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# A new form of 'racing to the bottom'? - Data Work, globally conditioned competition and challenges for international organization

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## Abstract

This study investigates the emergence of new forms of structurally enforced competition in the globally distributed data work industry, which curbs wages and hinders workers' organization. Data Work is a low-paid occupation that involves annotation, tagging and labeling of data, as well as debugging and evaluating AI systems. Data workers thus provide essential labour for AI companies, but are usually outsourced through platforms such as 'Remotask' or 'business process outsourcing' firms. While there are decisive differences between those modes, they are both prominently tailored towards data and profit accumulation and function under digital colonial logics of control. Considering the global and digital nature of data work, we argue for a new quality of workers being pit against each other as a globally dispersed, constantly available 'reserve army'. Falsely advertised as easy, low-threshold labour, Data Work attracts an abundance of workers, which is readily exploited to curb wages and outsource labour to countries with comparatively lax labour laws. As core-researchers of the Data Workers' Inquiry, we synthesize the individual inquiries and insights centering workers' perspectives on ever decreasing wages and rising competition to access tasks on platforms. Although there are individual forms of resistance, such as utilizing VPNs to cope with the fact that workers are paid differently depending on their location, there is widespread fear of potential account suspensions and a loss of livelihood. For example, among those affected by Remotask's sudden and non-transparent closure of all accounts in Kenya, a supposed abuse of VPNs emerges as a rationale for the platform's decision. Further strategies of retaining control over workers capabilities in the digital realm include IP tracking, irregular working times and auto-banning mechanisms, all following the aim of upholding global competitions and avenues for profit maximization. Taken together, data workers face decisive political challenges to fight for better working conditions. Whereas their exploitation is conditioned by global flows of capital, worker resistance remains geographically fragmented. Applauding and referencing existing efforts to build workers' councils, advocacy groups or non-institutionalized solidarity structures such as peer-to-peer mental health support, we interpret the compounding challenges faced by those attempting to internationalize struggles as symptomatic of the power asymmetry and structurally enforced competition. The epistemological challenge inherent to this asymmetry of political capacity between requesters and data workers should not be taken lightly and we encourage further debate on the role of academia in facilitating global networks for collective emancipation.

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