform would enable workers to come together and make demands on the platform that improve working conditions. There is one such example on AMT which demonstrates this potential: led by TurkerNation moderators, a campaign was launched in which Turkers came together to draft a letter to Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon, about the deplorable working conditions on AMT, which resulted in the introduction of bank transfers as a mode of payment for Indian workers.[32] Expert interviews also corroborate this argument—in different circumstances, with possibly different platforms, civil society organizations can play a role in enabling workers to come together. One example cited in the interviews was using a chatbot to collect grievances of drivers on ride-hailing apps and then working with local taxi driver unions to help workers negotiate their rights.[33]

Three concluding caveats are in order. First, interventions aimed at increasing workers' well-being are also political because they seek to shift the balance of power between stakeholders. These politics and

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[32] Milland, K. (2019). The unsupported Crowd: Exclusion of Indian workers in Amazon Mechanical Turk communities.

[33] McGregor, M., Bidwell, N. J., Sarangapani, V., Appavoo, J., & O'Neill, J. (2019, April). Talking about Chat at Work in the Global South: An Ethnographic Study of Chat Use in India and Kenya. In Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (p. 233). ACM.

their effects must be recognized. Lilly Irani, founder of Turkopticon, reflects on this, highlighting how public depictions of Turkopticon depicted the designers who had made it as "creative innovators" and the AMT workers as "dopes in the system…without agency or capacity to change their situation." Further, public media's depiction of these tools promotes the image of AMT work as "simple, menial, repetitive, or low-skill." Such depictions reinforced "the design savior complex" and even ended up marginalizing the agency and adaptive efforts of Turkers themselves.[34] The politics of such interventions are further bound up with emotional labor investments of the moderators or initiators themselves, some of whom report high rates of fatigue, burnout, and frustration.

Second, one must not assume that the collaborative crowd is a sufficient safety net for *all* workers. Strides towards mitigating alienation and facilitating social protection have been made by way of virtual forums and online groups, but that does not discount the necessity for protecting the outliers and the lone workers who are still invisible in the crowd. Participating in the crowd requires significant investments of emotional labor by workers, which may not be possible or desirable for all workers. The differential capacities to invest and participate in online forums suggest that research should take care to not homogenize the crowd. The same goes for platform moderators—while not covered directly in this report, the unpaid labor of these forum and platform organizers must be taken into consideration when considering the longevity and sustainability of such forums in enabling worker agency and rights.

The third and final caveat is that even though there are numerous stories of successful collaboration and engagement, these are often stories of individual success and must not be confused with structural remedies and interventions for improving worker conditions. In many ways, the individual stories of adaptation and resilience in the face of exploitation may enable or legitimize the prolonging of the exploitative structures in the first place. Equating individual efforts with structural changes to support crowdworkers and improve work experience on the platform not only puts undue pressure on the individuals behind such projects, but also de-emphasizes the structural changes that are necessary to discipline the platform economy.

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[34] Irani, L. C., & Silberman, M. (2016, May). Stories we tell about labor: Turkopticon and the trouble with design. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 4573-4586). ACM.

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