

lessons from mechanical turk
and turkopticon,
2008–2015

six silberman

scope

you might care about this if...

the most important things

some workers are casual;

others are professionals

mostly, workers are not the
narrowly selfish “rational actors”
of classical economic theory

markets are not isolated,
homogeneous, “frictionless”
spaces but parts of a larger
complex system with
incomplete information
and imperfect competition

market designers should
address workers' concerns

professional workers are
overlooked allies in the process
of improving outcomes

we may need new
organizational models

this is research!

mechanical turk

turkopticon

theory

so what?

mechanical turk

the basic process

requesters post tasks

workers do tasks

requesters approve or reject

tasks

search result relevance evaluation

transcription and translation

writing

content moderation

data cleaning and metadata creation

usability testing

behavioral and market research

requesters

big companies

government agencies

startups

researchers

workers

75-80% US-based; rest India

half women, half men

half born in 1980s

median US HH income: \$50K/yr

median IN HH income: \$10K/yr

most work is done by a small
part of the worker population

serious Turkers contribute a lot
of unpaid labor to create an
effective and supportive
professional community

\$2/hr – \$400/day

wages

experience (years and # of tasks)

community participation

specialized software use

reliance on Turkling income

complications

rejections

scale, communication

complexity, expectations

distrust

turkopticon

origin story

uncertainty about payment

unaccountable and arbitrary rejections

fraudulent tasks

prohibitive time limits

long pay delays

uncommunicative requesters and admins

cost of errors borne by workers

low pay

turking with turkopticon

outcomes

complications

evolution

situatedly rational actors
in complex polycentric systems

rational actors in
perfect markets

preferences given and fixed
at birth

economic actors maximize

actors act freely

complete information

efficient markets

no (low) barriers to entry

perfect competition

pareto optimality

preferences socially constructed

economic actors “satisfice”
and have “other-regarding
preferences”

actors face constrained choices,
exercise power over each other

limited information

herd behavior and other
“irrational” phenomena shape
market dynamics

market power

other criteria for evaluating
market outcomes, e.g., fairness

no invisible hand

institutions shape outcomes

institutions are “the prescriptions
that humans use to organize all
forms of repetitive and structured
human interactions”

situated rationality

institutional situations are
interlinked, creating
polycentric systems

crowd work is a polycentric
system populated by
situatedly rational actors

so what?

coda