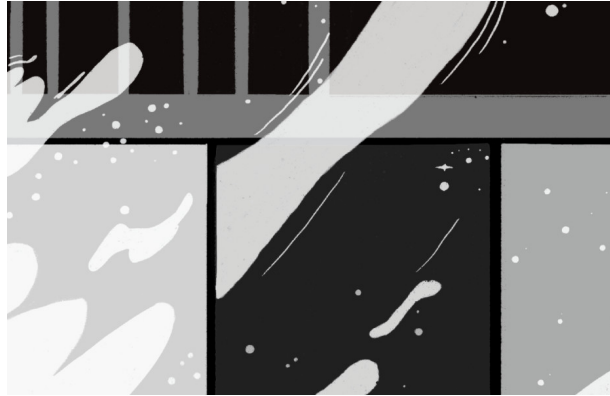**ISSUE 15** / **BEACONS**
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Family Units

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Can the families whose labor powers AI seize the
means of production?

Since the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, María's
house has been run like a factory. Every day, her family of
six synchronizes their routines so two people are always
behind a computer. María, her husband Rodrigo, and their
children, Daniela (20), Andrés (18), and Camila (13) are
among the unknown number of Venezuelans who, after
years of political and economic crisis exacerbated by the
pandemic, now try to make a living by annotating data
through crowdsourcing platforms. Using two Canaima
laptops, which the Hugo Chavéz government provided a
decade ago for school children, they tag images and
videos, transcribe text and audio, search for information
online, and send videos and pictures of themselves to
developers at companies and research institutions in
Europe and North America. The developers use this data to
train machine learning algorithms, like the ones that do
facial recognition, moderate content, and guide self-
driving cars.

The family's activities all revolve around data production
because this is their only source of income and, according
to María, they have to "focus on the same objective to

survive." She and Rodrigo do most of the work, although she also takes care of many domestic duties. Camila, Andrés, and Daniela work part time on data annotation while attending high school and university. Only María's youngest child, Sebastián (7) is able to focus exclusively on school. Although most crowdsourcing platforms' terms of use state that each account must be run by a single adult, often the only hard requirement to set up an account is for someone to prove that they are at least eighteen years old by taking pictures of an identification card and their face, and praying that a third-party facial recognition verification system called Onfido detects a match.

The platform the family works for pays them a few cents per task, in cryptocurrency. They are only allowed to transfer the money to their online wallet once they have made at least the equivalent of ten dollars. After working every day of the week, they usually earn around twice that much, but recently they have barely made the minimum. "Last week, we couldn't cash in," Maria told me. "We couldn't even make five dollars in total." Her family dreads the day when the tasks will stop coming, the computer breaks, or they will lose access to the internet and electricity. Ofelia, another data annotation worker, who has diabetes, depends entirely on the platform to purchase insulin. "I would die without this income," she told me. "I would literally die."

Income from data annotation is essential to Ophelia, María's family, and the other Venezuelans who do this work because hyperinflation has made the official monthly minimum wage in the country worth only a few dollars, which is not enough to afford staple foods to survive even a week. That has rendered most jobs paid in bolivars, the national currency, unsustainable. After years of economic mismanagement due to government corruption and its economic dependency on oil, Venezuela has a goods and services shortage and has inflation levels that are consistently among the highest in the world. This situation, combined with its existing internet infrastructure, has made the country an appealing target of crowdsourcing platforms. In the absence of a robust social safety net, workers often see these platforms as their most reliable source of income in US dollars.

Before the pandemic, María and her family were migrants

in neighboring Colombia for a year. María worked at a beauty salon while her husband Rodrigo worked selling coffees in the streets. The children all studied in the public education system. These were difficult but more stable times for the family. When the pandemic hit, María lost her job and, with deserted streets, Rodrigo couldn't find many clients. With no other choice, they decided to return to Venezuela. "Here we had to look for options, and a friend recommended the platform to us," Maria said. When the pandemic stopped in-person teaching, it meant that her three eldest children were stuck at home too, and could also perform data annotation work. In dozens of interviews with platform workers in Latin America, many of whom are or were migrants, I have heard similar stories: they were collectivizing platform labor across their household members, with teenage children doing more and more work after the onset of the pandemic.

In these ways, the political and economic crisis in Venezuela, as well as the pandemic and remote schooling, have turned out to be productive for data annotation platforms, their clients, and the venture capitalists that back them. (These crises have also generated profits for companies selling information to carceral states: Onfido, the identity verification company used by electronic wallets, shares the identity and facial recognition data it collects with the United Kingdom police.) The thousands of companies and research institutions that develop artificial intelligence are using platforms to find cheap outsourced labor, especially from low-income economies, for global markets in which data and labor are sold as commodities. One of the results is a race to the bottom in which wages get lower and lower as competition between platforms—and their ability to find pools of ready labor even among people living in refugee camps—goes up.

The invisibility of the workers in this process, and the myth of "one user, one account," which permeates the technology industry, are at the center of many tech companies' business models; in many cases, they pretend that their products are entirely automated and devoid of human intervention. In fact, the most popular data-annotation platform in the United States and India, Amazon Mechanical Turk, is named after an eighteenth-century automaton that deceived spectators by seeming to play chess autonomously while concealing a human player