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Turkopticon: From Software to Worker Organizing: On Organizing Form as Emergent Strategy (2009-2024)

Lilly Irani
UC San Diego

"If you do anything with machine learning, your company or university probably hires workers like me to clean, organize, or make data to train algorithms. I live in West Virginia on a farm with chickens, and I help build tech by completing tasks posted by 'requesters' on Amazon Mechanical Turk.

But Turkers know what we need from Amazon, and we're organizing to get it."

This declaration of struggle came from Sherry Stanley, the first Amazon Mechanical Turk worker or “Turker” to take the role of lead organizer of the Turkopticon project. Turkopticon is a project I co-founded in 2009 with Six Silberman to help workers share information on employers with one another. Twelve years later, workers were leading the project, not only sharing information but organizing for changes at Amazon. Sherry’s published her declaration on Turkopticon’s site as well as in the Tech Workers Coalition newsletter, calling on higher-income tech workers to financially contribute to their organizing. This transition was one of both organizational purpose and structure to expand sustainable worker power. (<https://blog.turkopticon.net/?p=920>)

Introduction

When Amazon Mechanical Turk was launched in the mid-2000s, journalists lauded it as part of a wave of large scale, online collaboration platforms they hailed as “crowdsourcing” (Howe 2008). “Crowdsourcing” named diverse projects of using digital media platforms to source and assemble labor into cultural objects and services. Wikipedia “crowdsourced” encyclopedia

authorship, replacing the encyclopedia industry with the cooperation of thousands of volunteer authors and editors (Shirky 2010; see also Wright 2010). YouTube made the front page of *Time*, as the magazine hyped the era of the “prosumer” (Ritzer 2012). Kevin Kelly, editor of *Wired* at the time, even went so far as to call Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) a form of digital “socialism,” lumping together pay-per-job platforms like Amazon with social media like Reddit and Wikipedia (2009). Cyberutopianism (Turner 2010) was a powerful drug for those with the power of purse and pen.

Digital “socialism” AMT was not. Amazon Mechanical Turk was a platform where employers – from corporations like LinkedIn to researchers and design studios – could send “human intelligence tasks” (HITs) where workers to compete to do them. Workers on the platform competed to grab jobs, transcribing audio, digitizing receipts, categorizing data to train machine learning, and otherwise making that which people culturally recognize legible to computers. The platform organizes workers to be paid per task; Amazon’s Terms and Conditions declares them “independent contractors,” denying minimum wage or occupational health protections. Amazon set policies by fiat, letting workers bear the financial and emotional consequences of unfair policies (Turkopticon 2023; Silberman et al. 2010). Workers provided their own infrastructure for the job, burdened with unilateral terms and conditions agreements (Dubal 2017:101; Rahman and Thelen 2019:182-3).

Workers of a previous generation might have assembled in corporate typing pools or a subcontracted temp agencies located in India. Now they worked from home, from several countries, but through the centrally coordinated policies, platforms, and terms and conditions of one of the world’s most powerful technology companies. Lawyers and labor scholars noted how “crowdsourcing” extended older logics, from dockwork to global outsourcing. Tellingly, the neologism “crowdsourcing” built on the term “outsourcing” – a corporate form that took advantage of information technology networks and uneven labor policies to make labor cheaper (Aneesh 2006). AMT sped up the process of contracting from weeks or months to the time scale of hours or minutes. The “futurist crowd-driven utopia,” noted labor lawyer Alex Felstiner,

“appeals to those who would look to the crowd as a substitute for – or an extension of – existing methods of production.” Crowds, he concluded, were not really about distributed internet creativity but about “an exploitable labor pool” (Felstiner 2012). This economy of microwork intensified corporate outsourcing arrangements that squeeze costs and shift risks onto suppliers, temp agencies, and workers (Hatton 2011; Aneesh 2006; Hacker 2006). Sociologist Ursula Huws and her colleagues argued that features of crowdwork, such as surveillable ICT mediation and the extension of the workplace into the home, were more broadly features of work across a range of sectors (2018).

So how could AMT workers organize for their needs, fair share, or even ownership of the whole? Dockworkers of a previous century organized themselves into hiring halls where they could distribute work more fairly and collaborate to set rates for their labor – something similar to a union contract combined with worker-governed hiring policies. Under US anti-trust laws, “independent contractors” are treated like companies and so coordinating a single contract can leave workers vulnerable to accusations of inter-firm collusion and price fixing without a change in jurisprudence or law (Paul 2015). What about fighting for minimum wage? US law does not offer minimum wage for independent contractors, so this requires challenging their classification as “independent contractors” or changing the law. While Uber and Lyft drivers have challenged their misclassification as independent contractors, AMT workers’ cases are more complicated than Uber drivers, working as they do for a wide range of employers through the platform. Making claims that Amazon and the job requester were “joint employers” could be a legal option to explore, following workers in other industries fighting for wages in “fissured workplaces” holding contracting companies and subcontractors alike accountable (Weil 2014).¹ Several legal scholars argue that crowdworkers should enjoy the protection of employment and labor law

¹ I thank Veena Dubal for this insightful point, though any errors in interpretation are mine alone.

(Felstiner 2012; [Cherry 2010](#)). Legal scholar Jeremias Prassl decisively demonstrates the ways that the crowdworkers of new digital media platforms could be understood through the history of employee rights fought for and won by precarious dockworkers and zero-hour contract baristas (2018). But legal battles to establish status can take years or even decades – a long time for workers needing the next paycheck for their families.

But the stakes for workers are high, and their work is essential to the production of artificial intelligence and machine learning (Irani 2015a; Irani 2015b). AI has become, over a decade, became an industry joining speculative finance, globally concentrated corporate computation, and national policy competition (Whittaker 2021). Turker and organizer Shery Stanley explained the stakes to an audience of white-collar tech workers through the Tech Workers Coalition blog in 2021:

“I know that the AI industry is worth trillions of dollars, producing ‘scientific innovation’ off of our backs, without giving us fair pay or any credit for our work. And I am one of tens of thousands of workers who depend on Amazon Mechanical Turk to make a living. Some do this work as a side job to make ends meet, or to buy Christmas gifts, go to a nice dinner, just have some luxury. The reason I did it though was I had no other choice at the time. You may think everyone has a choice; I didn’t. Around six years ago I didn’t have any form of transportation and living in rural West Virginia in the downturn of coal mining was not the prime market to get a job. I was stuck home with a computer and no way really to pay the bills I had. Then a friend suggested Mturk, and away I went.”

This chapter documents a decade of a data worker activism project I co-founded with Six Silberman, beginning in 2009 as a labor-oriented social software project that we transformed

after a decade into a worker-led advocacy and organizing effort. I begin by presenting a perspective on labor organizing that focuses less on organizational forms, such as unions or worker centers, and more the process of reorganizing existing socialities and media infrastructures to gain power. This perspective motivates the documentation of Turk workers' achievements as a generative reorganization of the mediated labor relations designed to extract from them. I begin the case study by presenting the data labor Turk workers do, why it is needed, and where they do it. I then show how the Turkopticon project responded to this changing ecology of knowledge extraction and organization over fifteen years. I then share the campaigns and worker advocacy projects that form the centerpiece of Turkopticon's work over the last five years since it became a worker-governed project. Worker autonomy can only be accomplished through solidarity; the chapter then turns to the kinds of resourcing and solidaristic relationships between Turk workers and other kinds of tech workers that have always made this organizing possible. I conclude by discussing Turkopticon's shift from activist software to worker organizing as a form of emergent strategy. This emergent strategy unfolds as workers' find and forge solidarities despite digital extraction infrastructures, finding creative ways to move from our collective present to somewhere they agree would be better.

Assembling Worker Voices as Experimental Method

This chapter is composed through an experimental method, as clippings of selected documents from the public archives of Turkopticon, supplemented by discussion of these statements to give context and narrate the history of this organizing. I draw from an archive of the Turkopticon blog, the monthly Turkopticon newsletter written and published by workers and their allies, Turkopticon's social media, and occasional policy memos. I have myself directly supported the Turkopticon worker organizing committee's work since fundraising for it and organizing the initial group in 2019. I have contributed to the production of some of these words often published under the collective moniker. But these archives have been accountable to the worker organizing committee and the broader publics of workers the committee seeks to represent — and that accountability happens on worker-run forums on Reddit and elsewhere.

Finally, this chapter was reviewed by a Turkopticon worker organizer.

Why am I taking this approach? Turk workers I organize with frequently express frustration when others — social scientists, entrepreneurial but unorganized Turk workers, or other self-appointed experts — represent their work, their working conditions, and their aspirations. These professionals can speak in workers' place because they are often offered funding to do so, and their representations are institutionally validated but not always member checked or accountable to workers' representational needs. My own work, historically, has rarely represented AMT workers but focused on systems and the engineers and companies that extract from them (Irani 2015a; Irani 2015c). This chapter documents a fifteen year arc of Turkopticon so that the “voice of the researched can be heard alongside the researcher” (Wolfson et al. 2022).

Turkopticon organizers' public representations of their work are products of their deliberations with other workers. These deliberations happen in weekly committee meetings, in monthly open Turkopticon forums, on worker-run subreddits, through worker surveys, and by communicating with organic leaders who moderate and organize these other Turk worker forums. Turkopticon organizers' statements are calculated to generate recognition among workers that they share a cause and legitimacy for Turkopticon to help articulate and advance that cause. I wish to respect this carefully crafted public voice, while also working against the historical conventions of social science which see scientists as knowing subjects theorizing the world while social actors themselves are treated as objects to be represented, in charge of neither interpretation nor agenda setting (Howard & Irani 2019).

My methodological orientation is informed by feminist science studies' understanding as knowledge production as inherently situated, embodied, and political, and the construction of the subject who knows and the object who gets constructed as known as doubly so. I understand my position as an academic worker with access to resources better used to support workers' struggles, but also as an ex-tech worker whose liberation from years of alienated technology labor is tied up in the liberation of other tech workers exploited by the industry in different ways.

I am also informed by militant-research, an approach to research that seeks to produce and diffuse approaches to counter power. The militant researcher participates in “clandestine knowledges” which belong to those resisting and subordinating, and works to co-produce with others in struggle “the knowledges and modes of an alternative sociability, beginning with the power (potencia) of those subaltern knowledges” (Colectivo Situaciones 2003). Clandestine knowledges are not for publicity and circulation, but militant researchers focus on efficacy in struggle and the production and dissemination of knowledge useful to struggles (Colectivo Situaciones 2003). Finally, from Black Studies and fugitive planning I understand scholarly critique as something that generates academic capital and reproduces the academic profession by responding to and reforming the terms of academic disciplines (Moten and Harney 2004). I am more interested in finding generative spaces of unprofessionality, sociability, and solidarity among those kept apart by capitalist media and spatial formations.

This chapter assembles a history of organized responses to platform work. From 2009 through 2019, Turkopticon persisted as a tech worker activist and academic led software tool – a browser plugin and online database – through which workers could write reviews of employers they encountered on Amazon’s system, sharing warnings against bad pay, bad communication, or other malfeasance with others navigating the thousands of jobs available in a given day. From 2019 on, I worked with a core committee of Amazon Mechanical Turk workers readers will hear from in the pages that follow to transform the project into a worker-governed advocacy organization experimenting with organizing under very challenging circumstances. Only Turk workers had a vote in key decisions. This chapter documents shifting understandings among workers and allies of our historical agencies, our analysis of our conjuncture, and shifting socio-technical means of assembly and action targeting Amazon and its platform.

Organic organizing among Turk workers

In the world of politics, including labor, organizing names how people take action to build and sustain collective relationships and knowledge to transform their conditions. Organizing strategies often draw on an understanding of political economy (e.g. outsourcing, technological

change, capital formations), industrial structures, workplace labor processes, everyday life, and how workers respond to all of that through their organic forms of sensemaking, relating, and desiring. Amazon Mechanical Turk workers have always, since the founding of the platform, engaged in forms of survival and resistance in their pursuit of dignity and a living – though they may not agree on the standards for each of those.

Turkers, as Turkopticon organizer Sherry Stanley shares below, have used open-source forum software, Facebook groups, private chats, and Reddit (see also Martin 2014; Irani & Silberman 2016). On these forums, workers share information, build scripts to automate aspects of their work, learn how to do the job more effectively, and build friendships.

“When I first started I worked mostly alone. Some of the time I worked with a friend from New York that I had met in a movie group on Facebook. She knew I was having trouble with bills and things because the economy of my area was turning to shit with all the coal mines closing and my former husband wrecking my finances. Those first days I was amazed that there was so much work posted. It didn’t matter what time of day or night, I could always see work. I was fooled though by the high paying transcription hits at first. I wasted so much time trying to earn a decent hourly wage, but it just wasn’t going to happen. If I had to estimate how much time I wasted, I would say at least 2-3 days because I even went back repeatedly to try again. The monetary value of the hits were just so large that they were hard to ignore.

After a day or two, my New York friend invited me to a Facebook group for new Turkers called “Turkers 101.” It was a small group of maybe 20 people that were active, but none who really made any money on Turk. They had the goal of making 5 dollars a day and there’s no way I could support my family on that.

I started making money. At first I thought it was just hobby money, but I realised I could make more. So I started searching for other turkers. In the group they had a list of scripts to help with the work so I started downloading them. Although after trying to use them I was really confused, so I started to watch YouTube videos...While I worked I kept branching out and looking for other Turkers that I could relate to. Eventually I found another large Turk group. I had never seen a group in which people helped each other so much before. They had a daily hit thread sharing all the well paying hits and tagging people to help each other. I regularly participated in the thread and loved the companionship of having an office crew of sorts. The overall structure of the group seemed to be like “a water cooler” where you could share anything - whether it was HITs or something happening in your life. The sense of companionship became really important - so much so that some members were upset that the daily HIT thread wasn’t just HITs but people sharing about their lives and the drama was just too much!

A select group of us broke off into a smaller subgroup. Some people got left behind in the process. They said they missed us so we started adding them and others back in. Over time we added more and more, to the point where it’s now above 2300 members. There are daily HIT threads that I still converse with...The overall feel of the group made me really feel like we were co-workers and we were supporting each other through both the good and the bad times.”

The forums are key spaces where Turk workers befriend, create, learn together on-the-job, making up for the denial of training and support by Amazon and many employers on the

platform (AI Now 2016). These forums, however, have not always been a conducive space for organizing campaigns or reaching a broad range of workers. Forums are often implicitly or explicitly led by a set of moderators who act as informal leaders and set rules and norms of inclusion. Many forums, in fact, came to be through splits with older forums after conflicts. With these histories of online conflict, workers could feel unsafe speaking about their grievances and organizing around them. In a participatory action research project with Niloufar Salehi, Ali Alkhatib, Michael Bernstein, and then-Turk workers Kristy Milliand and Clickhappier, we found that Turkers sometimes feared talking about organizing on their web-based forums because they recognized Turkers could vigorously disagree on what it meant to be a good AMT worker and on legitimate expectations of worker rights. Workers told the team about witnessing workers rebuking workers, or the escalation of tensions into explosive conflicts workers called “mega-drama” (Salehi et al. 2015).

Turkopticon: connecting and resourcing Turk workers

2009-2019: A tool for reporting problematic requesters

Krystal Kauffman, Stanley’s successor as lead organizer in Turkopticon, recounted an origin story of Turkopticon on May 13 2024 in the project newsletter:

“Following the launch of Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) in 2005, two college students had an idea for a platform that would allow AMT workers to review the requesters they worked for and the tasks they worked on. Drs. Lilly Irani and M. Six Silberman unveiled Turkopticon in 2008, a platform that did just that. For the first time, workers on AMT had a resource to help protect them from rejections, poor pay, and more. The browser extension that was developed made Turkopticon easy and convenient to use. It was the first tool of its kind and is still widely used by the turker community today.”

When Silberman and I created Turkopticon, we recognized the organic organizing on the forums and wished to complement and bridge across those spaces rather than replace them. We were both “tech workers” entering graduate school, him from New York non-profits and I from four years as a user experience designer at Google. I had encountered data workers like those of AMT at Google and disagreed with their treatment at Google (Irani 2015b). My own mother had been an undervalued secretarial data worker in the 1970s (Irani 2023). Silberman and I felt solidarity with Turkers, and we hoped such solidarity would grow among Turkers as they shared reviews with one another. We designed Turkopticon’s software interfaces to make it easy for workers to read others’ reviews of employers as they browsed Amazon’s platform to choose jobs. We also provided a short, structured survey to encourage workers to quickly write reviews for other workers.

At its peak, 20,000 workers used Turkopticon each month to write reviews. But after a decade maintaining the project, mutual aid among Turk workers through our system had not seeded a spontaneous emergence of organized struggle against the systems that produced the harms workers documented in their reviews. Worse, Amazon had co-opted Turkopticon’s presence and, without our permission, outsourced the work of repair and worker care to us and other worker operated fora. Volunteer maintainer burnout was endemic. Amazon had done nothing to change upstream sources of harm workers documented and shared through our system over a decade of the system’s life. This was my impetus to build organized leadership of the project from Turk workers themselves. I was tired of my own solidary labors being exploited by Amazon to maintain a harmful system. But workers understood best their own needs and capacities, both for organizing processes and for Turkopticon.

2019-2024: From tool to worker-led mutual aid, resources, and advocacy

In 2019, I searched for, and eventually found significant grant funding for a project called “Re-organizing Turkopticon: Finding Best Practices for Sustainable Digital Labor Infrastructure.” The goal was two-fold: re-architect the software so that workers could maintain

it and modify it autonomously, and also to hire an organizer to help figure out how to build a more robust community structure for project volunteers. Like all good plans, this one transformed workers actively joined in the planning work.

We invited every worker who had ever contributed to Turkopticon to a series of workshops to “talk about the future of Turkopticon, what would be a good future of Turking, and what we need to organize the Turkopticon community to get us there.” The workshops explored the role of Turkopticon in the Turker ecosystem, what sustainability could look like when Silberman and I could no longer maintain the system, and what support Turk workers would need to get there. By the conclusion of the workshop, forty workers had deliberated with us and our facilitators. Several had stepped up to form a core group who wanted to plan next steps. We also collectively decided that, rather than hiring an organizer, we would use the funds to train Turkers and allies to organize as Turkers knew the unique social practices of this globally and digitally distributed crowdsourcing workforce best. A San Diego worker center, Employee Rights Center, provided critical support at this juncture, offering mentorship to organizers (including myself), strategy facilitation, and fiscal services better suited to paying workers than the university through which I received the grant.

Together, this first Turkopticon core committee of workers and allies developed, by consensus, a mission statement to guide and communicate our efforts:

“Our mission is to organize mutual aid, resources, and advocacy to make Amazon Mechanical Turk work a good job, while also improving conditions for all workers.”

By good job, we meant that workers would organize to collectively articulate what for them counted as a good job. This vision of good work would speak from the diverse histories of production, class, gender, and ability across the world that had shaped workers lives and shaped their aspirations. It would not be a template imported and applied from an academic tract or dominant institutional discourse. By all workers, the committee, made up of workers from the United States, the UK, and Venezuela, pledged to pursue that good work for all workers, rather

than pursuing strategies that might harm one category of workers to privilege another.

We also began developing a software strategy so workers could autonomously govern, maintain, and update Turkopticon software. We moved the software from academic servers controlled by UC San Diego to servers that the core committee controlled.

I experimented with and failed at several approaches to supporting worker autonomy in operating computational infrastructures they relied on. First, I recruited two Turk workers who were interested to learn HTML and front-end coding, supported by a Computer Science master's student experienced in tutoring. We quickly confronted the reality that our code relied on myriad layers of network, server operating system, and front-end code all implemented in different languages and protocols that took years to learn. We confronted the political economy of education in which society invests in a few to learn engineering for the purposes of industry. The United States, at least, does not invest technical education and resourcing needed to make sure everyday people control their means of computational production and communication.

In a second experiment, I hired two undergraduates to experiment with off-the-shelf publishing and database platforms such as WordPress and Airtable in hopes that we might build something like Turkopticon in a system already designed to be end-user configurable (Chan et al. 2019). We discovered that low-cost database-driven publishing platforms were largely built out for e-commerce and monetizable content creation, the genres of internet capitalism. Airtable, by contrast, had the needed flexibility but a prohibitively expensive pricing model.

We finally arrived at a model of solidarity software engineering. We recruited several software engineers with desires to liberate themselves from unchecked tech capitalist power. On the basis of this common cause and solidarity with Turk workers, they took leadership from Turk workers to maintain and adapt the Turkopticon software. As the core committee wrote to Turkers in a 2021 newsletter: "Behind the scenes, we've built a software team... We hope you're seeing more system stability now. Programmers from Tech Workers Coalition believe in our cause and support keeping Turkopticon free and making work better for everyone."

(<https://blog.turkopticon.net/?p=1555>)

Finally, we organized a fundraising campaign to develop recurrent community donations to reduce worker reliance on philanthropy and challenges posed by the political and class dynamics of that source of funding (INCITE 2009). The fundraising campaign targeted tech workers and allies in the labor movement. “It takes time to organize, and for gig workers like us, time organizing is time off the job,” the committee explained in their call for funds. “Please donate to Turkopticon to make sure data annotation workers can lead our own organizing efforts. Recurring donations are best, but we appreciate whatever you can afford.”

(<https://news.techworkerscoalition.org/2023/04/04/issue-5/>)

Following queer legal scholar and activist Dean Spade, this was “solidarity, not charity” (2020). These acts of solidarity coding and fundraising were not about uplifting those with less, but about creating relationships to build worker power to strive for shared liberation in an industry that seeks unfettered wealth. Jacob, a mechanical engineer from Tech Workers Coalition San Diego, explained why workers needed to share resources and knowledge from their different locations in the automation supply chain to fight precarity together:

“...[T]echnology should improve life for everyone, and it incorporates anyone who works in tech but isn’t a manager or boss—janitors, rideshare drivers, and programmers collaborate in TWC and drive its work.

It is vitally important that all tech workers engage and collaborate with one-another. It is our work and labor that keeps the company moving. Whether you code the product, test for bugs, identify the images for a Machine Learning set, clean the office, or make the food to keep the nerds continuously typing, all our labor moves the machine. The CEOs and Venture Capitalists receive the press coverage for flashy breakthroughs, but let’s be real: Elon Musk and Jeff

Bezos aren't geniuses designing every widget in their companies. It's the workers that create the fortunes.

Despite these soaring profits, the average worker has more precarity and less recourse in their workplace. Companies have been skirting labor law by designating delivery drivers as "independent contractors" for years, and after the success of Prop 22 in California literally overturned state law, they're seeking to expand this model globally. Warehouse careers that could support a decent standard of living are being swallowed by Amazon logistics. And more programming and web-design is being transferred to an overworked, ad-hoc labor system with an eye for automation: MIT is studying computer-directed coding right now for a reason: being a programmer in 2020 is similar to being a machinist in 1973. It's a good job in danger of automation and dispossession.

The purpose of Tech Workers for Tech Workers, #TW4TW, is to harness our collective power and create a better world, together...Giving what you can, whether it's cash or code or on-the-ground knowledge of your workplace, and we can build infrastructure that makes us less isolated, more powerful, and wins improvements in our workplaces.

Building a new future together will require fighting economic inequality and climate disaster. It will require massive restructuring of the way we live and work to compensate for the rising tides, droughts, and new diseases which will continue to emerge from the current system. It requires us to acknowledge that we each have unique talent and dignity to bring to this work. And to fight, together, and win."

Worker-led programs and campaigns for Turkers

Workers lead the Turkopticon experiment with projects, programs, and campaigns that could support Turk workers in their struggle for a living while also pushing for Amazon to transform harmful policies. They communicate with and respond to the needs of the wider, distributed and fragmented bases of workers in a range of ways: through existing worker forums, through relationships with organic leaders (e.g. forum moderators) among workers, by holding “open forums” (multi-hour, organizer facilitated zoom chats Turkers can drop into between jobs to socialize in real-time), and with surveys of Turkers distributed through forums and to Turkopticon’s tool users.

Kauffman describes how Turkopticon expanded its organizing and worker support under worker leadership. Programs include pushing to get accounts reinstated for suspended workers, researching and informing workers about policy changes that impact workers, and responding to questions raised by workers in forums.

“As AMT grew in size and popularity, it became apparent that there was a need for people who could assist workers with things like suspended accounts, rejected tasks, and how to get started on the platform. It also became clear that workers were not always treated fairly and that certain AMT policies were insufficient. In 2019, Turkopticon began the process of transitioning to a worker-led, worker-run advocacy organization in addition to hosting the original tool and website.

The last five years have seen so much positive change! We have assembled a strong team of workers dedicated to improving the working conditions. Turkopticon staff developed a working relationship with Amazon. We implemented a system to help workers who have had their accounts mistakenly suspended get them reinstated. Requesters come to Turkopticon for assistance

with their accounts as well. A weekly report is prepared and sent to AMT staff that reports “bad” requesters with low approval ratings. When new things pop up from Amazon, such as the DAC-7 tax form, we reach out to AMT staff for clarification to help answer worker questions. For the last couple of years, we have hosted worker forums to facilitate conversations between workers, answer questions, and offer assistance. Since this transition, we have always tried to go where we were needed. “

(https://newsletter.turkopticon.net/i/wwEzKnfgDUALX_hVnJRv8IQd0ESpEXBNU1wVafRII8o)

In 2020, the Turkopticon organizing committee circulated a survey to identify issues Turk workers wanted to address and their relative priority. Rather than tackle every controversial issue, workers began a campaign to fight for where workers seemed in strong alignment. Through that organizing, they would build relationships with organic leaders among workers, as well as a wider base of workers and allies. These relationships could serve as a basis for working through more contentious, collective questions. This approach to articulating good work stood in stark contrast with that sought by well-meaning employers, including academic requesters, who sought quick answers to questions that stirred controversy among workers such as “what is a good minimum wage” for a job. Broadly legitimate answers to such questions simply did not exist. Worse, to pose them without thought to trust and facilitation could provoke what workers called “mega-drama.” Answers to such questions could only be arrived at through organizing work that could bring workers into good enough alignment to fashion a position on the issue.

The overwhelming majority of workers responding to the survey agreed that “mass rejections” were unfair and needed to be stopped. “Mass rejections” were what workers called a situation where an employer requesting work had workers perform a large volume of data processing tasks and then proceeded to reject the work. Amazon allowed employers to review, retain, and “reject” Turkers’ work product without paying for the labor. Worse, Amazon

interpreted employer rejections as a signal that the work product was flawed; workers carried a reputation score – an approval rating – across jobs that was the percentage of tasks they had performed that had been accepted and paid for, rather than rejected. That reputation score, in turn, restricted worker access to jobs. Turkers who had done hundreds of thousands of tasks could bear the reputation score risk of having a hundred tasks rejected; Turkers with shorter worker histories could effectively lose access to most work on the platform, forced to work on the worst-paid tasks just to bring their reputation score back. Crucially, employers had a financial incentive to reject tasks; they did not pay for tasks they rejected.

Stanley shared her experience with mass rejections and Amazon's neglect of harms to workers in a Turkopticon newsletter calling on workers to share their experiences:

“The hits were simple...I did approximately 80 hits before I thought I should stop until some of these approve. I went on turking like normal, doing a few surveys and then went to check my dashboard. I was speechless when I saw the screen: 80+ rejections. I had never had this experience before and I instantly contacted the requester. I then went to the Turkopticon website and there it was: Numerous workers receiving the same treatment. No response from the requester. I emailed Amazon and didn't get a response from them either. That's when I realized we, as Turkers, have no option but to just take it when a requester wants to scam the system and not pay workers. Amazon takes no responsibility in protecting us. We're basically on our own. I knew when Turkopticon reached out and asked for help that I could no longer stay hidden and I had to speak up!

Now, I'm asking you. What's your experience with mass rejections and how have you handled them? Which requesters are guilty? Has Amazon helped

resolve them in any way? Please send your stories to us at https://blog.turkopticon.info/?page_id=727 so we can work together to fix mass rejections and make Turk better for us all.”
<https://blog.turkopticon.net/?p=731>

Pursuing redress, another worker shared, exposed them to threats of retaliation from employers. Retaliation extended to the threat of carceral institutions.

“I know one Turker even had a requester find her real name and then threaten to send local authorities after her for harassment because she had contacted their IRB and had left them bad reviews. It’s sad that requesters can use our own reviews against us and threaten to have our accounts shutdown, all just because we try to have places we can organize and protect each other. But the bigger problems are the bigger players.” <https://blog.turkopticon.net/?p=920>

Building on surveys and stories gathered through fora, Turkopticon organizers convened a wider group to develop a set of demands for Amazon, coupled with a petition to show strength of support among workers and allies. They published the petition through Coworker.org (see Figure 2), a labor non-profit that provides digital campaigning tools and organizing support for un-ionized or not-yet-ionized workers.

Workers developed demands they felt maintained the integrity of data production, allowed employers a way to signal work product problems to Turk workers, while protecting Turk workers from consequences out of proportion with any errors they may have made in the work process. They consulted workers across forums as well as allied “requesters” or employers.

We, the undersigned, are asking the leaders of the Mturk platform (K. Chellapilla, C. Devers, S. Jones, N. Lindsey and M. Lease) to limit the harm caused by mass rejections. Mass rejections have affected many workers without any protection.

We call on the leaders to:

1. Limit the number of rejections the platform will allow to affect a worker's approval rate when a requester rejects all work (i.e. 10 rejections per day would affect the approval rating, the others would, of course, still be rejected, but only the first 10 would affect the worker's rating.)

2. Consult with the coalition of worker forums to problem-solve together to create solutions and improve Mechanical Turk for everyone.

Amazon Mechanical Turk is used by thousands of workers daily; all taking the chance of being mass rejected without protection... Workers want to feel safe while working on the platform and have protection from mass rejections. Workers believe in rejections because unfortunately, there are bad workers, but good workers are getting unjustly hurt by them. Limiting the number of rejections that can affect a worker's approval rating is something workers all agree will help everyone, including requesters. Requesters, especially new unrated ones, will get their work completed quicker because the fear of mass rejection will disappear.

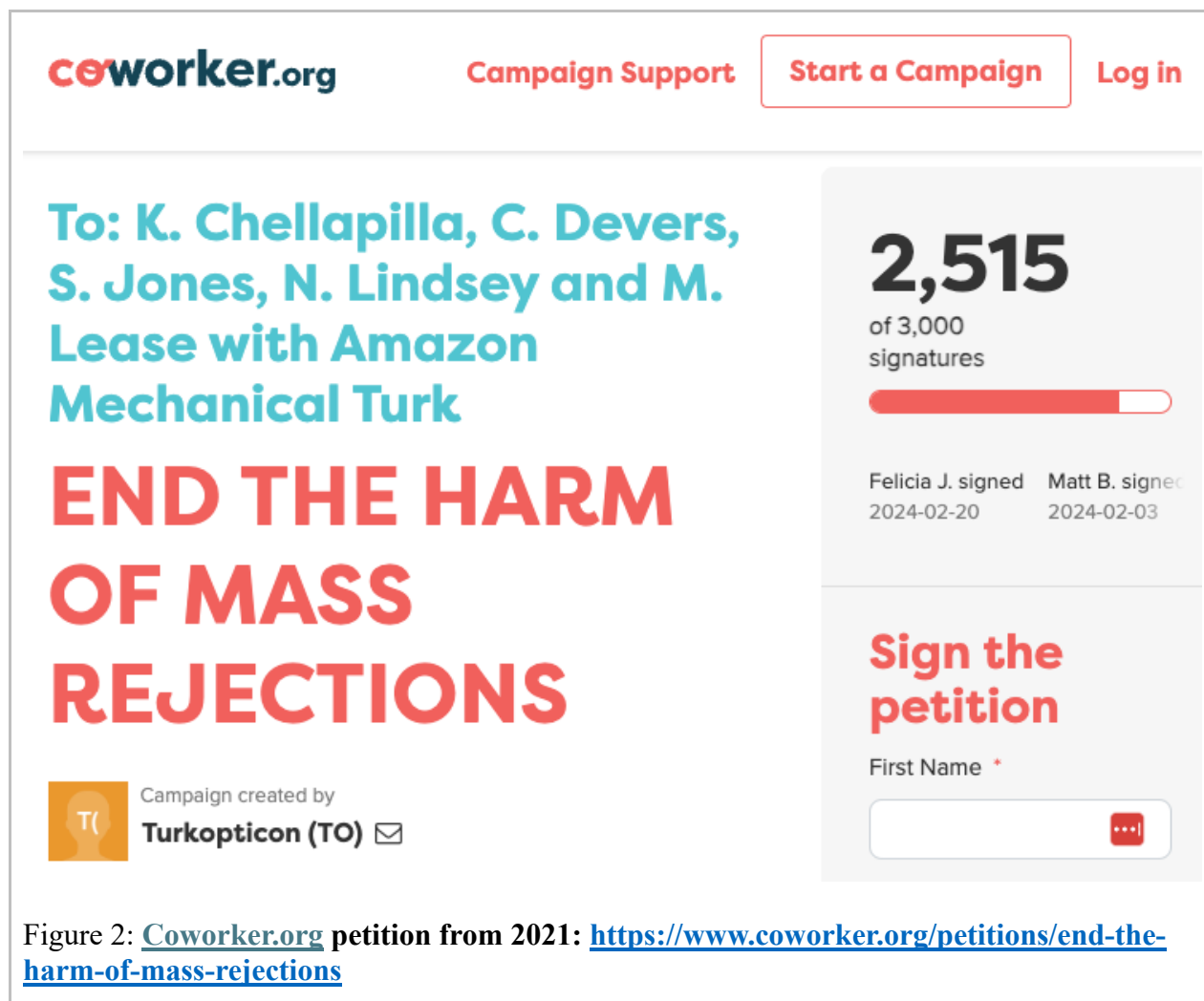


Figure 2: [Coworker.org](https://www.coworker.org/petitions/end-the-harm-of-mass-rejections) petition from 2021: <https://www.coworker.org/petitions/end-the-harm-of-mass-rejections>

Over the three years of the campaign, Amazon corresponded and met with the committee but failed to commit or take any concrete action.

“Turkoption sent out a petition to get workers to sign, saying that they also wanted to stop the harm of mass rejections. After we had amassed a few thousand signatures we brought that to Amazon. When we had our last meeting with Amazon, we brought a Turker with us who had experienced a mass rejection, and experienced it to a point that

her approval rating dropped to the point where she could no longer work on the platform. And we just wanted to have a real live person in front of them in the meeting to show them that these are real humans that you are affecting by ignoring this issue. These are real people that are no longer able to work, and you took away their source of income. And Amazon even admitted that the rejections were unfair, but still would not, and actually claimed that they could not, take the rejections off the workers' records.”
- Krista Pawlowski on the Mozilla IRL Podcast (Todd 2023)

In 2022, a company called AI Insights rejected every one of their 70,000 penny tasks in another mass rejection event. Six months later, Amazon admitted the erroneous rejections but refused to compensate workers for wage theft and reputation harm. Amazon was not enforcing their own terms and conditions, worker organizers revealed, against the employers on the platform:

Turkopticon has been trying to work with Amazon to repair the damages that workers incurred on the AMT platform, through no fault of their own. Possibly the most ridiculous part of this situation is that multiple representatives from Amazon told us that AI Insights DID mass reject unfairly. There was an error in the coding of their task so they rejected the workers and hid. I mean that literally. An Amazon rep asked if we knew the new name AI Insights was operating under. Rejecting without just cause is against AMT's terms of service. (<https://blog.turkopticon.net/?p=3203>)

While these campaigns have not achieved their demands, they have been an arena through which workers have strengthened their organizing relationships, alliances, and audience.

It is also an arena where workers have generated important insights into Amazon’s and employers’ operations.

2024-future: From organizing Turkers to advocating for all data workers

The explosion of the AI and ML-related industries has drawn policy and public attention to the labor impacts of these emerging technologies, both on workers whose jobs change and because of the labor conditions needed to produce these technologies. Turkopticon organizers have spoken at convenings that might have previously invited academic researchers like myself, taking the stage at MozFest, NeurIPS, FAccT, and filing research comments with the White House Office of Technology Policy (see Turkopticon 2023). By speaking from surveys and organizing, they are not tokenized workers but workers articulating goals widely shared by AMT workers.

Amazon Mechanical Turk, however, is no longer the main place where the data labeling work that fuels AI happens. There are many other platforms, companies, and systems for performing data labor across the globe. Even Amazon Mechanical Turk workers themselves work on multiple platforms doing similar kinds of work. Turkopticon’s organizing committee decided in 2024 that to improve their working conditions, they should address issues beyond just Amazon’s platform even as they continue to push for better working conditions on AMT.

Kauffman in May 2024 wrote in the Turkopticon newsletter:

“We have an exciting announcement!

Today there are many data-work platforms. The days of AMT being the only player in the game are long gone. With that in mind, we have decided to expand our efforts to assist ALL data workers! Going forward, we will work to improve conditions for data workers worldwide.”

Since expanding their vision, Turkopticon organizers have participated in a data workers' inquiry supported by Distributed AI Research Institute (DAIR). This project supports content moderators and data labelers in producing research about their working conditions across Kenya (Okinyi 2024; Mathenge 2024), Syria (al-Hammada 2024), Venezuela (Chavez 2024). Turkopticon (Chavez 2024; Kauffman 2024) and the African Content Moderators Union (Mathenge 2024) are organized worker advocacy groups in this collaboration.

Conclusion: Organizing form as emergent strategy

In considering organizing beyond unions, this chapter reflects on a decade of work with many collaborators, Amazon Mechanical Turk workers, tech workers, and academic workers, to intervene in and transform the organizational forms and ecologies of crowdwork to support struggles for better working conditions. I must again remind the reader that this is not an exhaustive account of our organizing activities or alliances, but rather an account that exercises discretion so as not to tactically disadvantage organizers or act as a form of disciplining surveillance.

In the work of organizing Turkopticon, we deferred questions of the “right” organizational form, whether union, worker center (see Lee et al. 2022), or something else. Like union workers, Amazon Mechanical Turk workers are targeting a corporation that significantly shapes their working conditions through its platform power: Amazon. Like worker center members, they work (through that platform) for myriad and diverse employers, any of whom might commit wage theft such as mass rejections. Turk workers face misclassification as independent contractors even though they have no ability to negotiate their pay and many significantly depend on Amazon for continued work (see Connelly & Gallagher 2006). Under these conditions, however, the question of whether Turk workers need a union is impractical. It is impractical to workers for legal reasons, because United States jurisprudence has treated collective action among “independent contractors” as price fixing culpable under antitrust law (Paul 2015). It is also impractical for social reasons, as the question sidesteps workers' concrete conditions and desires, and whether and how they wish to act towards those together.

That capacity for collective action among Turk workers required resources and relationships. Resources included both money and expertise. The International Labour Organization found that most Mechanical Turk workers do the work to pay for necessities, not as “spare change” as some tech industry-aligned experts claimed in the platform’s early days (Berg 2015). That means the time to organize conversations with coworkers, the time to deliberate, the time to research, and the time to imagine and strategize all take time away from workers capacity to earn on the platform. Fundraising was essential to allow low-income Turk workers the time to organize and lead, even though certain sources could stymie political freedom (see INCITE 2009). Technical expertise was also needed. Turk workers already have wide varieties of expertise; one Turk worker published a meta-analysis of over fifty research studies on Turkers and found that among the most active AMT workers, nearly 58% already had a bachelor’s degree or higher (Clickhappier 2014). Full-stack software engineering and server administration, however, is a very specific form of expertise requiring many years and specific mentorship to learn. Turkopticon’s committee developed solidaristic relationships with software engineers, designers, and server administrators who shared a vision of liberated technology work. Such solidaristic relationships may not be likely when software engineers benefit from the inexpensive labor extracted from Turk workers, as I’ve argued elsewhere (Irani 2015a). But such relationships are possible, as demonstrated by this and other tech worker organizing (Amrute 2019).

Brazilian political theorist Rodrigo Nunes argues that the right “form” has been an unhelpful fixation of the labor, progressive, and left movements. The world is already ongoingly organized in some way, and the work of organizers is to intervene in these organizing processes, rather than to organize the “unorganized.” Instead, he suggests seeing movements as working in an ecology of different networks, interconnected as a system of relationships that lay the groundwork for information flow, the collective power to act, and the collective capacity to withstand negative feedback (Nunes 2021).

Rather than begin with questions of form, we asked different questions, motivated by feminist approaches, first from feminist science & technology studies and later by Black feminist

informed approaches to organizing: What issues are pressing workers? Which do they want to work on changing now? How can we help strengthen the communication and organizing already happening organically through workers' own efforts (see also Irani & Silberman 2016; Salehi et al. 2015)? How do we recognize and support organizing practices that align with gendered and racialized needs such as flexible forums for workers also caring for kids at home or intentional efforts to combat racism within worker communities (e.g. Kauffman 2024)?

Organizer and writer Adrienne Maree Brown also takes a systems and emergence view of social life, arguing that strategy can be collectively learned and produced through myriad experiments embedded in the lived realities of diverse communities, geographies, and histories. Brown arrives there from a legacy of diverse Black feminisms and anti-capitalist movements in deindustrializing North America to suggest how the work of organizing across difference – different histories, different neighborhoods and built environments, different mediating legal structures – requires an openness to “emergent strategies” that align the needs and desires of people struggling collectively for better (Brown 2017). Scholars of digital labor can become a resource supporting workers' own collective articulation through allied design, research support, infrastructure building and maintenance, and especially resource generation (e.g. locating funding or technical experts). Rather than displacing worker voice, let us participate in collective inquiry and collaborations that build political power behind demands for better – “alongside... not in front” (Benavidez 2021; see also Wolfson et al. 2022).

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