Underage Workers Are Training AI

Companies that provide Big Tech with AI data-labeling services are inadvertently hiring young teens to work on their platforms, often exposing them to traumatic content.

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The lack of worker oversight can even prevent clients from knowing if workers are keeping their income. One Clickworker user in India, who requested anonymity to avoid being banned from the site, told WIRED he "employs" 17 UHRS workers in one office, providing them with a computer, mobile, and internet, in exchange for half their income. While his workers are aged between 18 and 20, due to Clickworker's lack of age certification requirements, he knows of teenagers using the platform.

In the more shadowy corners of the crowdsourcing industry, the use of child workers is overt.

Captcha (Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart) solving services, where crowdsourcing platforms pay humans to solve captchas, are a less understood part in the AI ecosystem. Captchas are designed to distinguish a bot from a human—the most notable example being Google's reCaptcha, which asks users to identify objects in images to enter a website. The exact purpose of services that pay people to solve them remains a mystery to academics, says Posada. "But what I can confirm is that many companies, including Google's reCaptcha, use these services to train AI models," he says. "Thus, these workers indirectly contribute to AI advancements."

Google did not respond to a request for comment in time for publication.

There are at least 152 active services, mostly based in China, with more than half a million people working in the underground reCaptcha market, according to a 2019 study by researchers from Zhejiang University in Hangzhou.

"Stable job for everyone. Everywhere," one service, Kolotibablo, states on its website. The company has a promotional website dedicated to showcasing its worker testimonials, which includes images of young children from across the world. In one, a smiling Indonesian boy

shows his 11th birthday cake to the camera. "I am very happy to be able to increase my savings for the future," writes another, no older than 7 or 8. A 14-year-old girl in a long Hello Kitty dress shares a photo of her workstation: a laptop on a pink, Barbie-themed desk.

Not every worker WIRED interviewed felt frustrated with the platforms. At 17, most of Younis Hamdeen's friends were waiting tables. But the Pakistani teen opted to join UHRS via Appen instead, using the platform for three or four hours a day, alongside high school, earning up to $100 a month. Comparing products listed on Amazon was the most profitable task he encountered. "I love working for this platform," Hamdeen, now 18, says, because he is paid in US dollars—which is rare in Pakistan—and so benefits from favorable exchange rates.

But the fact that the pay for this work is incredibly low compared to the wages of in-house employees of the tech companies, and that the benefits of the work flow one way—from the global south to the global north, leads to uncomfortable parallels. "We do have to consider the type of colonialism that is being promoted with this type of work," says the Civic AI Lab's Savage.

Hassan recently got accepted to a bachelor's program in medical lab technology. The apps remain his sole income, working an 8 am to 6

pm shift, followed by 2 am to 6 am. However, his earnings have fallen to just $100 per month, as demand for tasks has outstripped supply, as more workers have joined since the pandemic.

He laments that UHRS tasks can pay as little as 1 cent. Even on higher-paid jobs, such as occasional social media tasks on Appen, the amount of time he needs to spend doing unpaid research means he needs to work five or six hours to complete an hour of real-time work, all to earn $2, he says.

"It's digital slavery," says Hassan.