

Panel

The Computer is the New Sewing Machine: Benefits and Perils of Crowdsourcing

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There is increased participation by the developing world in the global manufacturing marketplace: the sewing machine in Bangladesh can be a means to support an entire family.

Crowdsourcing for cognitive tasks consists of asking humans for questions that are otherwise impossible to answer by algorithms, e.g., is this image pornographic, are these two addresses the same, what is the translation for this text in French? In the last five years, there has been an exponential growth in the size of the global cognitive marketplace: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk has an estimated 500,000 active workers in over 100 countries, and there are dozens of other companies in this space.

This turns the computer into a modern-day sewing machine, where cognitive work of various levels of difficulty will pay anywhere from 5 to 50 dollars a day. Unlike outsourcing, which usually requires college education, competence at these tasks might be a month or even less of training. At its best, this could be a powerful bootstrap for a billion people. At its worst, this can lead to unprecedented exploitation.

In this panel, we discuss the technical, social and economic questions and implications that a global cognitive marketplace raises.